

# Housing First Christchurch

*He Kāinga Ora ki Ōtautahi Report*



**November 2020**

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The research team wish to acknowledge the staff, kaewa<sup>1</sup> and whānau who contributed to this report and gave their time and wisdom to tell the story of Housing First Christchurch over the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Aotearoa.

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<sup>1</sup>Kaewa is the name used for people experiencing homelessness

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Housing First Ōtautahi (HFO) response to COVID-19 was rapid, adaptive and successful. The COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand created a unique environment that forced the requirement for all kaewa to be housed during Alert Levels 3 and 4.**

The HFO team moved into immediate action to meet the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development's (MHUD) 25th of March 2020 directive to accommodate all homeless people in Christchurch and attend to their welfare needs. HFO workers and representatives from MHUD and The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) activated the Housing First model to, 'accommodate first and work through any complexities once housed'. Over a 14-week period HFO assisted 68 kaewa off the streets and into temporary motel accommodation.

HFO worked beyond its normal scope of work and hours to meet the MHUD directive. The HFO staff felt enabled by the lifting of restrictions and criteria. They were able to move quickly to accommodate kaewa they picked up, or who were referred by other agencies.

This research demonstrates the complexity of housing kaewa, many of whom have been on the streets for some time and have significant addictions and long-term mental health conditions. There were kaewa who were extremely grateful for the motel/accommodation offered by Housing First Ōtautahi and others who resisted being housed during the lockdown. For many kaewa the lockdown was an extremely unsettling time, exacerbated by personal challenges and conspiracy

theories. Due to HFO support kaewa were off the streets, placed in temporary housing and able to access support from HFO staff and the moteliers. No kaewa contracted COVID-19. This was a significant achievement for HFO, key workers, the moteliers and the kaewa.

This research identified a series of enablers that supported the success of the COVID-19 HFO response. Central to this was strong leadership and a committed team with established relationships working for a common purpose. The HFO team was adaptable. It adjusted to meet the needs of the kaewa and the moteliers in an uncertain situation. Trusting, non-judgemental and respectful relationships held the HFO staff, kaewa and moteliers together. Support and trust from key government organisations enabled HFO to respond quickly without having to wait for formal agreements. Pre-existing local relationships enabled key workers to use their contacts to solve problems.

Moteliers became an invested part of the team, initially through economic necessity and then as the relationships developed with both the kaewa and key workers. The initial transition from street to motel was perhaps the most trying and dramatic periods of time in the moteliers' careers. They became an important

part of making an extremely demanding situation work.

A series of challenges were identified. These included a lack of access to appropriate support services, damage to the motels, a lack of information about new kaewa and the increased demand on the HFO resources. A challenge going forward is finding suitable long-term accommodation and supporting the successful transition of kaewa from motels into housing.

Steps to strengthening future crisis responses were evidenced in the data including seeking increased access to vital support services; improved safety, risk management and information sharing, and; enabling

the Champions Group to make systemic changes to support HFO.

The intention is to take these learnings and improve on the existing service model, particularly during crisis situations.

***“This model was just so much more about the people, and what we could do for them, rather than just ticking boxes. Great model.”***



# HOUSING FIRST

**The Housing First model was funded by the Government in 2017 to a collective of organisations in Auckland. Since this time, the model has been implemented in Wellington, Tauranga, Northland, Napier, Rotorua, Hamilton, Blenheim, Nelson, and Christchurch.**

Housing First places people experiencing homelessness directly into permanent housing without the requirement of a transition period or to be sober or drug free. Tailored support services are offered to individuals and a Housing First support key worker visits them weekly.

Housing First grew out of the work of Dr Sam Tsemberis, a clinical community psychologist in the USA and the CEO of 'Pathways to Housing'. He found that providing housing first, followed by in-home support was more cost effective than providing sporadic emergency and institutional support. The Housing First model provides homeless people with direct access to housing and has been successfully implemented in cities across the USA and Canada.

The principles of the Housing First model are:

- Immediate access to housing with no readiness conditions
- Consumer choice and self-determination
- Individualised and person-centred support
- Harm reduction and recovery-orientation approach
- Social and community integration.

In 2018 the Christchurch Methodist Mission led the implementation of the Housing First model in Christchurch. Housing First Christchurch He Kāinga Ora ki Ōtautahi (Housing First Ōtautahi) was initially funded by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and Christchurch City Council for the first two-years (2018 to 2020) and has since been extended to a further two years (2020-2022). Staff are seconded to a Housing First Management Group from six collaborative partners:

- Christchurch Methodist Mission
- Comcare Trust
- Emerge Aotearoa
- Christchurch City Mission
- Te Whare Roimata
- Ōtautahi Community Housing Trust



## HOUSING FIRST ŌTAUTAHI

Housing First Ōtautahi (HFO) employs 21 staff members led by a team manager, with support from the cultural leader, a housing specialist, key workers, and a community mental health nurse. The Champions Group is made up of 16 government and non-government stakeholders. They support the work of HFO by working towards system change in their own organisations and as a collective. The goal of the Champions Group is to address organisational barriers to eradicating homelessness in Ōtautahi.

Housing First use the Māori term 'kaewa' to describe people who are homeless. Kaewa means to roam, wander, travel or adventure (Moorfield, 2011). It is a strength-based term that offers a sense of hope and acceptance. However, kaewa have often experienced severe trauma which has led to poverty and is often associated with poor mental health, alcohol and drug

addictions, convictions and imprisonments. Kaewa often suffer from unstable emotional health and compromised physical health. Kaewa living rough (without shelter) often have multiple health issues that include dental, podiatry, venereal diseases, pneumonia and skin diseases, all exacerbated with complications that arise from malnutrition (Scanlen, 2009).

In usual circumstances the Housing First Ōtautahi referral criteria is four episodes of homelessness over the last three-years or 12-months of continuous homelessness. Kaewa are not required to be under any addiction programme, sober or drug free. Specialist support services are offered to individuals but are not a requirement to stay in the housing. The only obligation of a person receiving accommodation is that they accept a weekly visit from the Housing First support key worker.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this report was to investigate the unique situation that occurred during the lockdown response to the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand. This research was conducted during August and September 2020.

On March 12, 2020, the COVID-19 virus was officially acknowledged as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). In response to the rapidly rising infection rates globally, and the virus becoming evident within New Zealand, the Government introduced COVID-19 Alert Levels. On March 25, the Government changed the Alert to Level 4, placing the country into a nationwide lockdown. The sudden onset of the lockdown was particularly challenging for those who did not have housing. Because they had nowhere to go, they were unable to comply with the Government restrictions.

The methodology was largely qualitative as the researchers sought to tell the story of Housing

First during the pandemic lockdown. Housing First staff, the Champions Group, Ministry of Housing and Urban Development staff, kaewa and moteliere were interviewed to understand the experience from multiple perspectives.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Document the key activities/services/support provided to ensure that anyone who was homeless had a place to shelter during the COVID-19 Level 4 lockdown restrictions.
- Identify the positive impacts and strengths of services/support provided, as well as key challenges.
- Record the experiences of a small number of kaewa (Māori and non-Māori) who were supported by Housing First into motel accommodation.

## The research responds to three questions:

- 1** What is the impact for kaewa (Māori and non-Māori) who have participated in the coordinated services and support provided?
- 2** How did the Housing First kaupapa (purpose) enable the coordinated COVID-19 response? What were the enablers?
- 3** What challenges were experienced in providing this coordinated support? What could further strengthen this work and the positive impacts for kaewa and their whānau/families?

## COVID-19 LOCKDOWN 2020 – WHAT HAPPENED?

The Government restrictions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak required all people to be in housing during the four-week lockdown period. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development directed Housing First to collect kaewa and place them in temporary accommodation. There were no restrictions or criteria placed around the entitlement to temporary housing. However, the majority of the kaewa picked up during COVID-19 did meet the HFO criteria.

The urgency of the lockdown required key workers to respond quickly. They managed the logistics of collecting and accommodating kaewa as the referrals came in. Referrals were quick and the staff collected the kaewa from a variety of locations including parks, street corners, building fronts, and the hospital.

The demand far exceeded their original predictions. Throughout the period of lockdown HFO placed 68 kaewa in motel units. Seventeen kaewa came from rough sleeping, 12 had been sleeping in their cars, 10 came from emergency housing and the circumstances of 29 were unknown (temporarily sharing with others i.e couch surfing). Seven of these kaewa would not normally have met the Housing First Ōtautahi criteria.

Eight HFO key workers alongside peer support workers were tasked with direct care to kaewa and moteliars. Each key worker would normally manage 10 kaewa but over COVID-19 their caseloads increased significantly. Support included transportation to motels, appointments, food, clothing, linkages to existing support services, establishment of new engagements with support services, provision of a phone for contact, education around COVID-19 and attending to a variety of individual needs that changed daily. Assistance was regularly provided to moteliars by key workers and peer support workers. Initially this contact was frequent whilst kaewa and moteliars were settling into this new experience.

# IMPACT FOR KAEWA

**Kaewa comprise a diverse group of individuals from different cultures, different ages and backgrounds, with different needs and aspirations. The data demonstrated the complexity of housing kaewa, many of whom have been on the streets for sometime.**

There were kaewa who were extremely grateful for the motel/accommodation offered by Housing First Ōtautahi and others who resisted being housed during the lockdown. The most significant impact was that kaewa were identified, rapidly housed and supported during the lockdown. None of the housed kaewa contracted COVID-19 during the lockdown period.

However, not all kaewa wanted to be housed. Some appeared to feel trapped by the requirements of the COVID-19 lockdown. For those kaewa who had experienced trauma, or spent time in jail, the lockdown exacerbated feelings of being shut in, trapped and locked up. They were eager to return to the streets as soon as they could. Key workers spoke of kaewa not wanting to be collected, and despite being dropped off to a motel, leaving as soon as they could. For these kaewa the lockdown was an **extremely unsettling time which exacerbated personal challenges.**

*"There was a fellow who we tried to pick up and he'd be okay with it, then we'd take him to a motel and he had to leave that night. And we went and did that for him about three times, we kept going back and forth, pick him up and drop him off to where we picked him up from. He just couldn't handle people around him. He felt like he was in jail." (Key worker)*

*"I had a kaewa who, from day one of getting into the motel, he made it extremely clear that he would not pay rent. And at the whole end of this time (in the motel) he will go back to living on the street." (Key worker)*

The COVID-19 lockdown provided **an opportunity for some kaewa to demonstrate leadership** and use the skills and relationships they had gained over years of struggle. Because they had been on the streets and had relationships with other kaewa, the more mature kaewa were able to support the moteliers to deal with addiction behaviours, outbursts, and resolving relationship dynamics between other kaewa. These kaewa were described by moteliers as role models. Moteliers would seek advice from these kaewa to help them through situations with other kaewa. These kaewa often became confidantes and advisors for moteliers. During COVID-19 their awareness and relationships with other kaewa provided significant support for moteliers.

A few kaewa felt the pandemic was an excuse to trap them into services. These kaewa were **resistant to support** and felt they had lost the ability to choose. To the moteliers they appeared entitled, often demanding of attention, were less respectful to the moteliers, their motel units and the other residents. Some kaewa did not believe they needed to follow the COVID-19 regulations. They refused to wear protective gear and regularly protested about having to abide by the rules as **they believed COVID-19 was a conspiracy.**

Kaewa who had existing alcohol and drug issues found it difficult being placed in a space where there were users of synthetics, other drugs, and alcohol. They reported it was incredibly **difficult for them to stay sober** during this time. The COVID-19 restrictions

made accessing support for their addiction and addressing addictions difficult. Some engaged in risky behaviours; partying, baking and selling drugs from their units, stealing to access money for their drug habit and flouting the rules of the motel.

*“It wasn’t probably the best place to be because there was a high number of synthetic users there.” (Kaewa)*

Kaewa who presented with existing mental health issues found their **mental unwellness was exacerbated during COVID-19** as they were not able ‘to roam’ or access the supports (friends, whānau and services) or feed their addictions. Several found it difficult to access medications for their mental health or access mental health support workers. One kaewa described a significant mental health episode he had during the lockdown which resulted in smashing up the tv and motel unit. In interviews kaewa expressed their remorse for behaving aggressively towards the moteliers and their property.

Moteliers described instances where kaewa who were mentally unwell had altercations in their units resulting in broken windows, pavers being thrown through glass doors, units being intentionally flooded, fires being lit and furniture and appliances stolen.

There was **limited support** from essential community health workers, who were available by phone but not in person. This appeared to further isolate kaewa. One motelier was told by a mental health worker that unless the kaewa were running around outside with an axe they didn’t need to know about it, nor could they do anything to help.

Kaewa acknowledged they were grateful for the warm, dry units but said **they still felt vulnerable**.

They discussed feeling lonely in the motel, and again in their rental housing. They missed the social connection with their street whānau. Some described it as ‘feeling lost’. Kaewa dealt with their loneliness by having regular social gatherings in the motels in defiance of COVID-19 restrictions and motel regulations.

Interview data describes the **complexity of the kaewa** and the challenges experienced over lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for many whānau in New Zealand, resulting in isolation, exacerbating mental health conditions and increasing family violence (Laurence, 2020; Screbnik et al., 2013; Webb, 2020). Given the challenges many kaewa faced before lockdown it’s not unexpected that they would find the state of emergency challenging. However, due to the HFO support the kaewa were off the streets in temporary housing, able to access support from HFO staff and the moteliers, and did not contract COVID-19. This was **a significant achievement for HFO, the moteliers and the kaewa**.



# HOUSING FIRST'S KAUPAPA (PURPOSE)

*enabled the coordinated COVID-19 response*

## HOUSING FIRST ŌTAUTAHĪ TEAMWORK

Housing First adapted and responded quickly to the changing COVID-19 environment and restrictions. The **HFO team was effective prior to COVID-19** with a highly skilled team leader, cultural lead, peer support worker and strong relationships amongst staff (Hutching, Simmonds & Potter, 2020). During COVID-19 the HFO team rose to the challenge of coordinating temporary accommodation and ensuring kaewa welfare requirements were met. HFO quickly became the 'go to' service for kaewa and other vulnerable people who broadly met the HFO brief.

*"I think that's where we saw the real underlying values of those Housing First staff who are superb. To just see their flexibility and their 'can do' attitude. With the roles, it was just kind of like just get on and do it. They were superb."* (MHUD)

Team leaders regularly reached out to staff to ensure they were ok, providing encouragement, appreciation and guidance. This ensured staff were able to discuss any concerns they had, contributing to their calmness and confidence. **Strong leadership, a committed team with established relationships** and working for a common purpose enabled the COVID-19 response.

Staff shared that they enjoyed working through the COVID-19 period. They loved the experience and it reiterated why they work in this field. It validated their worth in their roles and gave them a sense of confidence while cementing their team work and strengthening their bond with their colleagues. They worked hard, often motivated by their team leaders and the work at hand. Staff used humour and kindness to keep morale high during COVID-19.

## FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

The urgency of finding kaewa a safe place to lockdown meant HFO staff had to **'act first and work through the details later.'** The Housing First team knew very little about the kaewa, and kaewa knew little about where they were going to be placed and what this meant for them going forward. This ensured kaewa were off the street as quickly as possible, but also meant the HFO key worker had to be **comfortable working in uncertainty.**

*"We just got told, such and such is at a bush in the red zone, he'll be waiting on the corner of such and such street, could you go and pick him up?"* (Key worker)

*"You just kind of roll with stuff here, so it's like, oh and how many? Okay, then think about it later."* (Key worker)

During the lockdown period Housing First key workers were classified as **essential workers**. The team leader and cultural lead were the only staff based at the Housing First Ōtautahi office. The remainder of the key workers and peer support workers worked from home, attending kaewa at their motels. The key workers had to **be flexible, working outside their normal work hours and role descriptions**. They were required to problem solve and work their way through challenging situations to ensure all kaewa on the street were housed.

*"We were literally just running around in our van (borrowed from the Christchurch Methodist Mission retirement village), picking up people and trying to keep a two-metre distance."* (Key worker)

The initial collection of kaewa worked efficiently and effectively. The challenges were most prominent in the first three-weeks of the relocation of kaewa to motel units. Placing several kaewa together in a motel created synergies that were positive and negative. This was a new experience for the kaewa and also for the key workers, peer support workers and moteliere.

The complexities of one individual provided one layer of challenges, but other layers were added as a

collective of kaewa with different sets of complexities were placed in the same space. **Motels were not designed to house kaewa**, and kaewa were not used to being managed by people who had no experience with mental health and addictions. This **context created daily challenges** that had to be negotiated and worked through by the HFO key workers and moteliere.

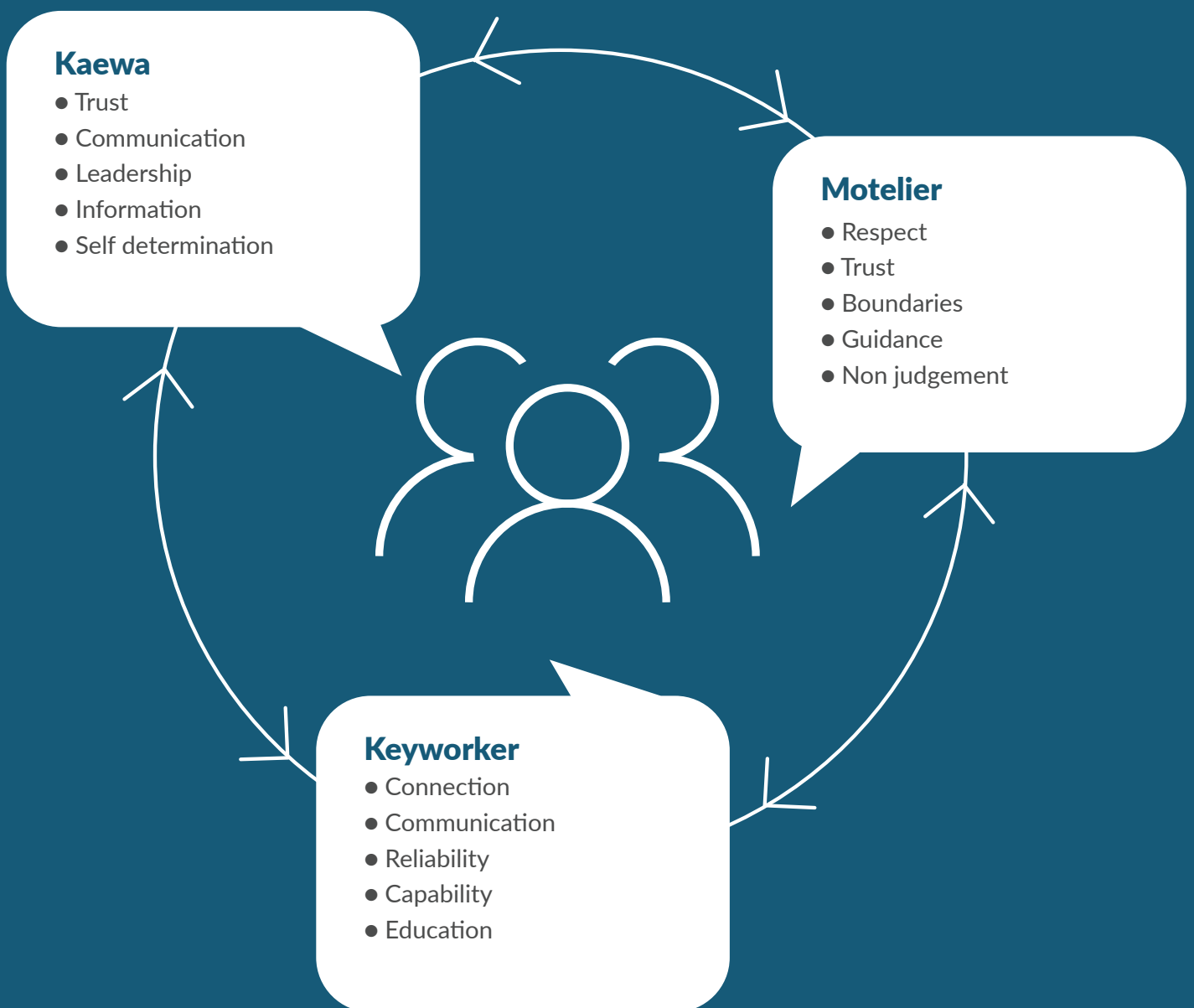
The HFO **Peer Support worker roles reflect their previous lived experience** of homelessness. Due to the demands placed on key workers during COVID-19, Peer Support workers were allocated motels as part of their roles. This was beyond their normal brief and provided many new challenges for them to address. However, their **maturity and prior experience meant they managed this increased responsibility well**.

Due to the need to work from home key workers were often required to work independently. This meant **key workers had to make quick decisions, often under difficult and complex circumstances**. While this was incredibly challenging, several of the key workers noted it was a period of significant personal learning and achievement.



# ENABLERS OF RESPONSE

The white circle represents relationships



## TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

**Trusting relationships held the team dynamic together.** There was an urgency, particularly by the key workers, peer support workers and moteliers, to build trust to get greater compliance in the motels and assist effective communication. The relationship between the key workers, the moteliers and the kaewa was an enabler throughout the period.

*"I found the motelier was great. You build a relationship which wasn't always easy because you also have the dynamics of everyone being in the one place. There was a lot of social behaviour and I watched this also have an impact on the motelier. The motelier would also look to you to solve the problem."* (Key worker)

Two core values underpinned this relationship, being **non-judgemental and respectful**. For the kaewa the non-judgemental approach from both key workers and moteliers was particularly enabling. Kaewa described how they often felt judged by people who are meant to be helping them, but that the key workers and moteliers came from a place of non-judgement. Moteliers spoke of **always showing respect** for the kaewa regardless of the interaction. One motelier said although it could be difficult, they always tried to be respectful to the kaewa.

*"They are people too and deserve to be treated with respect and understanding."* (Motelier)

**Regular visits by the key workers** to the motels contributed to trusting relationships. While the COVID-19 restrictions meant key workers were discouraged from face-to-face interaction, they had to be onsite and seen by both the moteliers and the kaewa regularly. Depending on need, key workers visited daily or on alternate days. This **frequency and reliability contributed to building a trusting relationship** between the kaewa, moteliers and key workers.

Trusting relationships outside of the kaewa, motelier, key worker triangle were also important to the success of the COVID-19 response. Relationships between the Police community constable and the key worker, for example, meant the community constable could support the key worker and motelier to sort disputes, or access vital information. Existing relationships, such as the MSD worker who is often onsite at Housing First, ensured that accessing support, that would normally take sometime, could happen quickly for kaewa. This eased transition.

## SUPPORT FROM GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Government departments, including the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MHUD), Te Puni Kōkiri and the Ministry of Social Development were aware of the urgency of the situation and supportive of the scaling up of Housing First activities to meet demand. The **approach from Government was to act fast** and sort the details later.

*"A lot of it was just sort of flying by the seat of your pants because we'd never done it before, it was new and it was, 'right, we've got to make this work'."* (MHUD)

Te Puni Kōkiri provided financial support to the Homeless Collective. Te Ara Poutama (Department of Corrections) adapted its release processes to ensure no one was released without an appropriate place to go. The Ministry of Social Development

(MSD) supported people into temporary motel accommodation. The MHUD provided \$105 million nationally to assist agencies to accommodate kaewa and have committed to maintain motel units for kaewa if required, until the end of March 2021. They are **committed to supporting the gains made during the COVID-19 period** and supporting kaewa into long-term accommodation.



## FREEDOM FROM RESTRICTIONS

There was a **high level of trust between MHUD and HFO** as they moved forward quickly without formal agreements. This enabled Housing First managers and staff to act much faster than they normally would. A **sense of freedom gave rise to an excitement** in the work.

Working without the constraints of a set criteria aided the ability for Housing First Ōtautahi to

respond effectively. As the word got out across Christchurch's essential services that Housing First was accommodating people the referrals came in from everywhere: Corrections, Police, the hospital, Civil Defence, WINZ and other community services. The phone calls came 24-hours a day, asking for accommodation support and addressing issues that were often beyond the Housing First brief. **The need for motels tripled and the workload doubled.**

## MOTELIERS AS SUPPORT FOR KAEWA

Moteliere didn't realise the extent of work required to look after the kaewa. However, with the sudden absence of tourists and regular clientele, working with MHUD saved their businesses. The moteliere managed the motels while living onsite. This meant they came to know the kaewa well. One motelier explained that he lived in the motel with his family so **having long-term residents/kaewa was like living with 'room mates'**. He had to work out how best to get along with kaewa and support them through what was a challenging time. Moteliere described how they became counsellors, law enforcers, mental health supports and teachers during COVID-19.

*"I've become a social worker and psychiatrist all in one go because a lot of things you can't keep bugging Housing First for."* (Motelier)

Moteliere worked to support the cleaning and hygiene expectations required for COVID-19 by implementing systems in the motel. For example, one motelier created a daily system where they would refresh cleaning products and do laundry when the kaewa placed baskets outside their units. **Moteliere became role models reinforcing safety protocols** and wearing masks around the motel to highlight the latest rules.

*"We bought these big white plastic tubs, put them in each room with a note saying, 'Anything you want to replace, towels, sheets, cleaning materials, washing up liquid, anything like that, just put the empty ones or dirty towels in the tub before midday ... I would come around and replace like for like.'" (Motelier)*

**The moteliere were invested in the process as their livelihood depended on it during COVID-19.**

The tourism industry had dissolved overnight as the borders were closed and New Zealand moved into lockdown. Moteliere faced losing their businesses, their jobs and their homes in their motels. There was a lot at stake for the moteliere, many owed money to their landlords for the motel lease.

*"I talked to many other moteliere and all of them were struggling. Moteliere often don't own the buildings. They are basically leasing. And the lease to a landlord for the motel is quite expensive. Most of the moteliere who discussed lease reductions said their landlords didn't want to lower their prices."* (Motelier)

*"I saw that there is not going to be any tourism in New Zealand for the foreseeable future. And then I started frantically looking to all other possibilities. It was a really scary time."* (Motelier)

*"Without the homeless coming in here, we probably would have to shut down because, of course, there are no tourists, the taps turned off, everyone cancelled because of lockdown. So it was a panic to start with, and then this contract came up."* (Motelier)

MHUD, and to a lesser extent MSD (who hired one to two units alongside the MHUD units), provided **short-term financial security for these moteliere**. The contracts with MHUD saved many of the moteliere from certain bankruptcy. However, they stated they were not prepared to have so many kaewa with such complex needs in the motel. The **moteliere worked hard, alongside HFO key workers**, to accommodate the kaewa and provide a safe environment during lockdown.

# CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED

*In providing coordinated support*

## ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES

Due to the nature of the complexities kaewa faced it was **difficult to find appropriate care from external services during lockdown**. Community services during COVID-19 became non-contact, reaching out through phone and online calls. Many kaewa did not engage in online or distance support, meaning their mental health and addiction needs were not met over this period of time.

Services from law enforcement, mental health and addiction services were not always forthcoming during the lockdown. Restrictions meant many other essential services could not directly support the needs of kaewa. The Christchurch City Mission and other

church services continued to drop food parcels to the motels, but it was a drop-off system. Lack of face-to-face connection with other community services **further heightened the reliance on the key workers for their needs**, and to reduce loneliness.

It appeared to moteliers that the prior knowledge of certain kaewa by Police, had an influence on the response provided. Lack of immediate response increased the stress carried by both key workers and moteliers. With limited access to support for kaewa, moteliers reached out to the Housing First key workers and peer support workers to support them



## DAMAGE TO MOTELS

All moteliers reported **damage to their units** from smoking inside the units, breaking windows, staining carpets, ruining linen, flooding and fires. In some cases smoke detectors were interfered with so kaewa could smoke in their rooms. This created health and safety issues for the moteliers. The moteliers discussed ways in which they tried to ensure the smoke alarms were kept in place such as checking the smoke alarms regularly during room inspections.

**Material damage impacted the moteliers.** Fixing damage caused by kaewa took a significant amount of time and effort. Moteliers were required to obtain three quotes, get approval from MHUD, pay for the repairs and then claim back the costs. This was increasingly difficult over the lockdown period and contributed to the stress placed upon moteliers.

“I had to get three quotes from everybody and so you’ve got plasterers, painters, electricians and you’re constantly having to be here all the time and meeting up with them, talking it through ... we couldn’t get any work done. We had the fire investigators coming around, the Police coming round and I couldn’t even touch the room until they had done their investigation.”  
(Motelier)

Damage was particularly difficult for the moteliers to repair as COVID restrictions meant they could not ask kaewa to leave. The kaewa would either be housed in another unit or taken to another motel. Moteliers described how **they struggled with the lack of accountability from kaewa** for damage they deliberately caused.

Key workers described the tension of **feeling torn between moteliers and kaewa**. They understood the situation from both sides and felt obligated to try and resolve very challenging situations. Their commitment to both the kaewa and the moteliers was noted by Housing First leadership.

“Our key workers had a really tough job of looking after the kaewa and the motelier as well. They were split. As well as the regular kaewa they had prior to COVID-19, it was like, ‘Oh, but he needs me, but they need me, but...’. It was a lot of that, which was really tough on them. I think innate to this issue is the value of the staff and the willingness just to get out and do it.” (HFO Team Leader)

## UNKNOWN KAEWA AND NEW RELATIONSHIPS

During COVID-19 many **kaewa were new to the HFO service** and to the key workers. Starting afresh with a kaewa who are unknown to staff can be intense and this was heightened during the COVID-19 restriction period. In some circumstances the **key workers had no information about the kaewa** and had to ring social support services in other regions. A lack of information regarding personal history, addictions, mental health and corrections meant HFO had to place kaewa without full knowledge of what was best for them, moteliers and other kaewa.

“Starting with brand new people, straight off the streets, the whole dynamic. Even them getting used to the fact they’ve got a roof over their head ... so it

was more intense. And being confined in the motel added to the high pressure.” (Key worker)

The **key workers had to work hard to quickly develop trusting relationships** with the kaewa. Support from the local Police community constable was invaluable during these times. He went out of his way to locate what information he could to keep everyone safe.

## CAPACITY OF HFO DURING CRISIS

During the COVID-19 restrictions the HFO key workers nearly tripled their caseloads. The **complexities of both the context and the cohort**, many who were new, **increased their workload substantially**. The role of the key worker expanded during the restrictions to provide essential items such as food, clothing, and other welfare needs. Initially, the requests for food, clothing, shoes, and sorting out government entitlements were necessary as the key workers attempted to keep kaewa from moving around too much. Post-lockdown, this has created an unrealistic expectation on HFO staff and key workers describe this as a 'rod for their backs'. **Many kaewa became reliant on key workers** to deliver all their basic needs to their motel unit. There has been a period of transitioning back to encouraging kaewa independence and self-determination.

*"You got 15 rooms, that's 15 lots of circumstances and social problems. Each one different to their neighbour."*  
(Key worker)

During the lockdown HFO utilised its peer support workers to take on additional duties supporting both kaewa and moteliers. These **peer support workers rose to the challenge, working alongside key workers to meet the demand**. The workload on coordinating roles, such as the manager and housing coordinator increased significantly over this period.

The HFO team discussed how having experienced the lockdown increased their awareness of what is needed during times of crisis, and that this will **inform future crisis management**. The team also discussed **COVID fatigue**, noting the team worked incredibly hard over an intense two-month period, and many were feeling the impact of this sometime later. This has implications if Christchurch is to face another restriction period due to an outbreak. **Increasing support around HFO and HFO internal capacity** during crisis periods will be crucial.



## ACCESS AND TRANSFERRING TO LONGER-TERM HOUSING

Motels offered a short-term respite from homelessness, the longer-term goal of finding kaewa sustainable long-term housing was still very present for key workers. **Finding suitable long-term accommodation is challenging**, however it became increasingly difficult for HFO to meet the sudden increase in demand. When these interviews occurred, some of the kaewa had been in motel accommodation for over five months. These kaewa discussed how they struggled with the limited functions available to them in the motels. In particular the inability to perform normal domestic duties in their own space. This appears to impact on their sense of worth and independence.

*“It’s just too small and I want my baby back (living with me). There is no oven or freezer in my unit. I put it (meat) at my friend’s house, she lives on the other side of town, so I go over there every day and pick my meat up. And the washing facility ... you’ve got to pay \$5 to wash your clothes, and \$5 to dry.” (Kaewa)*

Kaewa who had transitioned to permanent housing after lockdown wanted a **longer lead in time and a plan of their transition**. Kaewa found it difficult to go from the intensive wraparound support in the motel to what they perceived as **considerably less support when transferred to permanent housing**. This included being financially accountable for their rent and food. Kaewa wanted more preparation and ongoing supports around budgeting, domestic skills and cooking.

*“But moving from the motel to here, that’s a huge change because you’re used to having no power ... not paying for power, having the heat pump on all the time, and a nice warm house ... yeah, it’s sort of like a holiday, a walk in the park at the motel.” (Kaewa)*

The kaewa felt that while they were in the motel during COVID-19 they received a tremendous amount of support and did not feel lonely. However, when they transitioned to a permanent housing arrangement the support felt like it dropped off. They felt lonely and anxious about maintaining their house and keeping themselves well.

# FURTHER STRENGTHENING POSITIVE OUTCOMES

## INCREASED SUPPORT SERVICES DURING CRISIS

Many community services that regularly supported the kaewa were **not physically available** (as they had switched to online or phone access only) or were not deemed an essential service. Kaewa who were experiencing a mental health episode could not get access to support unless they were considered unwell enough to be hospitalised. Police did not have the capacity to respond to the frequency of motel damage and disagreements.

Key workers wanted **more involvement with mental health case managers** and more communication.

Often it was key workers trying to track case managers down to work out what was happening rather than the other way around.

During COVID-19 lockdown HFO became a response driven model which was not always reciprocated by other services. In future crisis situations, and for HFO going forward, organisations need to commit to **a two-way responsive relationship** to sustain care for kaewa and those caring for them.

## SAFETY, RISK MANAGEMENT AND INFORMATION SHARING

Information about kaewa was difficult to obtain during the COVID-19 lockdown and this presented a significant risk. **Information needed to be shared between stakeholders** about kaewa and the risks they posed to themselves and others. Unnecessary time was taken up searching for information that other services held but did not release in their referral. More information would have helped team leaders allocate key workers, appropriate accommodation and prepare moteliers on how to supervise the more challenging kaewa.

**The lack of information exacerbated risk** for HFO staff and moteliers during COVID-19. Moteliers were verbally abused and on occasion physically assaulted by unwell and intoxicated kaewa. They described how placing kaewa in the motel units was a difficult balance. For example, one motelier described how a kaewa who posed a serious risk of physical outbursts was situated next to a kaewa who had been a victim of physical abuse.

Moteliere would prefer for **MHUD to book all units** rather than some, enabling the motel to better manage the challenges. Post-lockdown it became very difficult, and sometimes inappropriate, to place regular guests in the spare units given the unexpected behaviours of some kaewa. Moteliere were also concerned about missing out on motel ratings. They were concerned poor ratings from guests could **jeopardise future bookings**.

Housing First Ōtautahi key workers identified aspects of health and safety that in retrospect they may have been able to manage with the right information. **Creating spreadsheets and fact checklists for referrers and moteliere** would help ensure vital information is shared to ensure the health and safety of kaewa and moteliere.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHAMPIONS GROUP

Homelessness is a **cross-sector, whole of Government issue** and requires a **coordinated cross-sector response**. Having key service representation from Police, Corrections, mental health, AOD, education and mana whenua around the Champions Group table (with regular attendance at meetings) is vital in **progressing sustainable systemic change**. The role of the Champions Group is to assist kaewa to have autonomy and choice. They achieve this through the collective of agencies collaborating to **“accelerate or prompt shifts” from Government through to kaewa**.

*“The Champions Group is an opportunity to champion the cause and to work collaboratively with key organisations, agencies, NGOs, everyone involved so that we can reduce the amount of homelessness in Christchurch.”* (Champions Group representative)

Kaewa frequently have comorbidity with substance abuse and mental illness. These morbidities have led to heightened criminal convictions (30 percent of kaewa have criminal convictions) and a relationship with corrections. Including a representative from the Department of Corrections into the Champions Group has **prompted system changes within corrections**. These changes enable better support to be provided to people when they are released from prison and when they are accommodated. Kāinga Ora sit in the Champions Group. They have released **more houses** to meet the dearth of long-term accommodation available to kaewa.

*“I think for me it’s what happens when you actually don’t give up on people and you actually walk alongside them and around the choice of self-determination ... it’s about what is possible when there’s political will.”* (Champions Group representative)

Findings from this research support the findings from the recent MHUD evaluation of He Kāinga Ora Ki Ōtautahi report (2020). Hutchings, Simmonds, and Potter (2020) identified that more work is needed to assist the Champions Group to be more effective. **The crisis of the COVID-19 lockdown highlighted the importance of coordinated and cross-Government support** to address homelessness. **The lack of appropriate support services**, particularly mental health, and addiction, during this time **exacerbated an already challenging time**. The purpose of the Champions Group is to influence higher level systems change to create more efficient and effective support from Government organisations. This research highlights the importance of their work.

# DISCUSSION

**This section unpacks how the COVID-19 response by HFO reflects the core principles of the Housing First Model.**

## IMMEDIATE ACCESS TO HOUSING WITH NO READINESS CONDITIONS

Housing First Ōtautahi responded immediately to the COVID-19 crisis. With imminent lockdown restrictions the team literally picked up kaewa from the streets and placed them into motel accommodation. The **crisis spurred action regardless of criteria**, neither readiness criteria or the length of the homelessness was applied, and this enabled HFO to immediately house 68 kaewa.

An analysis of data over the period highlighted two important groups that were missing from the data. They were youth and Pacifica. Housing First numbers for the youth population between 16-24 years of age remained at 16 throughout the COVID-19 period. HFO has always had low numbers of Pacifica kaewa and this did not change over the COVID-19 period. Only two additional referrals were received over the 14-weeks. Recently, Aaron Hendry, Youth housing team leader at Auckland's Lifewise programme conveyed the difficulty of servicing youth in Auckland who are living in overcrowded houses, cars and on the street. This was exacerbated in Auckland during the lockdown (Dunlop, 2020). Likewise overcrowding in Pacifica housing may account for low numbers of kaewa.

This first principle of the Housing First model was enabling during the lockdown period. The approach meant that regardless of their situation all kaewa were housed. HFO staff discussed how the crisis meant the model could be fully realised as the context meant all kaewa, regardless of how challenging they were seen to be, were housed. This was a huge achievement for HFO and the kaewa and demonstrated that when the situation dictated, and they needed to be housed, they were.



## CONSUMER CHOICE AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Choice and self-determination, while important, were to some extent taken away by the Government restrictions. All New Zealanders lost their choice to move freely during the pandemic lockdown. The **context predicated a lack of choice** and required those kaewa who preferred to live on the streets to go into motels. This was enabling for some kaewa but caused challenges for others. Moteliers and key workers described how some kaewa believed COVID was part of a conspiracy to control them. These kaewa were resistant to support and difficult to manage during this period. The pandemic demonstrated kaewa need to choose to change their situation rather than have it forced upon them. As noted in the Hutchings,

Simmonds, and Potter (2020) evaluation 'choice' was a fine balance that key workers had to negotiate.

Post-lockdown HFO is working hard to maintain the gains made to house kaewa in more permanent housing. Choice and self-determination have come to the fore as kaewa are able to choose their own path. For some kaewa, having spent time in a motel, they are looking forward to more permanent housing, the gains made through this forced situation have led to them to choosing to live in housing.

## INDIVIDUALISED AND PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT

The context of the lockdown meant that HFO had to **shift to a response driven model** rather than focus on individualised and person-centred support. The urgency of the lockdown meant all kaewa, regardless of their needs, had to be housed for the duration of the lockdown. Many of the kaewa were unknown to HFO and there was no record of support that they were able to access. Not knowing what support the kaewa may need during the lockdown period made it incredibly difficult to offer person-centred support.

The key workers worked hard to gather as much information as they could to personalise the support and ensure that kaewa could access the assistance

they needed. As the immediate urgency of housing for kaewa lessened, the key workers were able to individualise support by accessing more information and by building a relationship with new kaewa.

## HARM REDUCTION AND RECOVERY-ORIENTATION APPROACH

The Housing First model is built on the concept of harm reduction and recovery orientation. Key to this is the assertion that behaviour change is most lasting if it is client-driven (Collins et al., 2012). Housing First does not require sobriety or access to a recovery programme as a condition for its service. Many of the kaewa have long-standing addictions that cause them and those around them harm. During the lockdown moteliers noted drug use, selling drugs and intoxication. The Housing First team had to work in very challenging circumstances, supporting kaewa who were under the influence of drugs and alcohol. For some kaewa the nature of the context, the motel, and communal living made it more challenging to stay sober during this time.

Previous research on emergency housing of kaewa identified that harm reduction is often overlooked, and more discussion is needed to address this issue (Watson, 2017). It was apparent **there was insufficient support for addictions and mental health** episodes during the lockdown, and that **lack of support**

**perpetuated the challenges.** While online and over the phone counselling was available, it was not suitable for kaewa with significant drug and alcohol addictions and/or clinical mental health diagnoses.

Kaewa struggling with mental health episodes could not receive support unless they were considered acute and were a danger to themselves and others. This meant kaewa who were struggling with a mental health episode during lockdown often destroyed property, verbally abused moteliers and other residents, and in some cases physically assaulted moteliers. There is no easy answer to this challenge, other than to identify that the conditions of lockdown exacerbated poor mental health and harmful drug use for some kaewa and more specialist support is required in these situations to support kaewa, HFO and moteliers.



## SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

Homelessness, particularly when it is repeated or goes on for a long time, often fractures the links between a person and all dimensions of social life (Pleace, 2013). A key focus for Housing First is reconnecting kaewa with the social world in terms of living in normal community settings and sharing the same socialisation and community opportunities as others.

The COVID-19 lockdown was, by the nature of isolation, counter to social and community integration. However, there were aspects of the lockdown experience that demonstrated the strengths of some kaewa. Moteliers discussed how they had to learn quickly to **integrate kaewa as roommates** rather than guests as they were living with them for extended periods. **The relationship of respect** that grew between the kaewa and the moteliers, under difficult conditions, **demonstrated social connection and integration**. For some kaewa it was an opportunity to show leadership, working alongside the motelier, supporting them to manage some of the challenges with other kaewa. This opportunity enabled some

kaewa to see themselves as leaders, and for the motelier to value the skills of the kaewa.

Kaewa who were transferred from motels to longer-term housing reportedly found social and community integration challenging. The support that surrounded them in the motels from Housing First could not be replicated in their longer-term housing. This demonstrates a need to ensure that HFO support transition and that there are services that can provide intensive support for kaewa once housed.

# SUMMARY

This research demonstrates that Housing First Ōtautahi was well placed to respond to the COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand. The principles of Housing First supported staff to respond rapidly without judgement or the application of criteria for support. This enabled over 60 kaewa to be accommodated during this period. The complexities of kaewa made this challenging. HFO drew on the resources they had in the community, and their relationships with moteliers and other kaewa, to respond to situations that arose. There is an opportunity to reflect on the success of the response and to learn from the challenges to capitalise on support and negate barriers in the future.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was an extremely unsettling and extraordinary time, it did provide an opportunity for Housing First Ōtautahi to demonstrate that 'accommodate first and work through any complexities once housed' works. This research demonstrates that the provision of appropriate support services, particularly in addictions and mental health, is an important part of success post-placement in accommodation.



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# COVID-19 RESPONSE

## Nationally and in Christchurch

### Nationally

Overall, the Government spent \$21 million in nine NZ regions on 90 motels with 1208 units to accommodate homeless people during the COVID-19 national lockdown. The Government has committed \$105 million to cover people to stay in the motel units for longer until more permanent houses are procured for them. \$31 million of this total has been put aside to provide wraparound support for kaewa. MHUD allocated \$1, 577, 319.07 to Christchurch to secure 10 motels and 75 units. The majority of the motels were contracted for three months.

## COVID-19 Response in Christchurch Of the kaewa

**17** were rough sleeping

**12** were in vehicles

**10** in emergency housing,

**12** in other and unknown living situations (for instance sharing room spaces or couch surfing).

**73** motels were procured housing **68** kaewa.

### Over 3 months

Over the three months of the COVID-19 response the

**56 plus age group rose from 9 to 15 people**

and the overall monthly kaewa into the service rose on average **10% every month** (144 in May to 181 in June).

### Ethnicity

**77** European

**69** Māori

**6** Pacifica

March-June 2020

### Gender and Age

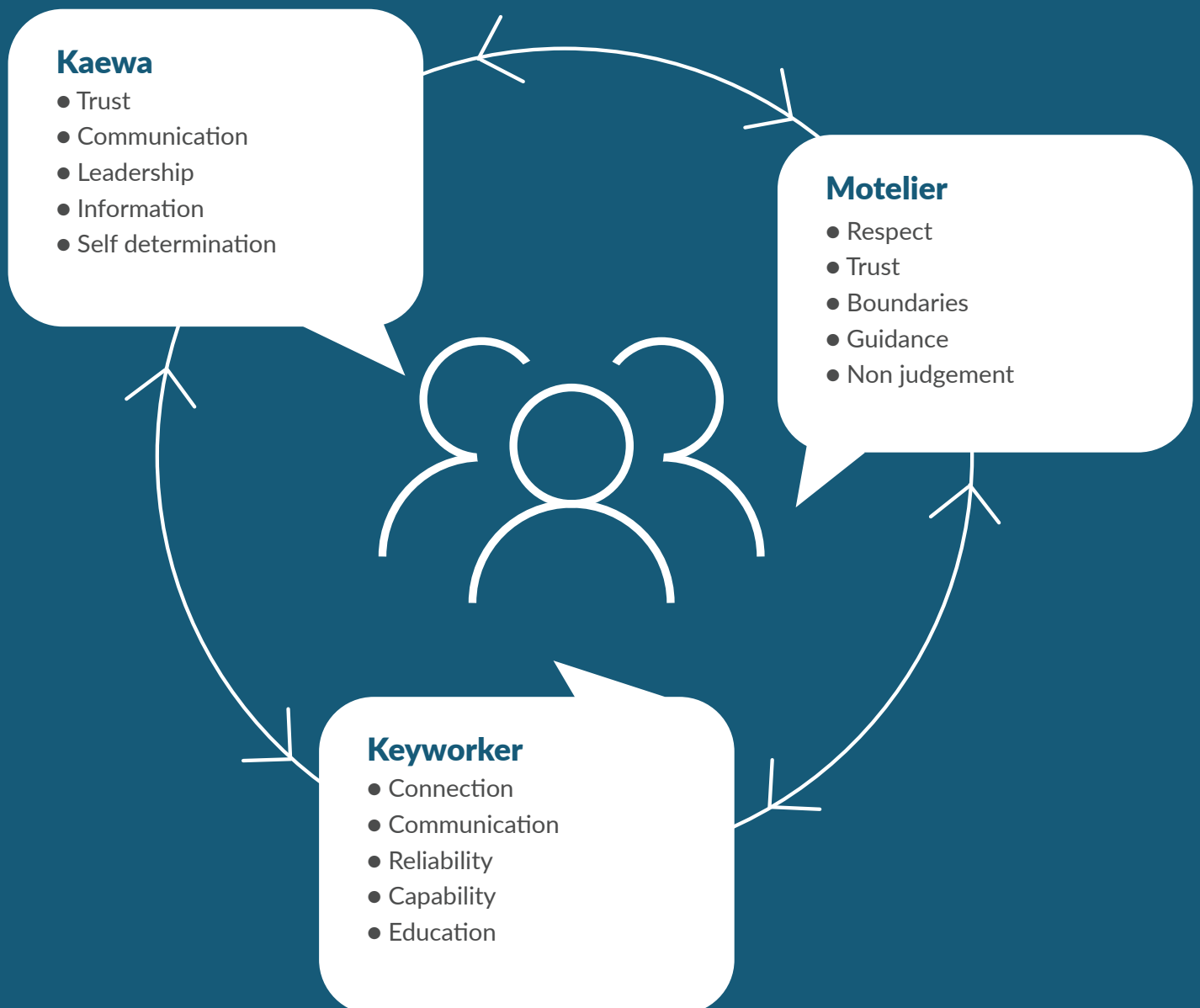
**105** males **24** females

**Average age 31-50 years.**

**Only 4 kaewa were over the age of 61.**

# TAPA TORU HOUSING FIRST COVID-19 RESPONSE

This triangular concept highlights the prominence of key relationships during COVID-19 as the country went into lockdown and community services closed. Housing First Ōtautahi provided essential services in an unprecedented situation gathering a cohort of kaewa together to be accommodated during the lockdown. The triangle highlights the intensive and isolative relationship these three groups had over this period. Acknowledgement is given to the integral support provided to the key workers and moteliers from leaders and specialists based at Housing First Christchurch He Kāinga Ora ki Ōtautahi and MHUD.







*“I’d just like to thank Housing First,  
and everybody who has helped me  
on my travels. I love Housing First,  
and everything they’ve done for me.  
Not just for me, but my kids as well.”*

(Kaewa, 2020)