



Te Kāhui Tika Tangata
Human Rights Commission

Whirinaki in Hokianga

Case study



**Hapū leading the way
for community-inclusive
Emergency Management**

Background

Whirinaki is a community nestled in a valley on the south side of the Hokianga harbour, beneath the mountain Te Ramaroa. The valley is home to several marae, kōhanga reo, small businesses, and papakāinga. The Whirinaki river flows through the area, connecting the community.

Te Hikutū is one of several hapū of Whirinaki, and many residents are of Te Hikutū descent. Since the arrival of Kupe, Nukutāwhiti and Ruanui, Te Hikutū has upheld its role as kaitiaki of the area, maintaining its ahikā despite the effects of colonisation.¹

Crucial to this role as kaitiaki is an understanding that all elements of the taiao – forests, seas, mountains, rivers, and people – are connected through whakapapa.

1 [Te Mātaitai o Te Hikutū](#) [PDF 9.3MB], page 4.



See tikatangata.org.nz/our-work/inclusive-emergency-management for the links to information in this document and other resources.

The taiao is a living network that everyone belongs to.

When any strand of this network is damaged, the impacts are felt across the whole system, including by us as ira tangata.

In Whirinaki, two interconnected pressures are directly affecting the community. The first is the increasing intensity and frequency of heavy rainfall across Te Tai Tokerau. The second is the condition of the Whirinaki river, where sediment build-up, erosion and blockages over time have reduced its capacity to safely carry floodwaters during major storms.



Photos throughout have been supplied by local residents showing effects of March 2026 flooding in Whirinaki.

These pressures have increased flood risk for local hapū and hāpori. Recently, heavy rainfall across the Whirinaki catchment caused rapid runoff into the river, causing water levels to rise quickly and the river to overflow its banks. Flood modelling also shows that many homes could be exposed to flood waters of up to 2.2 metres, including marae and papakāinga held by whānau for generations.²

In response, Te Hikutū and local whānau are strengthening emergency preparedness while also planning for longer-term solutions to support community safety. Whirinaki Toiora Trust works closely with the community to coordinate this work, drawing on its experience delivering social, environmental and cultural initiatives.

At its core, this case study highlights a hapū exercising self-determination in responding to emergencies and planning for long-term resilience.



2 Whirinaki Papakāinga Managed Retreat.

Emergency weather events in recent years

Whirinaki has faced a series of significant weather events in recent decades, with river flooding posing the greatest risk to the community.

In 1999, a major storm triggered a flash flood that inundated whānau homes and forced evacuations by boat as floodwaters covered the main road. Since then, extreme weather has continued to affect the community, including power outages and road closures during Cyclone Gabrielle and other intense rainfall events across Hokianga.

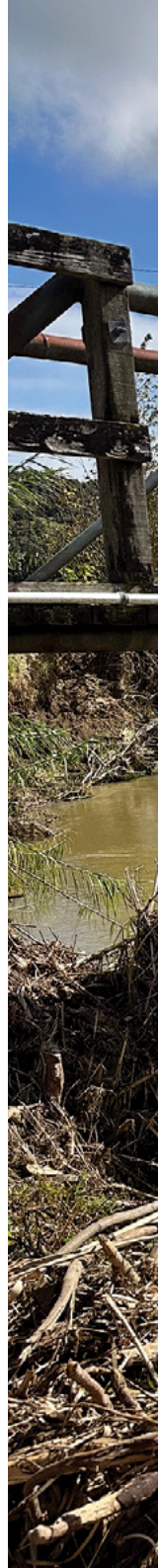
In March 2026, Whirinaki experienced its most severe rainfall event since 1999. Around 304 millimetres of rain fell over the span of 48 hours.³ The rainfall coincided with high tide, causing the river to overflow its banks and send floodwaters up to a metre deep through the valley.⁴ Around 65 homes were affected, nine of which were rendered almost unliveable.⁵ Widespread silt build-up was also left across the area, compounding the impacts on whānau and the wider community.⁶

3 [Weather-hit Northland communities face health concerns amid silt clean-up.](#)

4 [Parts of the Far North still cleaning up after floods.](#)

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

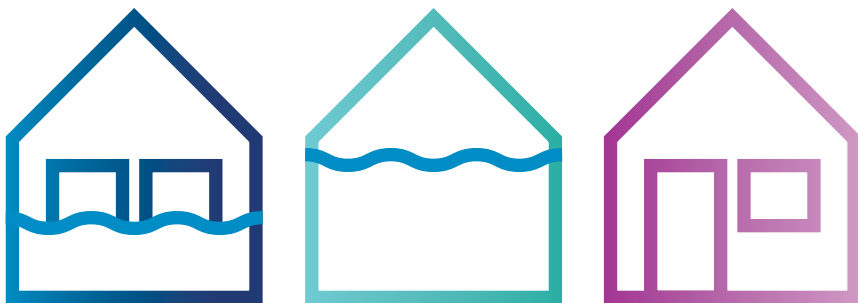




Key impacts of flooding events

These flooding events have had significant impacts across the Whirinaki community, affecting homes, infrastructure, health and wellbeing.

The March 2026 floods damaged housing, disrupted essential services, and resulted in the loss of essential household infrastructure such as water pumps, deep freezers, cabins and gardens. Widespread silt across the settlement required extensive clean-up and created health risks for whānau involved in the clean-up.⁷



While flooding affects the whole community, impacts are not experienced evenly. Some whānau have lost their entire homes, while those already experiencing housing insecurity have faced heightened risk during emergencies, including barriers to accessing safe shelter.

⁷ [Parts of the Far North still cleaning up after floods.](#)

Flooding can also create secondary risks. During the March 2026 event, one whānau lost their home to a fire believed to have been caused by flood-related damage to electrical wiring.⁸ There are also health implications associated with exposure to floodwaters and damp housing.

Beyond the immediate impacts, the Trust has observed long-term effects on community wellbeing. While emergency responses focus on physical safety, emotional and spiritual impacts often emerge later. Anxiety during heavy rainfall has become increasingly common, alongside stress linked to loss of possessions and irreplaceable taonga such as photos and heirlooms. These often hidden impacts reflect the lasting physical, mental and spiritual effects flooding can create for whānau in Whirinaki, as well as other communities impacted by flooding.

8 Ibid.

Responding to emergency weather events

Emergency responsiveness in Whirinaki is a whole of community effort, with the Whirinaki Toiora Trust playing a key coordination role. The Trust is made up of local residents and is closely connected to Te Hikutū, giving it strong credibility. As members of the Whirinaki community, Trust members have direct insight into whānau needs as they emerge, allowing resources and support to be allocated to areas of greatest need and helping to minimise further impacts on whānau hauora.





At the same time, responsibility extends beyond the Trust, with whānau across the wider community checking in on neighbours and volunteering their time and equipment to support clean-up and recovery efforts.

When an emergency occurs, Trust members move quickly through the valley to check on whānau. In a small community of around 400 people,⁹ going door to door allows them to confirm who is present, identify what support is needed, and prioritise households requiring urgent assistance.

Over time, this work has enabled the Trust to build a database that supports preparedness and helps ensure resources are directed where they are needed most. Trust members gather essential information, including whether evacuation support is required; whether households include kaumātua, kuia, pēpi, disabled whānau or others needing specific assistance; and whether anyone relies on powered medical equipment.

⁹ [Looking back to move forward: Thoughts on taking a community-led development approach in Aotearoa](#) [PDF 21.2MB], page 6.

The Trust also coordinates practical on-the-ground responses, including setting up evacuation sites and taking measures to protect drinking water from contamination. Following flooding events, it helps organise clean-up efforts by calling for volunteers, arranging skip bins and coordinating external assistance.

Given the community's remote location and limited infrastructure, the Trust's role in coordinating external support is critical. During the March 2026 floods, for example, the Trust sought emergency assistance from local and central government to support whānau who had lost their homes and acted as the main point of contact for the Far North District Council to establish an incident management team in Whirinaki. It also worked with other organisations who provided health care, distributed care packages and supplied drinking water.

Support from neighbouring hapū has been integral for flood preparedness and recovery. Hapū from Ngāti Wai, Whangaroa and surrounding areas have proactively offered support, including providing hands-on assistance in recovery efforts, making their marae available as emergency evacuation sites, and sharing guidance on funding, water shortages and other emergency-related challenges they have previously experienced. This network of shared knowledge and whanaungatanga played a key role in restoring homes and supporting the wider community.

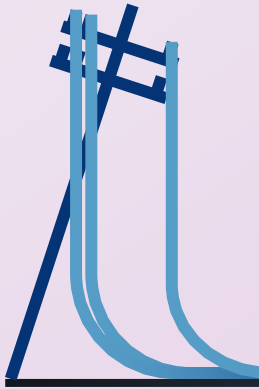


Challenges in responding to emergency weather events

Access to essential resources and services has been a recurring challenge during emergency weather events.

As a small remote community, Whirinaki often relies on external emergency response agencies. However, these services are often stretched across the Far North region during severe weather, meaning support can be delayed or unavailable when larger emergencies are prioritised elsewhere. In these circumstances, Whirinaki – like many rural communities – is required to respond using its own limited resources, often without the level of support needed.





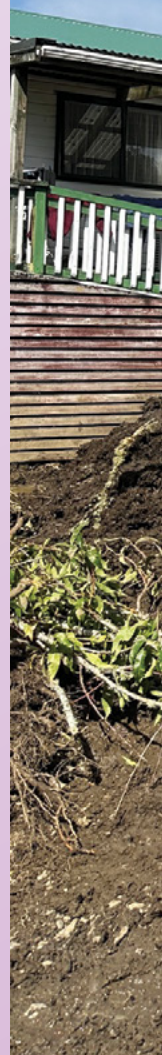
Previous incidents have exposed gaps in critical infrastructure, particularly power and communications. During Cyclone Gabrielle, for example, Whirinaki was without power for up to 14 days, creating difficulties in maintaining basic services such as showers.

In past emergencies, the Trust has often had to secure resources independently, including walking to the nearby fire station or relying on whānau in Auckland. These challenges are exacerbated when roads are closed or communications are disrupted.

Another key challenge for Whirinaki is the lack of suitable evacuation infrastructure. The primary evacuation hub, although spacious, is located approximately 20 metres from the river and is itself vulnerable during flooding. A secondary site on higher ground exists but requires additional work to be fully functional in an emergency. In addition, all three marae in Whirinaki are located within the flood zone and are often unable to be used as evacuation sites. To address these gaps, the Trust is prioritising the establishment of two fully serviced evacuation hubs on higher ground. These sites would be equipped with shelter, food, water supplies, showers, generators, mobile trailers and boats.

While government funding is available to support emergency preparedness, there are barriers to accessing this funding. In Whirinaki, the Trust can apply for grants on the community's behalf, but many rural communities do not have this kind of support or structure. Even where funding pathways exist, applying for grants requires time, awareness and administrative capacity that many smaller or under-resourced communities don't have. Trust members have noted that critical resources, such as generators and mobile trailers, are essential across many rural communities and may be more effectively provided directly, rather than through competitive or complex funding processes.

Alongside physical infrastructure and resources, communities also require skills and capability to respond effectively during emergencies. Trust members have highlighted the need for training to interpret technical advice, assess risk and inform decision-making. Targeted training is also needed to support responders to meet the diverse needs of their community, including disabled whānau, and to help minimise anxiety and stress during emergency situations.





Long-term planning in response to increased emergency weather events

Many whānau of Te Hikutū have lived in the Whirinaki valley for centuries. Although the social structures of Te Hikutū have changed throughout the years, the hapū has continued its role to uphold its responsibilities as custodians of the whenua, awa and taiao.

For this reason, findings from flood modelling indicating that the valley is likely to flood to a level that leaves many homes unliveable, have been unsettling for many whānau.¹⁰ To ensure the long-term safety of the community, it has become clear that most homes will need to be relocated to higher ground. In response, the Trust is coordinating a managed retreat process alongside the planning and development of new papakāinga.



¹⁰ Whirinaki Papakāinga Managed Retreat. Many whānau live in 10-year flood zones, and 100-year flood levels potentially reaching over 2.2 metres in some areas.

Early in this process, the Trust prioritised building a knowledge base to support decision-making. Funding from Northland Regional Council enabled flood modelling, identification of homes within the flood zone, geotechnical and engineering assessments of potential relocation sites, and river care and flood mitigation measures.

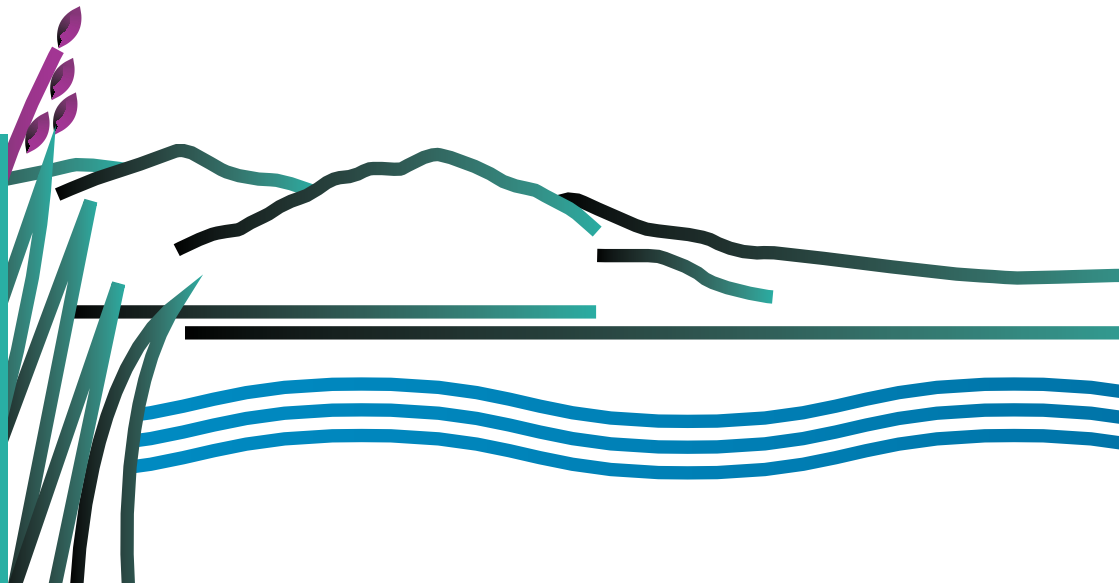
Once this information was available, the Trust focused on engagement with whānau to ensure their input drove decision-making. Hui were held in stages: the first to present flood modelling findings and explain the level of risk; the second to gather information about household circumstances including size and access to alternative land; and a third to explore whānau aspirations for future papakāinga.

Throughout this process, the Trust was explicit that managed retreat decisions needed to be driven by the hapū – and particularly affected whānau. One way that the Trust has done this is by being clear that relocation is entirely voluntary. Most have chosen to move due to concerns about the safety and wellbeing of their whānau and mokopuna. Others have decided to stay, due to their connections to their papakāinga and responsibilities to their whenua and awa. In response, the Trust ensures that planning includes additional housing provision for whānau who choose to remain in the valley.



The Trust continues to work through several complex decisions, including governance arrangements where land has been offered by whānau for relocation, and whether future papakāinga should be limited to valley residents or opened more broadly to the hapū. The current preference is to purchase a large block of land capable of accommodating the wider hapū over time.

The long-term vision is to establish a papakāinga that supports the safety, wellbeing and continuity of the hapū as it faces increasing climate risk. This papakāinga would be designed to support hapū self-sufficiency through infrastructure such as māra kai. Importantly, it would allow Te Hikutū to continue exercising its role to uphold its responsibilities as custodians of the Whirinaki valley and river over the long-term.



Conclusion

Whirinaki is an example of how close community relationships, combined with recognition of the longstanding responsibilities that mana whenua have to their whenua and awa, can support both effective emergency responses and long-term resilience planning. The Whirinaki Toiora Trust, Te Hikutū and whānau living in the valley have drawn on these strengths to collectively respond to extreme weather while planning for a future that prioritises whānau safety and the continuity of the hapū.

Hapū and whānau have been central to decision-making at all stages, including emergency preparedness, recovery and long-term managed retreat planning. Ensuring whānau retain choice about whether to relocate has upheld self-determination and respected enduring relationships to land, while also ensuring that whānau who choose to remain still have a safe place to evacuate.

Government funding has enabled access to critical technical information, such as flood modelling and geotechnical assessments, which has helped the Trust and whānau make informed decisions. At the same time, the case study highlights challenges for remote communities like Whirinaki when they must rely on emergency response services stretched across a large region, alongside barriers created by complex and time-intensive funding processes. Overall, it offers an example of a hapū-led approach that builds local capability and supports long-term planning for community safety and resilience as climate risks increase.

**He tai e, he tai e
he tai i tūria e
Tangaroa**

**He tai pakoa
he tai whanake
he tai pari
he tai timu**

**He tai pā e tukituki
nei e Tāne**

Taraia ki runga

**Taraia ki raro
i ngā wai**



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