

How an energy trust got a community insulation project off the ground

A woman in a purple t-shirt is shown from the side, looking up and reaching towards the ceiling of a room. She is installing large, white, fluffy insulation panels. A wooden ladder is visible on the left side of the frame. In the background, there is a window with a white frame and a patterned tablecloth on a table to the right.

The Eastern Bay of Plenty acorn that became an oak tree

Nearly 2,600 homes in the Eastern Bay of Plenty are warmer, drier, healthier and less costly to heat thanks to the work of the Eastern Bay Energy Trust – much of it supported by the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority (EECA).



"I've got folders full of letters from residents who are just so happy with their insulation work," says Jo Hunt, Retrofit Manager of Opotiki Trade Training – the organisation that provides the labour for the projects. "There are people who say their children have been able to come off their asthma steroid inhalers because their house is drier and warmer – and a woman who'd been on 24 hour oxygen who was able to come off it during the day."

With a fixed income and many worthy projects competing for funds, it hasn't always been easy for the enthusiasts on the Trust's board to get backing for such a relatively large commitment of funds.



But according to the current Chair of the Eastern Bay Energy Trust, Toni Owen, everyone is now behind it. As a fellow trustee comments, "it was an acorn that grew into an oak tree. A lot of people have benefited. We've never had anyone saying we shouldn't have spent money on this sort of project."

Pilot scheme identifies need

The Eastern Bay Energy Trust was established in 1994 when local energy companies were privatised. Its main source of income is dividends from an investment in the local lines company, Horizon.

Much of the drive for getting involved with community insulation projects has come from Toni Owen.

"When I first became a trustee I did a lot of thinking about what we should be doing with the community's funds. Retro-fitting fitted the Trust's criteria, and there was definitely a need – that was obvious to me from previous work I'd done with low income families. And it seemed a greater vision than reacting to lots of little requests for small bits of money."

The Trust's first step was to contribute \$67,000 to a pilot scheme initiated by EECA in response to a housing condition survey conducted by the Opotiki Development Project.

The scheme looked at 50 houses and it was quickly apparent most of them needed insulating. In fact, many didn't even reach 1977 building standards.



A community effort with community benefits

The pilot scheme retrofitted 48 homes, using the Trust's contribution topped up with EECA funding. EECA also provided the project management while labour came from the local skills training company Opotiki Trade Training.

The health benefits of the ceiling and underfloor insulation, polythene ground-sheeting and the weather stripping of doors and windows were immediately apparent.



"The obvious benefits were energy efficiency and healthier, warmer housing," says Toni. "That's why we called our early work 'Energy Save/EnergySafe' – because we were saving energy and making healthier, safer homes. Plus there were definite economic spin-offs, with the project providing training and jobs for local unemployed."

The project grows

Through the pilot scheme, a relationship had developed between the Trust and the training provider, Opotiki Trade Training. The company's retrofit manager Jo Hunt also had a growing commitment to home insulation for low-income families, and asked the Trust to consider retrofitting further houses. The Trust agreed.

With no paid employees at the Eastern Bay Energy Trust, EECA managed the retrofitting of 548 houses, with

the labour once again provided through Opotiki Trade Training.

Toni Owen recalls it wasn't easy keeping all of the trustees on board for such large commitments of money

– the second project cost the Trust \$711,000. But Toni had the support of a majority of trustees and says it was a matter of keeping pushing on with it. "I kept countering any opposition with the question – what else could or should we be doing?"

Now, retrofitting is a full Trust project. "The majority on the Trust had a passion for it, but all our current Trustees are right behind it," Toni says.



In fact, some 60 people from the eastern Bay of Plenty have received training in the insulation business as a direct result of the Trust's projects – most have come from unemployment to

the scheme and most have gone on to further employment.

"It's hard and often dangerous work," says the training company's Jo Hunt, "and it's a huge learning curve for the teams on the job. Each house is unique and offers different challenges. At the end of the day the installers can acquire really useful employment skills – a good retrofitter is a great worker."

A major initiative for the Trust

The pilot scheme 'acorn' has grown massively. So far, the Trust has funded a further eight projects – some fully funded, others contributed to by home-owners themselves, and one co-funded by EECA through the EnergyWise Home Grants Scheme. Another is in the pipeline.

Most of the early projects targeted low-income families and there has been a standing 'emergency fund' to help people with health issues who really benefit from having their homes retrofitted.

However, the Trust is now also working with higher-income families who contribute 50% of the cost.

To date, the Trust has funded or partially funded the insulation of nearly 2,600 homes and has committed over \$2.5 million of community funds to the projects for community good.

It seems the community is happy with the Trust's approach. Trust beneficiaries returned a favourable response to the retrofit work in a recent survey. Even the Eastern Bay of Plenty Power Society – a watchdog group which previously would have preferred the Trust to provide electricity rebates – regards the project as very worthwhile.

A welcome spin-off

A welcome spin-off of the projects has been the opportunities for training and employment the projects have created.

Working in partnership



The task of providing the labour has been contracted out to a local firm, Opotiki Trade Training and has been right from the start.

"From the initial pilot project, where EECA already had Opotiki Trade Training lined up, it was clear that the company had the skills and the commitment. says Toni. "It's a good relationship."

The relationship with Opotiki Trade Training extends beyond providing labour. Their retrofitting manager, Jo Hunt, is

responsible for making applications whenever EECA has a new funding round for projects. She handles monthly reporting processes and audits, and EECA conducts quality and financial reviews.

Jo also administers the applications from home-owners wanting their houses insulated. While there has been advertising for recipients from time to time, most of the demand comes through word of mouth.

An ongoing commitment to the community

The Eastern Bay Energy Trust's work doesn't stop at insulation. They were successful in their bid for an EECA grant to install solar hot water systems in local homes. The Trust is also working with EECA to upgrade old hot water cylinders in local schools and recreation facilities to more energy efficient 'A' grade cylinders - reducing the operating costs for schools and community groups.



Getting community insulation projects off the ground

If you'd be interested in getting a project off the ground, please contact us now by calling 0800 358 676 or visiting www.eeca.govt.nz.



Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority
Te Tari Tiaki Pungao