

# Crisis and consequence: a public library response to natural disaster



**Matt Finch is a writer and consultant who makes fun things for people to do in public places. Find out more at [www.matthewfinch.me/](http://www.matthewfinch.me/) about Matt is a contributor to the American Library Association's 2015 *Innovation Toolkit* (<https://www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?ID=11142>)**

**Matt Finch** describes how in the face of the most severe natural disasters in New Zealand's recent history, the response of the librarians of Christchurch was to apply their information skills and digital expertise to meet the needs of the community with flexibility, courage and innovation.

**IN September 2010, an earthquake hit the Canterbury region of New Zealand's South Island. Although there was only one death and few serious injuries, property damage was extensive. Roads cracked and shop fronts collapsed. Many historic buildings in the main city of Christchurch were damaged. Sewer pipes were forced to the surface as soil liquefaction flooded the streets.**

The region began the slow process of recovery, but just over five months later, another earthquake struck Christchurch. The second disaster, on 22 February 2011, took 185 lives, injured hundreds, and damaged thousands of buildings. In June of that year, a third earthquake caused further damage, hampering the work of rebuilding the South Island's principal city.

These were the most severe natural disasters in New Zealand's recent history. The repercussions of these quakes will be felt for many years, yet Kiwi librarians' response to these catastrophic events was one of courage, generosity, and lasting innovation.

### **Flexibility, collaboration, immediate response**

Christchurch City Libraries is one of New Zealand's largest library networks. At the time of the earthquakes, it had 20 branches across the country's third largest urban area.

The quake of 2010 affected the entire Canterbury region. In Christchurch itself, all library branches were closed so that the buildings and their stock could be checked. Libraries gradually reopened through September and into October. Already the disaster had an effect on the way Cantabrians used their local library. People now came to pick up emergency welfare forms and photocopy documents for insurance claims.

North of Christchurch, the town of Kaiapoi had been badly affected and its library

forced to close. The city agreed to send its mobile library to Kaiapoi on Saturday mornings while rebuilding took place.

This kind of flexibility and collaboration defined libraries' response to the Christchurch disasters. When the second earthquake struck, Christchurch City Council's premises were severely damaged. The library handed over three branches to host council services, including the earthquake recovery unit.

Staff, too, had to adapt to new roles and requirements. After the February quake, business as usual ceased to exist for Christchurch. Librarians found themselves turning their hands to whatever was required of them. That might mean clambering over box loads of rescued books stored in a garage, setting up portable toilets, or even issuing passes for drivers entering the city's severely damaged Red Zone.

### **Information skills at the heart**

Still, information skills remained at the heart of what libraries could offer their community. From locating open petrol stations to mapping altered bus routes and explaining how to register vehicles trapped by quake damage, librarians found themselves drawing on their expertise in information retrieval and customer service.

Christchurch Libraries also bolstered its online presence in the wake of the quakes. The organisation joined Twitter 11 days after the first quake in 2010 and established its Facebook presence in March the following year, just after the most serious event. Social media became a way to inform the public about help available to those in need, and to share updates on how to find missing people.

Donna Robertson, now Christchurch Libraries' web editor, was working for the



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Now operating in the city is Central Library Manchester (the building was a car sales yard).



Central Library Tuam was badly damaged in the earthquake, so a mini library reopened in the nearby mall.



A temporary, pop-up library in a mall.

libraries' digital team at the time of the earthquakes.

She says: 'Social media was approached in a fairly conservative way by the council, but we were enabled to take up these tools more quickly because of the immediate need. There were times blogging and social media allowed us to disseminate information to the public when the usual online channels weren't operating, for example when our website went down.'

Donna was also among the librarians who took on roles in the city's emergency operations centre. 'This was immediately after the February quake, and because the library had already started practising on Twitter, I was able to help set up social media dashboard Hootsuite, and help the team with good social media practice.'

### Documenting the quakes

Meanwhile, at the national level, New

Zealand's librarians were also responding. Penny Carnaby, then the country's National Librarian, was living in Christchurch and commuting to the Kiwi capital Wellington at the time.

'I was at home when the first quake struck,' says Penny. 'An emergency meeting of state sector CEOs was called and once the airport reopened, I flew back to Wellington, trying to think what the response of a national library should be, given we were not the first line for a state of emergency.'

Penny thought back to New Zealand's deadliest natural disaster, the earthquake which had devastated the Hawke's Bay region in 1931. As a librarian, she was aware that the record of the response to that earthquake was limited: 'Having been in the Christchurch quake I understood why; the last thing you think of is documenting it.'

Nonetheless, Penny determined that the best response from the National Library of

New Zealand (NLNZ) was to begin creating a documentary archive, especially as the 2010 earthquake seemed at first to be a one-off event.

Penny engaged photographer Ross Becker and a number of oral historians to capture people's experiences of the earthquake. The commission was based on the expectation that the earthquake was a one-off event of unprecedented scale. When the 2010 incident turned out to be one in a series of major events with many aftershocks, the project became a long-term record of the city's experiences during a prolonged state of emergency and recovery.

As the state of emergency continued, the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority restricted access to the Red Zone for many other photographers. Ross Becker had taken photographs for New Zealand's library association Lianza, but was not a trained photojournalist. A 2013 article in New Zealand

magazine *North and South* retrospectively highlighted concerns about the National Library's choice of photographer.

Reflecting on the decision now, Penny comments: 'Professional photographers were vocal about the fact that I hadn't gone through due process. I argued that I needed to respond quickly and the focus was on accurate documentary record rather than a professional artistic recording of events.'

### Digital expertise

Penny's experience leads her to give some advice to colleagues working in libraries and archives. 'If I am honest, it didn't occur to me that this would be an issue, so there was learning there for me. In hindsight it may pay to think what you would do in a similar situation and look at a strategy for moving quickly to record significant events or moments in your history. Our reaction was completely pragmatic. It would be advisable to line people up ahead of time to avoid the issues we faced.'

New Zealand's Ministry of Culture and Heritage subsequently set up the Ceismic consortium, a group of cultural organisations working to capture the story of the earthquakes from many perspectives. The photographs produced for NLNZ, distributed under a Creative Commons license, now form part of Ceismic's collaborative, open-access archive.

Penny points out that New Zealand librarians' digital expertise was key to documenting the quakes: 'The National Digital Heritage Archive meant that as a country we had the capability in digital preservation to ensure that the memory and story of the Canterbury earthquakes would be remembered and be accessible in perpetuity. Without knowing it, we were ready to respond in a significant way.'

### Long term changes and lessons learned

While NLNZ looked to the long-term legacy of the earthquakes, the librarians of

Christchurch were finding new ways to meet the post-quake needs of their community.

Katherine Moody, Information Librarian at Christchurch's Fingertip Library, explains: 'Sometimes simply being open, creating a sense of routine and connecting people to something familiar was enough, or creating temporary arrangements to continue familiar services. At other times it was a case of taking services to damaged areas, running special community events, rescuing precious heritage, or hosting organisations that were facilitating the recovery effort or providing vital services.'

Pop-up libraries were established across Christchurch. Community Libraries Manager Erica Rankin says staff were pushed out of their comfort zones by the experience, but 'we gained the freedom to innovate, be creative, try new initiatives and services, alter plans, pop up and pack down, stretch, grow and learn, respond to need and make decisions on a dime, all amid a constantly changing and challenging environment.'

As libraries re-opened, a new service model, Smart Library, was introduced, along with RFID technology. The Smart approach trades service desks for a roving model which sees staff working on the library floor to help customers at their point of need.

Smart was already on the agenda, but Erica credits the smooth implementation of these changes to the shared experience of the earthquakes: 'I don't think we could have managed the transition to a new service model so successfully without having had so many Central Library staff working in community branches. The experience really grew and strengthened ties across the network. There's a better appreciation of what goes on in community libraries, and also of the skills and collection knowledge that Central staff were able to share in community settings.'

The Christchurch earthquakes became an opportunity for Kiwi libraries to innovate even as they demonstrated their enduring value to those they serve. For Penny

Carnaby, the work of documenting the quakes and contributing to digital archive also reshaped discussion of librarianship at a national level: 'I think the transition for the National Library was from passive recipient of content to content creator.'

Erica said that Christchurch Libraries continue to learn lessons about the importance of resilience, including training for all staff. 'This is a marathon, not a race. Coming up to the five-year anniversary of the quakes, we are in this for the long haul. The ongoing tiredness and exhaustion we feel is a continual surprise to us but is very real.'

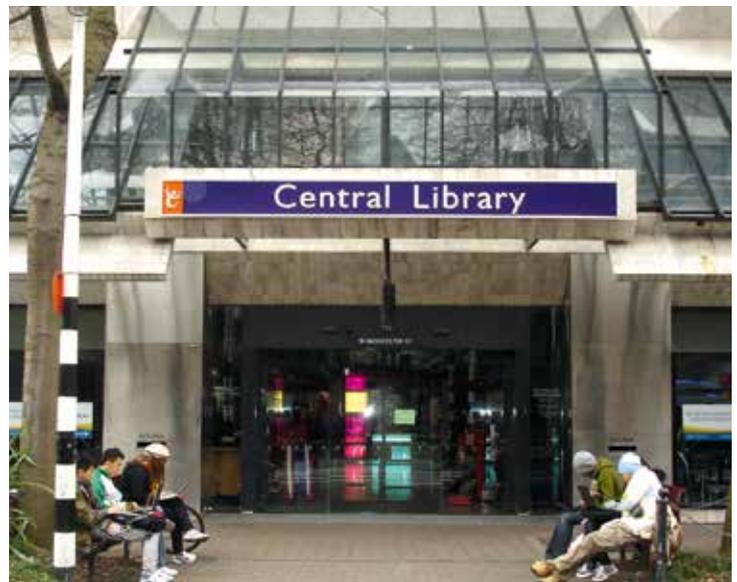
In hindsight, she says that if this situation were to occur again, libraries would push back harder on reclaiming their buildings for service to the public as soon as possible. 'There's a much greater focus now on buildings' ability not just to protect life, but also to be up and running again within days and weeks rather than months and years. Roles and responsibilities in the event of an emergency are also now much clearer and we understand where we would most likely put our efforts: IT, logistics, and welfare, for example.'

Christchurch Libraries did heroic work responding to a dramatic and unexpected crisis, and the lessons they have learned are ones which all libraries could heed. Katherine Moody has advice for any cultural institution trying to prepare for such drastic events. 'Soon after a disaster people will do anything to continue services, but as time goes on initial decisions have consequences and the public are less forgiving of these consequences. In the worst-case scenario, a Glam (Galleries, Libraries, Archives & Museums) institution fails to communicate with its staff and the public and becomes introverted.

'There is no reason why any Glam organisation can't help in the event of an emergency. You may be part of a local authority and have certain obligations anyway, you may have space that can be used, staff that can be deployed, or a vital service that you can provide. [1]



Polish language collection launch at Central Library Peterborough.



When the Central Library was closed due to the earthquake, people were glad to use the free Wi-Fi.