

# Executive Committee report 2021

The story of the Valley Project's past year is the story of a community organisation doing its best to respond to the wild ride that has been Covid-19. We have changed the way we work in response to the pandemic, throwing open our doors to the Valley community and it has been wonderful to connect with so many new families, whānau and residents.

In many ways the pandemic has not panned out the way we expected. We have not had the virus in the South Island for more than a year, yet the consequences have still been large, especially in terms of the mental health of our people. Necessity is the mother of invention. We have kept altering our plans in response to emerging community needs. Some things we have tried in the past year have not worked out, but others have been very successful and brought great rewards. It has only been through the massive efforts of our staff and volunteers that we have been able to do this work, and the executive wants to acknowledge everyone's enormous commitment and mahi through these difficult times.

## *A Covid Hub experiment*

Our biggest project this past year has been turning our offices and community rooms into an open and welcoming Covid response hub. The idea was to use the space we control into a place the community could come for advice, social connections, education opportunities and a safe place when things got hard. We changed up our reception, added hotdesks in the Te Putake room and video conferencing equipment, installed a gifted barbeque, and overhauled the community pantry. Most importantly we opened the doors for longer, up to 10 hours on Thursdays and added a hugely popular Saturday food and activity day. All of this has been a huge effort but well worthwhile.

## *New times, new programmes*

With the hub as our base, and in response to the needs we were seeing, we started several new programmes to support the community.

We geared up for mass unemployment in the Valley, as anecdotal reporting and evidence seemed to be that women, Maori and Pasifika members of our community would be the hardest hit. We got a big grant to run employment and training programmes for the under and unemployed from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, but it hasn't worked out as expected. The economy has been much stronger and unemployment much lower. In fact, we have struggled to find people who are unemployed and needing help - most people have found training or support in other agencies.

The other side of this project has been more successful. We have been able to work with the dozens of local businesses in the wider Valley area to support and promote them, and encourage people to shop locally. We have done special business spreads in the Valley Voice. Post-lockdown many new businesses have sprung up, especially people starting new businesses from home. We will keep looking for ways to connect and support them as they build their businesses and spread their wings.

Some interest has been expressed in a Valley business network and we are actively supporting this idea though ultimately this will need to be business led. We have begun work on a Valley business and community directory, which will be hosted on a website and a printed directory.

### *Food resilience*

The other big opportunity has been to work more on food resilience. Covid-19 and the lockdowns have shown how reliant we have become on long supply chains to move food around the country and world, and how risky that is. Many people in the Valley yearn to grow more of their own food, work together on food forests, and create a more circular economy. Thanks to the Ministry for Social Development, we have a grant to survey the community and map the many resources that exist, and build a plan to make the Valley's food supply more resilient. We will be talking more about this at the AGM and in a number of ways over the next year.

### *How Green Was My Valley*

Despite Covid, our environmental partner programme, Open Valley Eco Sanctuary (OpenVUE), is going from strength to strength. Clare Cross and her committee have developed a new Backyard Ecosanctuaries programme which harnesses the energy in the community to expand backyard monitoring and pest trapping, and weed and plant new areas. All with the ultimate aim of bringing kākā parrots back to the Valley. This has now been backed with a major investment by Predator Free Dunedin establishing a bigger trap library and staffing to support hundreds of households to get involved.

### *Mainstays confirmed*

The other thing that the Covid experience has done is to confirm the value of so many of the Valley Project's existing strengths and projects. The Valley Voice has emerged as a key communication tool. So many residents have thanked us for its role in informing and connecting them in. Our Cosy Homes project continues to help get households through the worst of winter and lower their energy bills. Kai Share keeps feeding dozens of families and whānau, a vital service amidst uncertainty. And the community rooms keep pumping, hosting dozens of groups a week in a wonderful array of activities that keep us connected, grounded, entertained and learning new things.

### *Funding for the rainy day*

The Covid situation has also been a challenge to our finances as we have had to expand our staff and budget to deliver extra programmes and staff the Covid hub.

We have had huge support for this from our funders, and gained new support from central Government, through successful applications for new grant schemes for Covid response. In total we have received an extraordinary 17 grants this year, totalling about \$190,000.

We thank the following for their strong support of the Valley Project's work this past year:

- Dunedin City Council
- Department of Internal Affairs/ Lottery Grants Board / COGS
- Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
- Ministry of Social Development
- Sargood Bequest
- Presbyterian Synod of Otago and Southland

Even so there has been a funding gap. The executive decided early on that this was the rainy day we had been saving for, and decided to act first and work out how to pay for it after. We committed in advance to cover any shortfall from our reserves, a gap which has come out at about \$20,000. We can't do this very often, but it has proved the right decision for the times.

Overall the Valley Project's overall financial situation remains strong. However, we will have to trim back now and return to a tighter unit as we figure out what our core work is now and what the new normal will look like.

### *Where to from here?*

The Project again faces some decisions about where to put its resources and focus. Do we return to our core purpose of empowering the community to do its own projects, or keep trying to run programmes ourselves that build up our community strength and skills? How many hours a day and a week do we open to the public for? How do we actively support the mental health needs of the Valley without becoming councillors or health workers. How can we build on the lessons of this pandemic to best prepare for the next disease or disaster? How can we lift the health of our people, our environment and our awa/ river Lindsay Creek, which is the water at the heart of our Valley. The next executive committee will need to decide these things with the guidance of staff and members.

*Stepping up, stepping down*

None of what we have done this year would be possible without the tireless efforts of the Project's staff this year: Tess Trotter, Charlotte Wilson, Jess Covell, Clare Cross, Emily Peterson, Marama Smyth, Hinewai Broughton, Aaron Baker, Tessa Petley, Jo Mohan, Sala Tofa, Steve O'Connor. And Jess Corbett aka Ladybird has taken on our finances and done them brilliantly. To all of them, we say a massive Thank You.

The work has at times placed a heavy load on our many volunteers and our executive members. We acknowledge and thank all those who have served on the committee and standing down this AGM: our inimitable secretary Sarah Gallagher, VCW liaison Natasha Murachver, Hub steering committee Hinewai Broughton and Marama Smyth, Nicky Bisley, Chris Burgess, Helen Jack. Thank you for your wisdom and leadership and we look forward to working together again when the time is right.

The challenges we have faced over the last year (or few years) have reinforced our confidence that the answer to solving any social problem is community. It may not make it disappear but facing it together we can get through anything, and be stronger for it.

*The Valley Project Executive*

*June 2021*