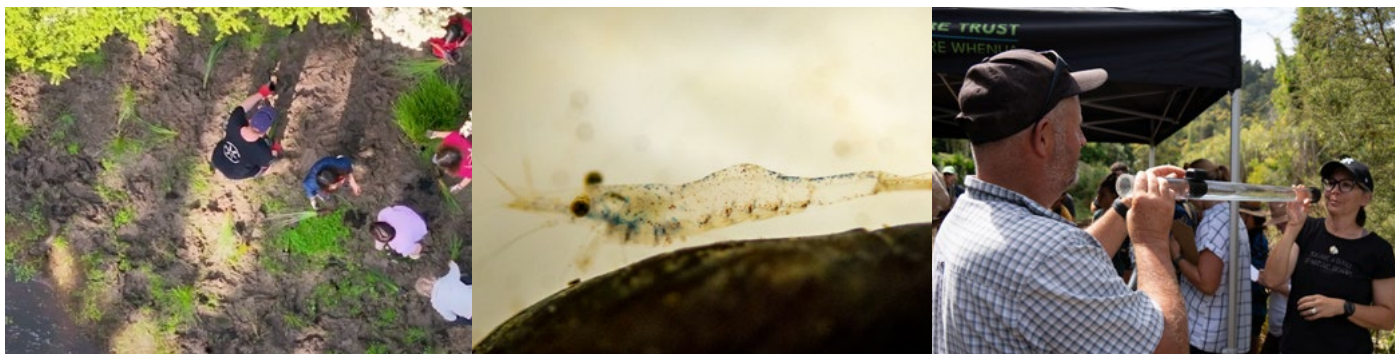# Effective Catchment Group Communications

Introduction

Welcome to Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust's 'Effective Catchment Group Communications' guide. This document is designed to give you all the information you need to start telling the story about the wonderful mahi your catchment or community group is doing on the ground...without all the dense theory that sometimes accompanies communications guides. It's divided into three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced, with simple instructions of how to execute each level.

Who this guide is for: catchment groups without dedicated communications support who are stretched for time, but who want to tell their story.

Who this guide isn't for: groups with dedicated comms resourcing who have the time and expertise to execute more complex or comprehensive communications strategies.

FAQs

What is 'communications' in the context of catchment groups?

Telling people what you're doing, how great it is, and why it's important to your community.

Why do I need to do it?

To build support and community engagement. Good storytelling leads to more members, more sponsors, and greater community support for what you're doing.

Should I do a proper communications plan?

You don't need one to begin with. If you rely on volunteers and have limited resources, this document should serve as an adequate plan until your group has more time, re-sources, and expertise to dedicate to storytelling.

What equipment do I need?

At a bare minimum, you need a phone with a decent camera (95% of modern phones have one), a computer/laptop, and an internet connection.

Do I need to be good with technology?

Not beyond a basic understanding of how to take photos and how to upload things to social media.

Level 1: Beginner

Level 1 includes

- Starting a Facebook page
- How to tell basic image-based stories
- Who/how to tag
- How to recycle stories
- Starting a simple newsletter using existing content

A brief summary

You're going to focus on New Zealand's most popular social media platform (Facebook) and tell stories here, taking care to tag anyone who might want to know about it. You can then recycle those stories for funding applications, and for a simple newsletter.

Equipment you'll need

- A smartphone with a decent camera (or standalone digital camera)
- A desktop computer
- An email address for your catchment group (gmail is free and comes with the Google Drive software suite, allowing you to create and store documents)
- Word processing software (Google Docs is free with a Google account)

Starting a facebook page for your catchment group

Whatever you think of Facebook, it is New Zealand's most widely-used social media platform. Other than email (more on that below), it is the most feasible way to engage with your likely target audience (who are probably 30+) for free.

To set up a page, log in to your personal facebook account, and find the 'Pages' section of facebook (scroll down using the menu on the left hand side of your facebook menu on desktop). Click 'Create a new page'. Fill in the required fields, and your page will be up and running. From here, you can post to it in exactly the same way as your personal profile. Make sure you add the basic details Facebook asks for, and include a few relevant images.

Once the page is set up, invite other people from the catchment group to join, as well as other people or organisations you think might be interested.

Now you have your page and you've started inviting people to follow it, it's time to start telling people what you're doing.

As a rule, you can't post too much.

However, **you only need to post things that are relevant to your work and your community**.

Contrary to popular belief, the algorithm won't 'reward' you for posting incessantly: it cares mainly about engagement. **If your community watches, likes, comments, or shares your posts/stories, Facebook is more likely to push your content more widely**. Post as frequently as you can, but make sure your content is engaging and relevant.

Telling simple image-based stories

If you have a planting day, training event, or any other activity your community might be interested in, take a few phone images and post about it.

Here's what to do:

Step 1: Take photos of:

- the people attending (they love to see photos of themselves!)
- any experts involved
- the wider setting (ie a wide shot of the stream/river)
- any wildlife or details you uncover

Step 2: Upload those photos to your computer.

Step 3: Write a short story (up to 200 words) about the event on your word processer (eg Google Docs). Follow a simple: 'who did what, when' structure, and briefly explain how and why the activity took place. **Make sure you save this document in a place where you can easily find it, preferably alongside the photos you took**.

Step 4: Upload the best pictures (try to include at least one for each of the bullet points from step 1!) along with the story you've written.

Step 5: using the '@' symbol, find and tag anyone you know who attended, as well as any organisations, council contacts, or funders if they are relevant to the post. If you don't, they will only see your post if they see it on their feed.

Your posts/stories will look a lot like this

Who did what, when and where

Lots of tags!

People doing the work

Expert and setting

Turning it into a newsletter

If you have an email list, or even just a handful of email addresses of people in your community, you can directly send them an email that copy/pastes text from the stories you write, and include a few key photos alongside them. You can also link people directly to your facebook page. Your email provider will likely have a way to create email lists or email groups to help you manage email addresses. If you're looking for instructions, most email providers will have instructions on their website or on Youtube.

Recycling stories for funding applications

Many funding applications will ask for evidence you're making a difference on the ground. Your stories and photos are an invaluable resource that proves you're doing the mahi. In many instances, you'll be able to copy your stories word-for-word and include them as evidence, or directly link your potential funder or sponsor to facebook posts.

In summary

Your stories and photos are an invaluable resource that proves you're doing good work. They're also a great way to introduce your community to the work you're doing, and encourage them to get involved.

Level 2: Intermediate

Level 2 includes

- Using Canva for basic design (including logos)
- Creating short videos to promote events or tell stories
- How to set up an email list with Mailchimp, and use it for your newsletter

A brief summary

You're going to dip your toes into more complex content creation, and set up an email list on a dedicated mail marketing platform you can use to make a professional-looking newsletter.

Additional equipment/accounts you'll need

- A free Mailchimp account
- A free Canva account
- Lapel mic set (optional)

Making your visuals look more professional

Now you've got the hang of posting to facebook, can tell image-supported stories, and have used your stories to start building a simple newsletter, it's time to level up your visuals!

Canva is 'freemium' design software (it has a free tier, you pay for advanced functionality) that operates entirely within your web browser. That means you don't need to download anything - you go to the website (www.canva.com) and do all your design and editing through your browser.

It is very user-friendly, and will help you create a range of graphic elements that would have required complex software and professional support ten years ago. Better yet, Youtube is full of helpful tips and advice to help you learn how to use it (search for 'Canva tutorial for beginners' or similar).

Here are some things you can use Canva for:

- Designing a logo for your catchment group (simple is good!)
- Creating flyers and posters
- Designing digital posters for events you can promote on your facebook page
- Editing videos, including adding captions

Creating short videos

Short videos are the next logical step for social media after you've created short image-based stories. There are (broadly) two kinds of videos you can create.

1) Simple 'what's happening' videos

This is a single phone video with no visible editing (you might want to trim the start and end if your video is too long) showing people the main action at your event. You may choose to have someone explaining what's happening as they film, but this isn't necessary if your text description does it. For example, you might simply take a 20-second video of people putting plants in the ground, and upload that to facebook along with a 200-word story as described in the Beginner section. You can upload it along with still images.

2) An edited story video – up to 90 seconds

This requires more commitment in terms of time, skill development, and effort, though the results are far more engaging if you do it well. Follow the same basic formula as with still image posts (get footage of attendees, experts, setting/environment and wildlife) but edit them together into a single video. An interview with the expert or catchment spokesperson often helps to tell the story (get them to say who's doing what, when, where, how, and why). Still include your 200 word story.

A note of caution: videos like this need good audio and confident delivery. Wind noise or inaudible interviews make for an uncomfortable listen. While your mobile phone microphone may work in quiet spaces, lapel mics like the **Rode Wireless Me** can help ensure your audio sounds clean and tidy.

Video editing is a skill in itself, though some apps make the process quite easy. **Capcut** is a good freemium tool, and **Canva** also includes video editing tools. These may require a few video tutorials via Youtube if you're not confident with technology, so bear this in mind.

Videos continued

A few more general tips for social media videos:

- Vertical videos are often better if your audience watches on their phones
- Show people DOING stuff - people sitting down at meetings or standing around don't make for interesting videos
- Brief is best - shorter content means people are more likely to watch to the end, which in turn makes the algorithm more likely to share it

If you're enjoying creating video content, it might also make sense to start an Instagram account - you can even link it to your Facebook account. While Instagram typically engages a slightly younger audience (25-40), this platform is more suited to image and video content. Only do this if you have the time and inclination to manage a second platform!
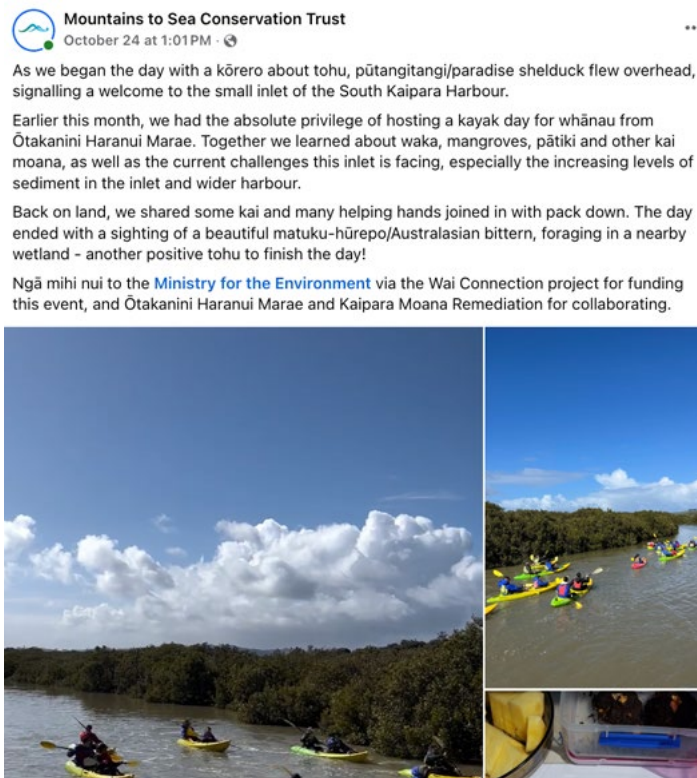
Video and images alongside a thorough text description

Narrative video, with interviews (lapel mics!) and captions

Setting up a Mailchimp email list and a professional newsletter

Since you have en email provider, like Gmail, and can create visual content in Canva for your Facebook page, you have all the tools necessary to start. Mailchimp's free tier is the perfect tool for your list of members, funders, and councils (under 500 contacts). It's a full-featured marketing automation platform that allows for significant customisability...though you may not need all its features! Here's how to get started (though Youtube tutorials will be helpful!).

1. Set Up Your Free Mailchimp Account

- Go to the Mailchimp.com website and select the Free plan. When signing up, use your catchment group's generic email address.
- The critical step here is Email Verification. If you don't have a website with a custom URL, you can't fully authenticate your emails. Instead, Mailchimp will send a link to your inbox. Clicking this link proves you are authorised to send from that specific address, which is the necessary step to get started.
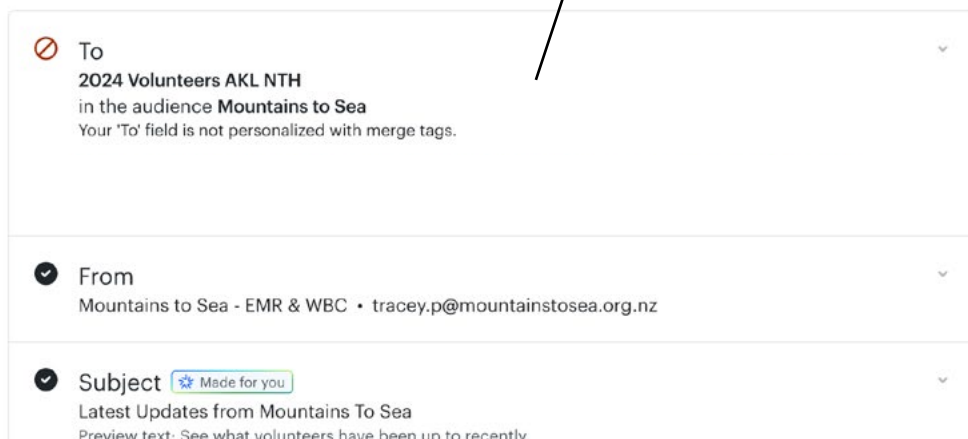
2. Import Your Email List

In Mailchimp, your mailing list is called an "Audience." Create a new one, then import your collected contacts. You can typically copy the list of names and email addresses directly from a simple spreadsheet. Make sure you also have their permission to receive emails - this is key for good practice and staying compliant.

3. Design and Send Your First Newsletter

- Create a Campaign: Start a new Email Campaign and choose one of the free, drag-and-drop templates.
- Incorporate Canva Assets: Upload a logo and other visual elements you've created in Canva. The images and text you already produce for your Facebook storytelling are excellent, ready-made content for your newsletter.
- Content: Add the text and images, keeping your stories concise and action-oriented.
- Send: Always send a test email to yourself first. Once confirmed, send your first official newsletter! The platform will automatically track who opened it, giving you valuable feedback on what content works best.

The Mailchimp email editor user interface
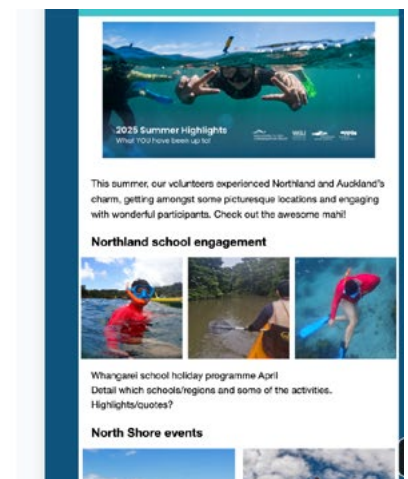
Talking to your community and funders effectively

A newsletter is the single most reliable way you can communicate with people involved with your catchment group, assuming you don't see them face-to-face frequently. There's two reasons for this:

1) The algorithm dictates what people are shown on social media (which is why tagging relevant people is so important). You can spend a lot of time and energy on social media posts, only for your desired audience not to see them.

2)People rarely change personal email addresses, so they'll usually receive the emails you send them (you can even see who's opened them in Mailchimp). Social media platforms change and evolve - as does people's engagement with them.

In summary

Creating more professional-looking communications helps show your community and funders that you're organised and well-established. That, in turn, helps you attract more members and funding. Effective, consistent storytelling is also a great way to motivate and engage your exisiting members and volunteers. While people usually say they don't like being on camera, almost everybody likes to see well-documented evidence of how their hard work is making a difference.

Level 3: Advanced
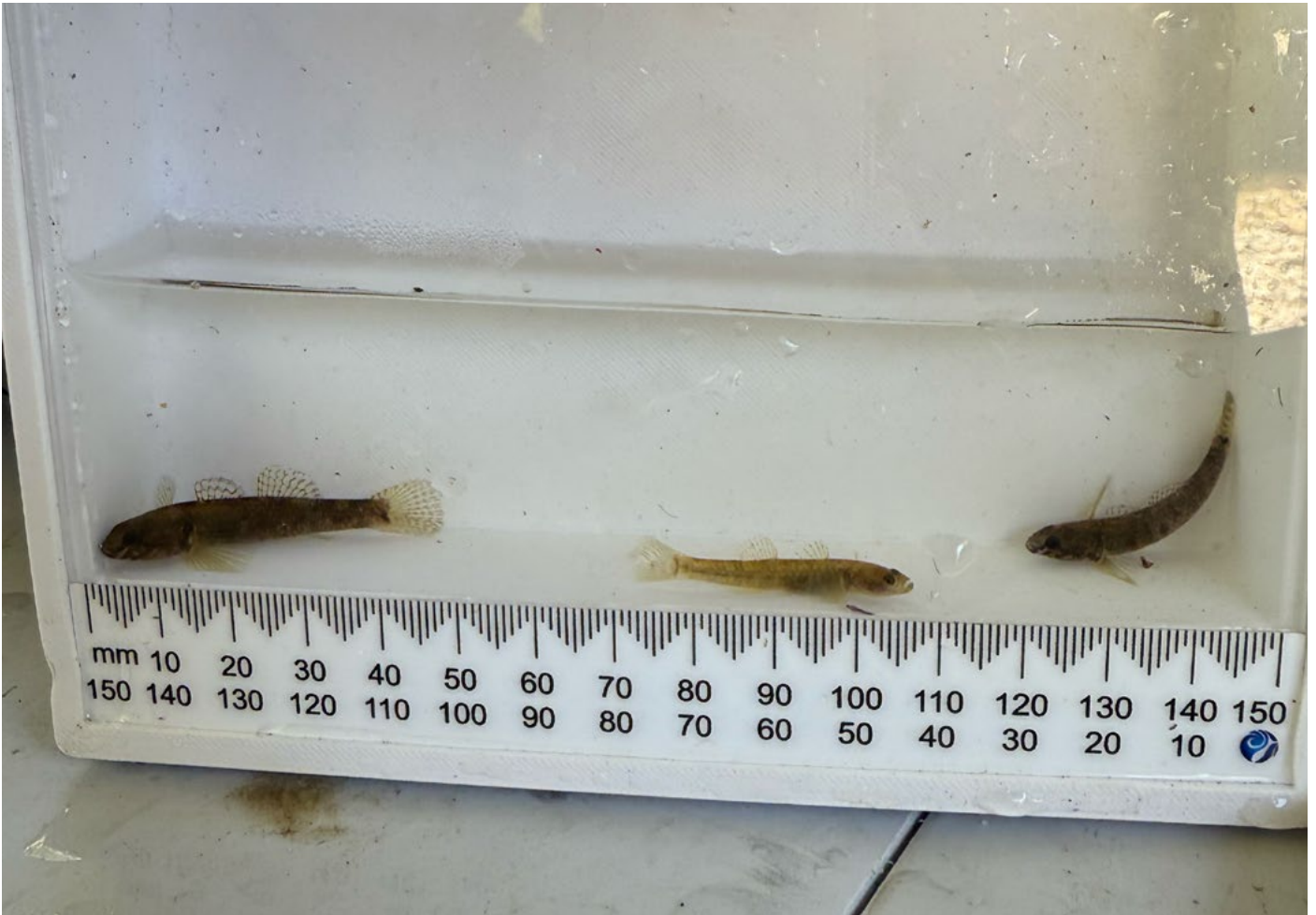
Level 3 includes

- Using creative tools (Canva, video editing software) for in-depth storytelling
- Analysing trends to help you identify what content to create
- Contacting local media and writing press releases/news stories

A brief summary

You have the tools you need, and a reasonable idea how to use them. Let's level up your storytelling, use it to spread the word about your mahi, and attract some funding.

Additional equipment/accounts you'll need

- None, over and above tools you've learned to use at Level 2

Storytelling - in depth content

If you're comfortable creating text, image, and video-based posts about events you've held and the difference you're making, now's the time to consider engaging your audience on a deeper level.

There are a few questions you should answer before you create in-depth content, because it often takes a lot of time and energy. Here's what you need to consider:

The audience – who do you want to talk to? Be 100% clear. It helps to picture an individual in your target community and ask yourself, 'will they they find this interesting or useful?'

The human element – detailed scientific concepts can be hard to interpret. Make sure you focus on the people in your community doing the science, and how the science connects to them. For example, 'How Jane measures water quality in the Clarence River, and what it tells her' is far more interesting to everyday people than, 'e.coli readings and analysis from the Clarence River 2020-2025.'

The imagery – try and take as many interesting images/videos of people, locations, and people as possible. We're a visual species - give us something cool to look at!

Keep a single-minded focus – stick with one specific idea, if you can. Instead of 'What different tools do we use to measure water quality on the Ruakaka Awa?' (this could quickly become a very long video), try something like, 'What's does this turbidity tube tell us about the Ruakaka Awa?'.

Some more examples of in-depth stories might include:

- **An explainer video** (eg 'What is riparian planting, and why are we doing it on the Whangaripo Stream'?)

- **A video series** (eg 'What's in a SHMAK kit, and why do we use it on our river?' with a single short video for each component)

- **Wildlife profiles –** image 'tiles' put together in canva, with (big!) photos and text descriptions profiling important creatures from your catchment, and how you're trying to protect them

- **Any interesting information about the history of your awa or catchment** that locals might not know about.

- **Volunteer or team member profiles** so your community gets to know them a little better

A 50-second 'wildlife profile' about the Northland Mudfish

Find what works, and do more of that

In-depth storytelling can build your credibility with both your community, and the funders you want to attract. But it takes time! For this reason, you want to make sure you're spending your energy on telling stories people find useful or engaging.

There are three useful tools you can analyse when deciding what content to create more of.

Facebook's 'Professional dashboard' – open your group's profile page on a desktop/ laptop. On the left hand menu, there's a 'Professional dashboard' button. Click on it, then the 'Content' button. Here, you can see how many views your posts and videos have received. If those numbers are low, don't worry! Your intention isn't to 'go viral' – you're usually trying to connect with your (probably local) audience. 50 views from engaged locals is more valuable than 50,000 views from a disinterested international audience. For this reason, focus mainly on the 'Interactions', 'Comments', and 'Distribution' numbers. If there's a certain piece of contact that people enjoyed, try replicating the style and see if it works.

Mailchimp link clicks – if you link to a piece of your in-depth content in your newsletter (eg a link to a video you did about endangered bittern habitat in your catchment), Mailchimp will show you how many people clicked on it as a percentage of your overall email list size. This is a great way to discover what content resonates with your audience.

In-person feedback – this is a simple and valuable way to understand what people want to see more of. You can ask attendees at events if they're seen any of your stories, or ask them what they'd like to know about your catchment. If you can tell stories they enjoy reading or watching, they're more likely to continue engaging with you.

Facebook's Professional dashboard, and it's content anaylsis interface

Attracting local news outlets

Wherever you are in Aotearoa, there will be a newsletter, local newspaper, or regional facebook page covering news and events from your community. They're a great way to tell your community what's going on, and build your profile beyond committed catchment group members. Here's a few simple tips, plus a template to write a press release (or a news story yourself!) on the following page.
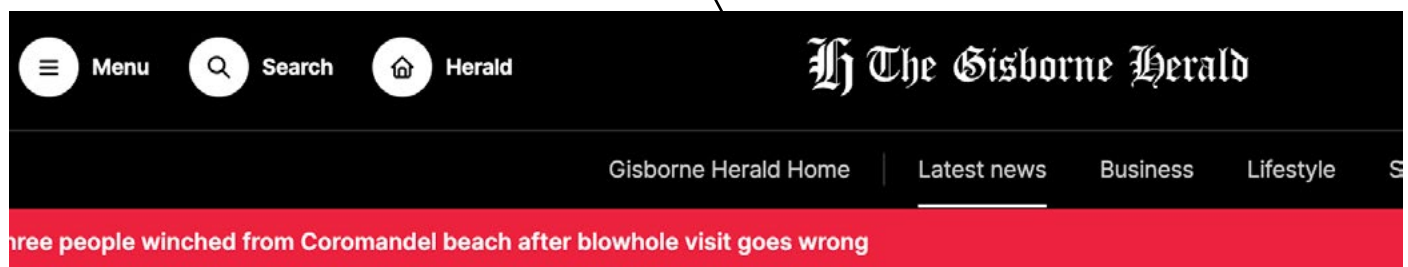
Meet up – it's usually a small team (or even a single person) running the local newsletter or newspaper. Catch up with them for a coffee, and invite them to your next event. That way, they can tell the story for you!

Email – get the email addresses of your local news outlets, and include them in your newsletter list. Send an introductory email, too, so they know who you are and some of the stories you might have to share, and invite them to your next event if you can't meet them in person beforehand.

Send a press release – use the template on the opposite page to send a press release about an event you've just had (make sure you include links to photos, with captions for each photo). If you do a good job, the newsletter, newspaper, or facebook page may just copy/paste large chunks of what you've written...or even the entire thing.

Note: your press release doesn't need to be long – 300 words is plenty!

Good engagement with local newspapers = effective communciation with your community

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Gisborne's Waikanae Stream gets a clean-up thanks to students

Gisborne Herald
23 Sep, 2025 05:00 PM 🕐 2 mins to read

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Press release/news story template

First paragraph - introduce who did what, when and where.
Eg Local Catchment Group hosted its first-ever public stream survey at Everett Park Scenic Reserve last Sunday, helping connect locals to the Manganui Awa.

Second paragraph - explain more about what people did, learned, and experienced at the events.
Eg More than forty people attended, and attentively listened as Local Catchment Group and Ngāti Waru volunteers helped share the secrets about what's hidden beneath the river surface. Activities included water clarity measurements, biodiversity surveys, and electric 'fishing' to capture and record what creatures live in the awa.

Third paragraph - provide more context about the organisation or project.
Eg The Local Catchment Group was established in 2023, and has already embarked on a range of restoration and water quality improvements in the Manganui river catchment. That includes riparian planting, pest trapping, and helping local farmers with freshwater farm plans. They've also run a number of engagement events to show locals what they're up to, and what they're trying to protect.

Fourth paragraph - spokesperson quote.
Eg "Everett Park is such a beautiful place, and a lot of people from across Taranaki love to come here to relax and connect with nature. It's really rewarding to show people what's living in the awa, and hopefully they see how important it is that we protect it for future generations," says Local Catchment Group member Jo Bloggs.

Fifth paragraph - event attendee quote (make sure you take a name and a video on the day!). *If it is a child, get verbal permission from parents!*
Eg Inglewood local Tane Smith, 10, was fascinated by what he saw. "I didn't know there was so many things in the river. I saw baby eels, īnanga, and koura. We need to make sure we keep the river healthy so those animals can keep living there," he says.

Sixth paragraph - promote organisation and future events/activities.
Eg The event is one of many Local Catchment Group will host across the region over the next nine months. "We're hoping to connect as many people across Taranaki as possible with their awa and moana," says Bloggs. Anybody interested in attending upcoming events can view them at Local Catchment Group's Facebook page, or by emailing localcatchmentgroup@gmail.com.

For more information, contact Jane Doe, Catchment Group Coordinator at JDoe@gmail.com or via phone on 021 234 5678.

ENDS

Further information

YOUR ORG NAME - Insert 50-75 words about your catchment group or organisation