



The reflections of a Lincoln graduate in a small council facing a big challenge

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Late in 2015 I graduated from the first class to complete the Master of Environmental Policy and Management Degree (MEPM). In May the following year I started work as Kaikōura District Council's (KDC) Planning Officer. Six months after I started, just as I was finding my feet, my introduction to small town local government changed dramatically. The 7.8Mw Hurunui/Kaikōura Earthquake event began. Not only did the earthquake throw me out of bed, it also threw this small local council into complete disarray. Despite my experience as a graduate being relatively short, the circumstances have given me some unique insights. Not only can I talk pros and cons of starting a career in a small local authority, but I can also detail what it's like to be a graduate in a pretty exceptional situation.

My experiences begin at Lincoln. I found myself in the MEPM programme because I wasn't content with the career options I had after graduation from another institution. Reflecting on what I really wanted in a career led me to the Resource Studies Programmes at Lincoln. I played it safe at first and started in a post-graduate certificate, however I quickly found that I was really enjoying the course. This made the decision to continue into the newly available MEPM programme a simple one.



Being a student at Lincoln after the Canterbury Earthquakes was an interesting time. As the facilities came down and the university adapted, so did the course content. Earthquake recovery policy and building disaster resilience were common themes.

Lectures on these topics were made more interesting and relevant due to the significant quantity of local examples available. This was particularly true of the Resource Management Law course. In this course we frequently examined and critiqued the response of government and local authorities to major natural disasters. I left Lincoln feeling well equipped for a diverse array of careers, however, being an optimist I never considered that I would be putting to use the post-disaster policy and planning aspects so soon after graduating (indeed if at all).

When I submitted the application to work in Kaikōura I had doubts about whether I could actually accept the job if it were offered to me. My reservations were due largely to the small size and relative isolation of the town itself. Moving to Kaikōura certainly did not match my stereotype of the graduate lifestyle. However following the interview my doubts about the social aspects were displaced by my realisation of the opportunities. Working in a small Council is characterised by significant diversity and

exposure. You end up being a jack of all trades, and a master of a least a few. In any week I could find myself considering freedom camping policy, meeting to discuss the Ohau Waterfall (baby seal) walkway, management of flooding hazard in the district, implementing changes to the RMA, considering strategies to promote cycling, or discussing biodiversity. I also began to see some advantages in the town itself, the more obvious of which included the ready access to some great backcountry and becoming involved in a tight community - for example joining the local fire brigade. I think being in a volunteer fire brigade will remain among my most rewarding experiences and would encourage anyone curious to find out more.

The earthquake shook things up in both a figurative and literal sense. The initial quake will stick with me for being both very long and very strong. It was so long that assuming it must be ending; I tried to get out of bed. As soon as I was upright I quickly found myself unable to stand. I was left crouching in the centre of my room as my bedroom furniture collapsed around me. When the initial shaking had subsided (and my flatmates all appeared OK) I made a quick dash to the fire station. The road was alive with people as everyone poured onto the street and headed for the hill. Turning into the West End (the main commercial street), I was genuinely surprised to find the buildings largely upright and intact.

For me and my fellow fire fighters the morning was a busy one. Whilst most people had a long nervous wait on the hill till sun-up we were responding to the limited information that was coming through. This saw us respond initially to the Elms Homestead collapse, and as the day progressed, to surveying the town and the accessible rural surrounds. Our work that day began to reveal the extent of damage to homes, land and key infrastructure. Early on day two I reported to Council, although for the next five weeks we were no longer a Council. The civic centre had transformed into an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), the Council now a cog in the Civil Defence machine. Our role was to begin evaluating and responding to the long list of complex problems the district now faced.

Not long after starting at KDC I participated in a two hour introduction course to the Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS). CIMS is the framework that Emergency Response (including Civil Defence) occurs within. As part of the Council induction I was assigned to the Planning and Intelligence Team. This would only become relevant should we ever find ourselves becoming Civil Defence, which no one seemed to regard as a likely scenario. So a two hour workshop was the extent of my pre-event exposure to Civil Defence. Luckily I'm a fast learner and have a back ground in the Defence Force. Indeed my time in the army reserve had included both a deployment to East Timor and responding to the Christchurch earthquakes.

Working in an EOC is a strange experience. It's challenging, the pace is fast, the tasks are complicated and the context is characterised by ambiguity. Our small Council of 22 staff was well supported. At times the EOC alone had over 100 personal from various councils plus New Zealand Defence Force staff, Red Cross, Fire Service, Police, central government and geotechnical experts. This helped immensely, but the routine was twelve hour + shifts every day, for four weeks straight. In that time we achieved a lot. My personal involvement included the acquisition of Civil Defences rental fleet; setting up the monitoring and forecasting programme for fuel supplies; working to keep evacuated Goose Bay residents informed on progress as we raced to understand the implications of a land slide Dam that had formed in the catchment above the settlement; and work to understand rural needs and how we could best meet those needs. While Council is small, we had a huge out-of-district work force. A key role for local staff was connecting other staff to local contacts and to staff in the EOC, as well as providing a continuity link between outgoing and incoming staff. There's no doubt an EOC is a stressful place to be, and the context is very much an unfortunate one, but none the less I loved it.

As the initial response work began to wind down it was replaced by recovery work. As a planner my role became guided not only by the District Plan and Resource Management Act

1991 (RMA), but now also by the Hurunui/Kaikōura Earthquakes Emergency Relief Act 2016, Hurunui/Kaikōura Earthquakes Recovery Act 2016 and Hurunui/Kaikōura Earthquakes Recovery (Coastal Route and other Matters) Order 2016. The new legislation made significant changes to the RMA. Our challenge was to apply this legislation in a manner that got the best outcomes for the community. The time spent at Lincoln looking into the Christchurch experience now seemed particularly relevant as we began to grapple with similar issues. For example, management of rock fall and slippage hazards were now issues that we also had to consider.

This is the first time I've been asked to reflect on my post-graduation experience. Given that two thirds of this experience has occurred in either a state of emergency or transition it can be easily described as unique. However I think that working in small territorial authority would always fit the description; and if you find yourself contemplating work in NZ's smaller districts, it is an experience I would recommend. Even without a major disaster it will be diverse, unique and rewarding.