

Research Summary

Empowering whānau through papakāinga: insights, impact and pathways

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Background and Methodology

This report was commissioned by Te Puni Kōkiri and written by the Awhi Whānau section of the Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit. The aim of the research was to better understand the experiences of whānau living on papakāinga, and of the trustees and project managers who develop papakāinga. As the lead policy advisor to government on Māori development and Iwi and Māori relations, Te Puni Kōkiri sought to strengthen the evidence base relating to papakāinga, to contribute to better Māori housing outcomes.

Aotearoa New Zealand is in a housing crisis. Māori home ownership is 20.9 percentage points lower than the total population, and this gap grew slightly between 2018 and 2023.¹ Many Māori aspire to develop housing on, or near, their ancestral land. Papakāinga housing has become more important as an affordable housing option for whānau who have access to whenua.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 whānau members and 13 development leads or trustees at six papakāinga across Te Ika-a-Māui. The research followed kaupapa Māori research principles.²

What are ‘papakāinga’?

In pre-colonial Aotearoa, papakāinga were traditional Māori settlements. They were family-based villages or pā where extended families lived together. They supported communal living, and they were centres of life, providing a space for the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, customs and practices.

There are many ways to define ‘papakāinga’ today, but the term refers to communal settlements on collectively owned ancestral Māori land. Usually, a papakāinga would include a number of houses functioning as a community, shared infrastructure, and community spaces. As well as homes, modern papakāinga can include other community buildings, such as kaumātua housing, kura and kōhanga reo, health services, commercial enterprises and cultural facilities.

The process of establishing papakāinga is complex. It involves securing landowner agreement, planning and design, assessing financial viability, consenting process, and working with several agencies including the Māori Land Court, local authorities, and banks.

“The manaaki and awhi is very strong here. There are a whole lot of things that happen here that we just take for granted because of the good quality of the homes and the good spirit on the marae, the wairua and the cooperative nature of all the people that live here.”

¹ *The current state of housing in Aotearoa New Zealand* | Stats NZ. (2025). <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/the-current-state-of-housing-in-aotearoa-new-zealand/> (accessed 19 June 2025)

² Full details of the methodology and limitations are outlined in the full report, which is available on the Te Puni Kōkiri website www.tpk.govt.nz.

Key findings: positive outcomes of papakāinga living

Whānau residing in papakāinga experienced important benefits including:

- **Health-related benefits:** Whānau reported improved mental and physical health because of better living conditions, reduced stress levels due to community support, and access to communal recreational facilities. Four out of six of the papakāinga whānau felt that living on papakāinga allowed them to have a better quality of life.

“For the last five years, [koro] was in and out of hospital continuously with his heart, with his breathing. We’ve been home on his papakāinga since September 2022, and, he hasn’t even been to hospital. He hasn’t had any issues. Mental health has improved as well. It has been so good to see he’s living healthier, breathing healthier, and being healthier.”

- **Cultural benefits:** Whānau reported a deeper connection to their heritage and traditions, reconnection to Māori knowledge and use of te reo Māori in a caring environment, integration of cultural practices into daily life, an enhanced sense of identity and belonging, and increased access to cultural capital through people, services, and facilities (especially when living near marae). Whānau on four of the six papakāinga reported a stronger sense of identity since living on papakāinga. They had learnt or wanted to learn about their whakapapa, history, reo and tikanga.

“We’re Māori and we definitely know where we come from and who we are. And we definitely continue to retain taonga tuku iho... I do feel more connected to my Māoriness having lived on a papakāinga. I absolutely do.”

- **Social benefits:** Whānau reported strengthened community cohesion, increased social interaction and support networks enabled through papakāinga design, and reduced social isolation (particularly for kaumātua and rangatahi).
- **Economic benefits:** Whānau reported affordable housing (and the potential to eventually own the homes), opportunities for whānau economic development through communal businesses, reduced living costs through shared resources, and enhanced economic stability through collective asset management. As rents on papakāinga were more affordable, most whānau felt they were better off and could live better than they did in the past. Many reported that they had more disposable income than if they were living in a standard market rental.

“I’m not behind on bills. I can afford to buy the bags to put my rubbish out. I can afford kai. I can afford to get to and from mahi daily. I am so much happier all round.”

- **Improved quality of life:** Residents reported enjoying the community and whānau aspects of co-living arrangements, and access to high-quality housing - described by some whānau as ‘a dream come true’.

"I was homeless for six months before I moved in there. So that doesn't mean I was sleeping on the street, but it just means I did not have a home. And so, I was like, sleeping at a friend's place or at a studio space that I had, which was like, what I had to do. It was a pōuri time for me."

Key findings: challenges from papakāinga living

Whānau also described challenges of papakāinga living:

- **Anti-social behaviour:** Some whānau were concerned about partying, inconsiderate behaviour around communal resources, and tolerance of potential criminal behaviour.
- **Privacy:** While proximity to whānau had advantages, some residents felt their privacy was compromised if boundaries around individual houses were not maintained.
- **Complex whānau issues:** Several complex situations arose, including relationship breakups leading to non-whakapapa whānau remaining in papakāinga housing, and questions about the duration of tenure for residents.

Key findings: papakāinga development process

The key issues identified by trustees and project managers who had led the papakāinga development processes were:

- **Complexity and time:** Development processes were complex and time-consuming. Inconsistent responses and requirements from local authorities and the Māori Land Court sometimes complicated the process. Local authority requirements, especially around environmental compliance, could be onerous. Specific issues included requirements for stormwater filtration, roading, and other environmental mitigations that could cause tension and increase costs.
- **Infrastructure:** Rural papakāinga faced significant infrastructure challenges, particularly with reticulation of electricity, water, and sewerage. The lack of qualified tradespeople and companies in rural areas exacerbated building and cost issues, sometimes requiring solutions like using relocatable houses.
- **Governance and leadership challenges:** Effective governance requires long-term commitment by trustees. Succession planning for governance roles was often challenging, as was adapting to changing requirements throughout papakāinga development.
- **Dependency on individual expertise:** There was a high dependency on a small number of experienced project managers who were able to navigate the complexities of the regulatory and financial systems. They were able to use their understanding of tikanga and kawa to incorporate cultural design principles that met the needs of whānau and engage the community during the process.
- **Ongoing management:** Managing tenancies, property maintenance and ensuring financial viability (including meeting tax obligations and repaying debt) was challenging. Effective property management systems and regular communication with whānau were crucial to managing and mitigating these challenges.

Conclusion

Whānau living on papakāinga experienced benefits beyond housing. They experienced improved health and wellbeing, closer bonds with whānau, and a deeper connection to their whakapapa and traditions. Affordable housing meant that whānau had more disposable income and could use that to improve their lifestyle.

Despite these benefits, the journey to develop papakāinga is still long, challenging and unnecessarily complex. By addressing the regulatory, financial, and logistical barriers to developing papakāinga, the benefits of papakāinga can be made accessible to many more whānau.³

“It’s made a huge difference to our whānau in all ways possible. Being on the papakāinga has brought peace of mind and a sense of safety to all the whānau that live here.”

³ The full report contains a number of recommendations for Te Puni Kōkiri.