

# Graduate Pathway Students: Three Contributions

The School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington each year accepts a small number of promising undergraduates into its Professional Masters programmes. They undertake an accelerated programme that involves a for-credit short internship. In this issue of *Policy Quarterly* we feature short articles by three students – Alice Denne, Matthew Macfarlane and Danijela Tavich – based on their internship research. The students had highly varied experiences ranging from supporting a social enterprise in its work with contractors to government, researching productivity

with the Productivity Commission, and exploring covenanted land and sustainability for the Waipā District Council. We are very proud of our excellent Graduate Pathway students and look forward to their graduation this December.

We sincerely thank our internship sponsors from 2016/2017 - Waipā District Council, Ākina Foundation, New Zealand Productivity Commission, the State Services Commission and the Ministry of Justice.

Dr Barbara Allen, *Graduate Pathway Coordinator*

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Alice Denne

## Lessons from an Internship at Waipā District Council motivations and incentives

Creating change through policy interventions relies most often on changing individuals' behaviour. To create effective change, it is important for policymakers to understand the attitudes and motivations of the people most affected. I learned how important this is while spending my summer interning at the Waipā District Council in Waikato as part of Victoria University's Master of Public Policy graduate pathway programme.

Isolated from the rest of the world, New Zealand is home to much indigenous natural heritage. The rise of agriculture and suburban living has dramatically reduced the dense native bush that covered most of the country just 200 years ago. The Waipā district is not exempt from this trend and, as a farming region,

now all but 7.5% of the district's land has been cleared. It is home to 73 nationally threatened species, including kahikatea, tawa and podocarp forest, kānuka shrub and species of bat and gecko (Kessels & Associates Ltd, 2013).

As a local authority the district council must work to prevent further destruction of the heritage that remains. The Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) requires territorial authorities to protect 'areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna', while preventing inappropriate land use, subdivision and destruction (s6(c); Waipā District Council, 2010). The challenge is that the most vulnerable land and many threatened ecosystems are found on private property, outside council authority. In

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order to meet biodiversity goals, the efforts of landowners to protect and maintain the quality of the environment that surrounds them is essential. Limited in their ability to monitor or enforce regulatory measures, the councils' role is then to encourage landowners to protect their own natural heritage sites.

Natural heritage covenants are promoted as an effective way to ensure the ongoing existence of threatened species on private land otherwise vulnerable to destruction. Covenants prevent both current and any future title holders from removing the heritage feature and are administered by either the Queen

be divided into two camps: those who farmed for money and economic gains, and those who farmed for the lifestyle, driven by stewardship values to care for the environment (Scarlett, 2004; Sullivan et al., 1996; Taylor, Cocklin and Brown, 2011; Maybery, Crase and Gullifer, 2005).

These motivations were consistent with what I found in the Waipā district: four of the six landowners were protecting their natural heritage because they cared about the environment. They talked about being motivated by the knowledge that they were leaving something behind for future generations and felt a responsibility to protect what was left.

plant the land, their ecological benefit will be minimal. For this reason, not only are the covenants important, but it is also important for landowners to have a stewardship attitude towards their land and be motivated to look after it. Hence, the current policy is not doing enough to change the attitude and behaviour of landowners unwilling to protect natural heritage and threatened species.

Some interviewees talked about neighbours who saw covenants as 'black marks on the landscape' and thought that maximising the agricultural potential of land was always more important than protecting bush. It is these attitudes that need changing to prevent the further destruction of the district's natural heritage. Awarding subdivision entitlements to those unwilling to maintain their heritage sites brings few benefits to the region, and at the cost of undermining the district's rural growth strategy. The strategy aims to reduce ad hoc rural development created by these unplanned residential lots scattered between towns.

As it stands, the current incentive offered by the Waipā District Council reaches the low-hanging fruit, mostly those individuals already motivated by stewardship values to restore the natural environment in their care. The financial incentive is not great enough to overcome the loss of property rights or compensate for the ongoing work that must be done by farmers. It is not easy to see the degeneration of natural environments that happens gradually over generations. The council should increase awareness of the issue of biodiversity loss in the district. It needs to inform people of what they can look for as indications of this on their own land and highlight what changes they should be concerned about in their waterways, soils and visible landscape.

After awareness is increased, the strategies the council uses to reduce the effects and prevent further damage can be better communicated. I suggest that there should be greater awareness of the biodiversity corridor strategies and protection for significant natural areas, and why these are important priorities for the district. Support can be built through profiling the environmental work already

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Elizabeth II National Trust or the council. In the Waipā, landowners are incentivised to use covenants by being offered a subdivision entitlement in exchange. These can be used on another section of their land or sold to another property within the district. This creates a financial benefit to compensate for the loss of potential economic value the land had prior to covenanting.

To better meet the requirements of the RMA, the council sought to evaluate the effectiveness of this scheme. I wanted to know how people were responding. Was this incentive attractive to landowners? Were farmers interested in covenanting their land, which often comes with costly management plans on top of loss of property rights, for the economic benefit of a subdivision? Or was there another, more important motivator for seeking covenant status?

My exploratory study was centred on interviews with landowners who already had covenants on their properties. Altogether, I conducted seven exploratory interviews in early 2017, six with landowners and one with a local property valuer. Existing literature suggested that the farmers and their motivations, broadly speaking, could

For the environmentally motivated farmers, the subdivision entitlement was a reward for the work they were already doing on their property, not an incentivising factor to apply for covenant status. The legal protection a covenant provides is not enough to ensure ongoing protection of threatened species; many sites require fencing, riparian margin planting, and ongoing weeding and pest control. Before a covenant is created, landowners are made aware of the management required and are able to make a decision on whether this ongoing cost is worthwhile. Even with a covenant, without the effort, time and financial investment of landowners maintaining their sites, the preservation of natural heritage would be lessened by uncontrolled weeds and pests.

The two farmers who were motivated primarily by the economic value of the entitlement claimed that their sites required very little, if any, maintenance. Neither was motivated to protect the environment in their care.

As they provide ongoing legal protection, natural heritage covenants are essential for the long-term preservation of biodiversity. But without the effort of individuals to weed, control pests and

being undertaken by role models and champions in the community. Greater benefits will be achieved if social norms regarding land use and the environment can change.

Yet changing attitudes alone will be ineffective when significant barriers still exist. I recommend that the council tries to better understand the specific barriers faced by Waipā residents who may intend to act pro-environmentally but are limited in their capacity to do so. I found that barriers are both financial and related to

capacity, skill and time. These can be reduced by profiling external funders, community restoration projects, and increasing education about what landowners can do to restore natural heritage on their own properties (Steg and Vlek, 2008; Taylor, Cocklin and Brown, 2011).

This study taught me the importance of knowing the people whose behaviour you are seeking to change and understanding their motivations. It is easy for policymakers to make inaccurate

assumptions and then design policies that miss the mark because of this. Policy is about people: it is about their values and motives and the way they respond to incentives, sanctions and barriers. Policymakers do not know everything and must often make decisions based on limited information. But it is important to engage with those most affected by the policy and develop a better understanding of their motivations and barriers to change.

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