



## Progressive Thinking:

### Ten Possible Futures for Public & Community Services

#### Reimagining New Zealand's journey to a zero carbon future

*Sophie Handford*

**In 2020, as we navigate our way through COVID-19 lockdown and beyond, we have the chance to reimagine what our journey to a zero carbon future looks like, writes Climate Activist and Kapiti Coast District Councillor Sophie Handford.**

People often introduce me as New Zealand's youngest District Councillor. It always makes for a strange segue for what I want to say, as if my work for better youth housing on the Kapiti Coast, or the urgent need for climate action should somehow be seen alongside the number of candles Mum puts on my birthday cake (a really tasty banana cake if you are interested!).

After only six months in office, it's already clear to me that the challenges we face in Local Government won't be solved by councillors like me growing up, or growing tired in these institutions – but by more people from more diverse backgrounds standing up, and making their voices heard around our council tables.

So when I talk about what a planned retreat from our coastlines could look like, I am not being dramatic. I've not spent too much time online or around activists. I'm thinking very practically about my family and the future of my community. I'm thinking about what leaving my family home in the coming decades could mean.

I grew up, and still live, on the Kapiti Coast. I'm here right now, in lockdown, amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. I'm writing about the future of our public services, a Just Transition and how local government can support our journey to a zero carbon future.

I am writing impatient for our council tables to be more representative. Impatient for a time when climate change is at the heart of all our decision-making, and for a time when we are united in our work to safeguard a livable planet for future generations.

Urgency and lockdown are interesting bedfellows. As countries all over the world change to cope with COVID-19 and grapple with the economic upheaval in its wake, I see people asking whether now is the right time to talk about climate change.

That's a tough one for me. Right now, I can see the impacts of climate change from where I'm sitting. My home has the Tasman Sea for a front yard, a beach as my playground, and I have spent a good part of my life already watching it change irreparably. Storm surges and sea level rise is something constantly on the minds of my community – and for our Pacific neighbours? They're fighting for their lives now with the water at their doorsteps.





This is also very real for the Kapiti Coast District Council. We represent a low-lying coastal community. Many of the people who put me here will bear the brunt of the effects of more severe weather events and rising sea-levels.

So adaptation is going to be a massive part of this mahi – making sure communities are better able to deal with these challenges when they inevitably come. That means we have a responsibility to tackle this head on and discuss defences such as sea walls, it means we have to build infrastructure in new and different ways.

When I was growing up not many people would have foreseen the growth on the coast. We are now a commuter hub, and our population is growing rapidly, mostly with people who don't work locally. So how people get to and from work here makes a massive difference to our community carbon footprint.

These are the conversations and questions that motivated me to run for office. As a global and national society, we know we need to make some serious shifts in the way we operate and the things we value - from profit to people and the planet. We know we need to limit temperature rise to no more than 1.5 degrees if we are to avoid the irreversible impacts of catastrophic climate change, and we know we don't have much time.

I am clear on where we need to get to, which means that my energy, and the energy of the people fighting for a stronger, greener economy is focused on the journey.

### **We have to take people with us**

We have to make sure no one is left behind and that disadvantaged groups are not disproportionately affected as we adapt to climate change. As we reorient our communities and our work we have to take steps to make sure the transition is fair and shows compassion for those who will feel the impact the most.

### **We have to put climate change at the heart of our decision-making**

When we are considering the cost in money value of certain purchases or decisions, we should be considering the societal cost and the environmental cost as well. We can make decisions which hold economic development and positive climate impacts in the same breath. In fact we must - without a liveable climate and functioning ecosystems, we won't have an economy.

We need to be looking at every decision with the climate crisis always in our heads and use this to ensure we are making responsible, sustainable decisions that give us the best chance at passing on a liveable planet to future generations.

For councillors like me this means connecting our work to an overarching purpose of protecting our environment; including climate friendly public transport, community resilience for living locally and infrastructure to support the rollout of electric or hydrogen vehicles.





## **We have to build community resilience**

If the COVID-19 environment has taught us anything, it's the importance of community when forced to adapt to change. We need structures and services that allow us to survive and thrive locally. What people have realised during lockdown is what a life closer to home could look like. I have talked to so many people plagued by the daily commute into the CBD from the Coast – and guess what? We don't need to do it. We can commute less, consume less, and come away with more. We can change our habits and build stronger local communities and better safeguard our local environments.

## **We have to give some stuff up**

This means we have to own up to what's not working. We have to be willing to change. If we are to adequately respond to the climate crisis we need to embrace the idea of co-designing services from the ground-up. We can already see the start of this in public service engagement with Te Ao Māori. That means our fundamental framework of policy development might look a little different, we might have to create a bit more space for diverse interests and perspectives if we are to truly develop a shared vision.

Making the switch to a sustainable economy, will take considerable investment. That includes not just the funding needed to support a just transition but also investing in our public services so they're properly resourced. We have complex problems to solve, but they're not beyond us. We need to be creative and re-envision the better world that we all know is possible. Through a just transition to a clean, green economy, we can create a society with many more examples of justice and reduced inequalities. Through the changes that will occur for workers and our local public services we have the opportunity to build the kind of world we all want to live in and that we then want to pass on to our children.

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