



**'It's not OK' Campaign Community Evaluation Project**

**CASE STUDY 1:  
COUNTIES MANUKAU RUGBY LEAGUE**

Counties Manukau Rugby League (CMRL) comprises three local authorities: Auckland, Waikato and Hauraki District and includes 12 clubs with approximately 8,000 registered members. The catchment's northern club is in Otahuhu and the most southern club is based in Tuakau. Southeastern areas of Howick and Pakuranga also form part of the Counties Manukau zone.

The 'It's not OK' Campaign was initially approached by CMRL because of a growing concern over the sport's reputation and a variety of negative behaviours associated with the sport, namely violence, alcohol use and sport-related intimidation.

*We needed to change the culture around the game. The violence, the stigma and the gang affiliations were painting us in a really poor light. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

*Enjoy the game without unnecessary violence. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

*We believe if we set up the right environment they have a much better experience. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #2)*

*There was a really negative culture. Beers after the game, gang culture and especially youth gang culture. People who thrive on being tough. Parents who think this behaviour is normal. Children who were parents who were not equipped. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #2)*

League staff believed that these behaviours were a direct reflection of home environments. However, while it was acknowledged that there was a need to change attitudes and behaviours in the home, CMRL was limited in its ability to influence wider familial and social environments. As a consequence, CMRL developed a strategy of changing sport-related attitudes and behaviours with the belief that positive changes would impact on the home environment.

*We saw all these problems and realised we needed to go to the root cause, you know, do something in their homes. Obviously we couldn't go into people's homes but we could talk about expected behaviours. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

Club participation was identified as an invaluable mechanism to change sport-related culture as it was acknowledged that players and their families feel comfortable within the club environment and, as such, clubs were viewed as an ideal location to launch attitude and behaviour change interventions.

It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the other six case study sites, CMRL sought a cultural shift across a sporting code and not a specific location.

## INTERVENTIONS

The following specific Campaign-related interventions were developed and implemented in the rugby league community.

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### KEY INTERVENTIONS

**Awareness raising** – branding, billboards, whistles, ‘It’s not OK’ Campaign resources, signage on league uniforms and acting as master of ceremonies at public events/galas. Taking every opportunity to communicate the key Campaign messages. Importantly, the resources were viewed as indispensable. In particular, localised resources were highly valued.

*Dan MCs at all the events. He takes every opportunity to reinforce required standards and messages of smoke free, alcohol free, drama free. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

*Signage was really important. At first, the national competition was televised, it has a huge following, so we knew if we could get representative players to wear the brand that would be a huge step in raising awareness. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

*The banners are the first point of contact when people turn up on a Saturday. It’s so much more than a banner. It has been a powerful message in terms of behaviour. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #2)*

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**Codes of conduct** – clubs’ codes of conduct were adapted to include violence free policies. In addition, sideline behaviour policies were developed.

**Sideline abuse strategies** – vests/bibs are provided to representatives of the home and visiting team. The vests demarcate the individual as someone who will police their own people to ensure that appropriate sideline behaviour is maintained.

*We realised we couldn’t affect other team supporters but we could impact on our own. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

*Poor behaviour on sidelines has been a major issue. That is where a lot of stigma comes from. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

*The bibs on home and visitor teams have created ambassadors. Supporters look after their own people. They know they are taking responsibility for their own behaviour. They tell parents to pull their heads in. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #2)*

*The vests do the work and parents take responsibility. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #2)*

*From the time Kasey was rolling out ‘It’s not OK’, it was in people’s minds. So the vests are a physical presence of that. Effectively people are policing their own communities. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

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*We got four vests. They feel like they are the police. So other teams know they are doing their business. That's really good. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #2)*

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**Sharing stories of change** – Vic Tamati presented his story of family violence at the 12 clubs that fall under CMRL's catchment area. These presentations were regarded as transformational, resulting in a variety of players identifying with Vic Tamati and taking a non-violence pledge and/or seeking assistance.

*We did multiple presentations in each of our 12 club rooms: Vic came and spoke. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

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**Early childhood playgroups** – provision of pre- and after school care for those with a rugby league affiliation. The playgroups aim to engage high-risk parents and families in targeted sites. There are three play groups in South Auckland: Papatoetoe, Mangere East and Otara. Each playgroup runs for four hours per session.

*Initially we saw there was a need for something because the car parks were full of parents waiting for their boys who were training. We are talking about low socio-economic, high risk, vulnerable Māori and Pacific families with emotional and physical abuse in their homes, neglect and malnutrition. No formal education beyond high school. They are living the way they were brought up. We discovered these mothers didn't realise how they could be involved in their child's learning. They didn't have a good understanding of behaviour management and how to keep their kids well. These are isolated families. People who avoid social services because of a fear of people finding out how they live. Because of rugby league, there is a sense of belonging when they are at the club. These buildings have been here a long time – they have rugby league in common. This is really important because we provide a non-threatening environment. They are happy to engage with us. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #3)*

## IDENTIFIED IMPACTS

Participants stressed that impacts arising out of the Campaign have been incremental and generally occurred on a small scale. These changes, however, have been appreciated as they qualitatively demonstrate a major shift in cultural attitudes and behaviours associated with non-violence.

*It won't change straight away. Subtle changes will lead to bigger changes. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

### 1. Increased awareness and message infiltration

All participants reported that the national 'It's not OK' Campaign has resulted in a high degree of awareness and knowledge of family violence among club members and their families/whānau.

*The Campaign has been great. Everyone knows that violence is not OK. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #2)*

Further, key Campaign messages were reported as having become entrenched. This was evidenced by the adoption of Campaign messages, within common vernacular, across multiple levels of the community. For instance, multiple reports were provided of players, their families and children using the term 'It's not OK' in reference to violent and/or bullying behaviours.

*You hear, "it's not OK" on the field, on the sidelines and in day-to-day conversations. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

## **2. Attitude change and increased prosocial behaviours**

The Campaign was reported to have led to decreased incidence of antisocial behaviour and contributed to a number of positive changes in the community.

*The community has changed. The community challenges one another. Families are challenging families. It's a good sport now. It's not a dangerous one anymore. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

### **Decreased antisocial behaviour**

Participants reported a significant decrease in antisocial behaviours. These included reductions in player violence and intimidation, sideline abuse and high incidents of alcohol and drug use. The adoption of prosocial behaviours was discussed in reference to players and supporters. Changes were linked to a combination of Vic Tamati's presentations, the implementation of sideline abuse strategies, the development of non-violence as an integral component of code of conducts, and the consistent use of 'It's not OK' Campaign signage and branding to reinforce non-violence messaging and expected behaviours.

*Alcohol was a big issue. A real big challenge. There has been a big change there. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

*One change I have noticed is a decrease of abuse directed towards referees. Referees are reporting that they are not getting the same level of abuse. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #2)*

*It's so much better now. People's violence has drastically decreased. People are respecting the club. Where not so long ago people would get trashed after a game, now our club is respected. It was dangerous. There were parties all the time, Saturday and Sunday. People just loafed around here. Windows were always being smashed. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

*Crowd behaviour was really intimidating, especially towards referees. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #2)*

### **Changes in wider community culture**

A shift in culture was identified in the wider community. While the local Campaign had initially focused on rugby league only, schools and community groups in the area reported positive impacts on students and community members. As a result, CMRL was increasingly asked to have

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a presence at schools and community events in order to communicate 'It's not OK' Campaign messages.

*Now we have schools ringing us and asking us to come into schools. They asked me to MC at school galas because they want the whole school to have these messages. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #2)*

*We've received a lot of emails from people talking about how happy they are to have Dan saying those things when he's MCing. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

### **3. Community responsiveness and ownership**

Community responsiveness and ownership was cited as evidence that the Campaign has had a major community impact. Responsiveness and ownership was discussed in relation to club members and supporters embracing, incrementally, non-violence. Participants stressed that these changes, while reflected in behaviour at a club level, occurred within families and the home environment.

### **4. Statutory intervention**

The one police participant reported that fewer CMRL families, known to have a history of family violence, had been brought to the police's attention over the last two years. This was regarded as a significant shift in intergenerational family violence. Similar reports were obtained from club presidents who reported a lack of police interaction.

*For me there is a decline from a police perspective. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

*We haven't had any problems with the police for the last three years. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #2)*

## **CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS**

Participants were asked to identify critical success factors integral to the local Campaign's success. Critical success factors included: rugby league culture, the national 'It's not OK' Campaign, leadership, the locally owned and driven nature of the Campaign, and the national 'It's not OK' team.

### **1. Rugby League Culture**

The local Campaign had as its foundation in rugby league's culture of excellence, an acknowledgement that league is more than a sport, but a culture that centres on people and communities.

*It's a culture. It's more than just a game. In fact rugby league's motto is "It's more than just a game." This means we acknowledge that our biggest asset is our people. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

*We have a culture of excellence. It sets us aside. We firmly believe that our biggest asset is our people. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #2)*

In comparison to many other elite sports, rugby league has historically distributed resources at all player levels and acknowledged that families are an integral component of the sport. In this sense, rugby league was appreciated as a unifying culture, which provided a foundation from which to launch the Campaign.

*We realised we always needed to relate 'It's not OK' back to rugby league. As soon as it moves away from rugby league people lose interest. Rugby league is not threatening. The club is their home. You are talking to them in their home. It's not a foreign environment. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

## **2. The national 'It's not OK' Campaign**

The national 'It's not OK' Campaign was described as providing a vital framework to guide some CMRL staff to complement a commitment to improving the game's image and changing league's culture in the area. On one level, some interventions were directly related to the Campaign. These were most specifically linked to awareness raising strategies and the development of an elimination of sideline abuse strategy. As the Campaign progressed, however, opportunities to extend the focus of the Campaign emerged and linked to general hau ora: the importance of healthy eating, being smoke and alcohol free, the provision of childcare and anger management. Finally, in one of the participating clubs, a community garden was developed which, while providing food for the local community, also stressed the importance of community pride and wider healthy families and self.

## **3. Leadership**

The success of the CMRL 'It's not OK' Campaign was attributed to strategic leadership arising out of CMRL Headquarters and the concomitant leadership at a local club level. The Manager of CMRL identified the need for culture change and formed a close collaborative relationship with the national 'It's not OK' Campaign team. It was at a local club level that club leaders, generally chairs of the various committees, acknowledged the need and embraced the changes driven by the manager.

## **4. Community owned and driven**

The local Campaign was regarded as highly successful because it was owned and driven by the 12 participating clubs. Rather than a Campaign that was imposed on clubs, each club has identified the need for non-violence and prosocial strategies to be implemented and responded with approaches appropriate to their specific area.

*Everybody was sick of it. It was hitting the headlines. There were lots of incidents of sideline abuse. We all identified that we needed to do something differently. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

Integral to this success factor was the endorsement of the club committee who then drove required changes and associated strategies.

*It needs to be totally endorsed by the club's committee. So it is top down. When we write it into the code of conduct it gets the message home. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Club president #1)*

## **5. Support provided by the national 'It's not OK' team**

The national Campaign team was lauded for their provision of advice, support and financial assistance. Especially appreciated was the provision of strategic advice and the focus the Campaign team brought to local initiatives.

*They were phenomenal. The Campaign team saw what we saw. She helped us connect the dots. She connected us with Vic [Tamati]. She helped us develop our strategy like ways to raise awareness and kept us on track. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

The team was also appreciated for linking CMRL with other bodies and initiatives. Notably, CMRL, through the Campaign team was invited to attend an Auckland City Council initiative and has become a permanent representative at a number of non-violence initiatives.

The provision of 'It's not OK' Campaign resourcing was also valued. While the funding was relatively small, it was greatly appreciated given the various agencies' low operational budgets and a lack of available time and funds to develop their own resources. Without this funding awareness-related activities would not have been possible. Specifically, opportunities would have been lost to link local initiatives with the national 'It's not OK' Campaign branding which would have severely hindered audience resonance and uptake. As such, the complementary national and local branding meant that a call to non-violence occurred at a local level.

Finally, linked to Campaign resourcing, the Campaign's provision of Vic Tamati provided players, supporters and family members with a human face. This contact was described as actualising non-violence messages that, until Vic's presentation, had generally been restricted to media, billboards and posters. Participants furthered that the role of champions, such as Vic, is a vital first step in attitude and behaviour change. Without this support, participants strongly believed the local Campaign would have faltered.

*Over the last two years we have visited each of our 12 clubs twice with Vic. It's been important to reiterate the messages. (Counties Manukau Rugby League, Staff representative #1)*

## **BARRIERS TO ON-GOING SUCCESS**

Insufficient funding was raised as a primary barrier to the Campaign's on-going success. This barrier was understood within an environment of intergenerational violence and family dysfunction that will require long-term support to achieve the required changes. As such, funding was identified as a requirement to the development and implementation of strategies to achieve significant shifts in culture.



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