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Reviving Kaikohe's food system over the kitchen table

The whare kai at Korewhata Marae is electric with lively energy amidst blown-up pictures of food. The women in the kitchen are passing succulent looking dishes to and between facilitators who, dressed in matching aprons, are busy capturing all the conversation that is pouring forth from the tables. This is Kitchen Table Talk in action – a Healthy Families Far North-led initiative that is working with the Kaikohe community to address the accessibility and availability of fresh kai to its people.

For several months, Healthy Families Far North has been quietly undergoing a process of social innovation, in collaboration with design agency innovate change and other services and champions based in the mid-North area, to look at co-designing solutions to Kaikohe's food system, from garden to plate.

The community dinners at Korewhata Marae were the culmination of a preliminary research exercise which saw the Healthy Families Far North gather insights into what Kaikohe's food system currently looks like, via one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions, and present them back to the 100-plus community members who attended in early October.

Now, Healthy Families Far North kaiwhakahaere Shirleyanne Brown says they are sitting on five prototypes – or quickfire solutions – that are ready to be tested out, in response to what the community have informed is happening.

“One of our insights told us that whānau are drawn to food options that are very visible whether they are healthy or not. One way to support this idea is to make people more aware of what food is available and where to find it. So, we are looking at testing this idea in the form of a smart phone food app that could assist whānau to navigate food ability and enable better food choices,” she says.

She says the app's concept is to map out both retail and wild food availability of good, nourishing kai and could extend to include healthy recipes based on seasonal produce and dietary requirements.



“Kaikohekohe is named for the kohekohe berries which were once in abundance in the area. We want to work in with the community to rejuvenate that legacy of the town being a pātaka of good kai,” she says.

The other prototypes being considered include utilising public spaces to grow more produce in and around the town, branding households as providers of surplus produce for the community, creating pop-up kai stalls and encouraging retailers to produce and promote healthier, alternative fast food options, or ‘kete kai’.

Local champions that have been driving the movement include Countdown Kaikohe store manager Ursula Reichel. She is a crucial part of a group of Healthy Families Far North prevention partners – including faith-based organisations, Te Hau Ora o Ngāpuhi, Kāinga Ora/Place-Based Initiative, Sport Northland and the Northland District Health Board – who have taken on the role of leading out change across the whole community.

“Taking part in this project has both challenged and influenced my team and I. It’s made us think differently and how we can help encourage our customers to make healthier choices through our displays and the conversations we have with our customers on a daily basis. We’re present in the lives of hundreds of customers each day – why not help them make healthier decisions when they shop with us?” she says.

For Kaikohe Seventh Day Adventist Church member Toro Mason, who delivers community cooking classes through Manaia PHO, the Kitchen Table Talk experience has been enlightening and rewarding. He says he has connected with others working in the community working on the same kaupapa, including retailers and organic producers, that he would not necessarily have worked with, which has resulted in a richer and more synergetic system.

“If you want the food industry to work, you have to get in each other’s business; you can’t get into the essence until you know about what everyone does. Healthy Families Far North is here to help the community, not tell us what to do. I’m learning how to leverage off what is already happening in the community,” he says.

Shirleyanne says the collaborations that are being borne of the initiative are the some of the most exciting outcomes of the work.

“One of the guiding principles of the Healthy Families NZ movement is collaboration for collective impact. We know that long term commitment from a range of partners has greater impact on the collective health of communities. The knowledge and momentum being generated across Kaikohekohe is testament to that. Nāku te rourou,



nāu te rourou ka ora ai te iwi – with your basket and my basket, the people will thrive,” she says.

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