

Te Ahu Museum and Archives: A bodacious plan



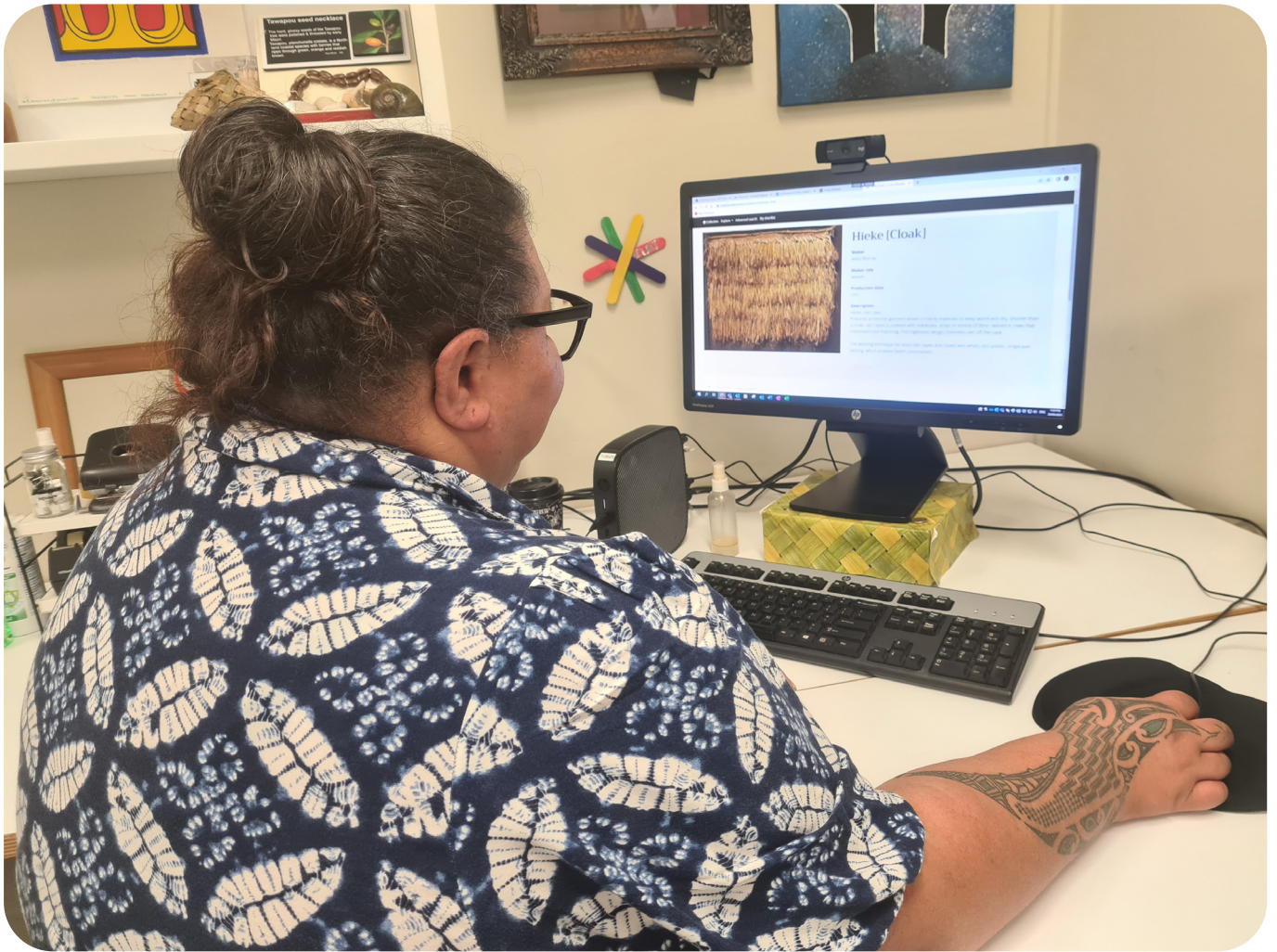
Over Covid, Te Ahu Museum and Archives countered the sense of paralysis around future planning by developing a bodacious five-year strategy to create a museum that everyone could feel connected to.

As its visitor numbers plummeted and its revenue took a hit, Te Ahu's Manager Whina Te Whiu could register the sense of fear in the community and

subsequent paralysis that came with that feeling, though she consciously moved against this into this space of reinvention.

"During that period everyone was really fearful. We were racked with concerns, like what's going on with our collections? Did we cover everything before we left? Have we got access to our cameras and temperature control? And then there were bigger questions, like who are we if our doors aren't open?"

ABOVE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Ruben Garcia – General Manager of Community and Engagement, Whina Te Whiu – Manager of Te Ahu Museum and Archives, Mary Daun – Archivist beside the DeSurville anchor.



“Before Covid there wasn’t a vision for the museum, we had to future-proof it in a way that wasn’t fearful about closure - it had to be bodacious and fearless.”

During the tightest restrictions, there was a 40% decrease in visitor numbers between Jan – August 2020 and a 79% decrease in generating revenue. Whina says they could go one of two ways to help generate the income they needed.

“We could have made up the money by upping our entry fees or we could find money to future proof the museum, so that we’re never in this situation again. In the end we opted for the second strategy so we could touch base with our community and create a roadmap together. The Museum Hardship Fund gave us opportunity to undertake this work, so we could become more clear-sighted about our future.”

Digitisation fast-tracked

Despite a significant drop in visitation, the museum saw its Facebook following swell incredibly over Covid which gave Whina the conviction to fast-track its digital strategy. “During this period, you had to be more visible, this is when everyone was stuck at home, everyone was watching Facebook, so you had to give them more.”

Whina quickly found these platforms were a new teacher, they enabled her to step outside the walls of the museum, find its voice, and genuinely engage with its online community.

“If it wasn’t for Covid, I would be posting once a week and it would be very blah, I would be using it like a notice board. There is an expectation that a museum has to be an authority, though when you show some vulnerability and stay humble, it can become a mana-enhancing exercise in which everyone wins. When I am posting now, I am sense checking, I am seeing what

ABOVE: Manager of Te Ahu Museum and Archives Whina Te Whiu looks over some of their newly digitised collection items.

is happening in the area, seeing what's happening around me, so what I am saying is relevant.”

During the first year of Covid, Whina and Archivist Mary Daun took a good look at how the museum could function beyond its physical walls to reach new people, and as the personality and relevance of its online content grew, its audience doubled in size. With a growing online audience that was hungry for museum content and a voice that was genuine and true, they were in the perfect position to tell more stories about early life in the far North through its vast collection of taonga Māori and settler artefacts. Though they needed to digitise their collection at pace to meet the demands of their online community.

“We already had a plan to digitise the collection, though Covid gave it some gas. When Covid struck, we had just finished a project of cleaning our collections and providing safe storage, thanks to the Museum Hardship Fund we were able to photograph and catalogue 500 key taonga to demonstrate its breadth and diversity.”

A community-driven plan

Whina says that Covid gave Te Ahu Museum the opportunity to reflect on what the Museum was doing and contemplate what the future may look like. Again, the Museum Hardship Fund helped them with this aim.

“It gave us pause and enabled us to get our collections digitised, get them valued and insured and work on our strategy. What we were doing on Facebook page started to pave the way for a conversation, and we wanted to hear more from our community. The strategy is borne out of not wanting to feel lost, before we had never had a strategy, wanted to test what resilience meant and ask those big questions like, what does it mean to be a museum in this day and age?”

To sense check whether the Museum was moving in the right direction, Whina hired a museum specialist who had worked across the sector to run a series of workshops and write up a strategy document that was written in a voice that was lively and engaging, like the strategy itself.

“At the stakeholder workshops, we got 35 people - teachers, students, researchers, historians, the museum association, youth council members,

people from the library and five different iwi. It gave them a chance to share their whakaaro and ideas to collaborate, create partnerships and plot a future together.”

Quickly Whina realised that Covid provided a necessary disruption to enable them to look more closely at how the community viewed the space and what it would take to transform it so it was a place where they could see their stories.

“It was shocking. The feedback that we got from iwi was that when they walked in here, Māori taonga was at the back and it was dehumanised, the Pākeha story was so much more prominent and each of the objects were linked to missionaries, whereas the Māori story was faceless.”

After conducting this stakeholder research, they have produced a strategy document that wasn't 'stuffy' so anyone who was interested in the museum's future-planning could get a sense of what direction they were heading in.

“The strategy gave us a chance to look at small and big ways we could connect more with our community and create a sustainable financial and volunteer base, so we're equipped to service the community in many ways, from hosting school visits to responding to research enquiries.”

With Covid firmly in the rearview mirror, Te Ahu Museum is moving forward with a collective sense of where they need to go, one in which community and relationships lie at its heart. Indeed one of the larger goals of the strategy involves strengthening the social fabric of the cultural and heritage sector across the region, so they can grow stronger together.

As the General Manager for Community and Engagement, Ruben Garcia says many organisations are still doing it tough, though he believes through greater collaboration and co-operation the region can grow to become a cultural hub.

“The numbers haven’t bounced back to pre-Covid levels across a number of visitor sites. Though, I believe we shouldn’t be seen as competitors in this space – we won’t be able to replicate what other museums do. It got us to thinking about creating a map of the district, so we’re not seen as isolated, cross promoting each other, collaborating and creating trails, we want to be the leaders in that.”



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This case study was produced by National Services Te Paerangi

The Museum Hardship Fund is a COVID response funding stream from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage



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