



Tackling a wicked problem

Policymakers are using a new term to describe intractable problems – *wicked*.

A wicked problem is one that's difficult to solve - a social problem that has big economic consequences and affects large numbers of people. Wicked problems don't have clear boundaries; they are interconnected and merge into each other, and there are always conflicting views about what causes them.

Examples of wicked problems are unaffordable housing, poverty, poor education outcomes, crime, pollution and unsustainability.

Wicked problems are unique and can't be solved by a template. Addressing wicked problems requires innovation.

Auckland's growth is a wicked problem.

On one hand, it is an economic boon and the tangible sign of New Zealand's positive growth performance.

But on the other hand, Auckland's interconnected issues - congestion, lack of affordable housing, homelessness, lack of infrastructure and lack of qualified people to build more housing and infrastructure – are wicked.

There are ideas proposed to address aspects of this wicked problem - impose loan to value restrictions, abolish urban limits, make people live in high-rise apartments, house the homeless in marae, bring in more skilled immigrants, pay for more building apprenticeships, restrict immigration, pay people to leave Auckland, pay a living wage, increase benefits, confiscate land from landbankers, build more rail, impose road tolls, build kitset housing, and more.

Some of those proposals are contradictory, some are unaffordable, some would make the problem worse, and none of them is a silver bullet.

Auckland's wicked problem requires innovation.

Fortunately that's something New Zealand is good at.

One part of Auckland's wicked problem - the part about the lack of skilled workers for new construction - is being addressed in a clever way.

A group of construction businesses, building suppliers and education and training providers have started working together to deliver the skills needed to build Auckland's new development.

The Auckland Construction Skills Alliance was set up a couple of years ago in the knowledge that there was a huge wave of new construction in Auckland over the coming decade (infrastructure, commercial developments and residential housing) – and not enough skilled workers and tradespeople to build it.

The scale and speed of Auckland's growth needs means it's near impossible for the education and training system to supply qualified people with the range of construction skills needed. Attrition - with skilled workers leaving for Christchurch or Australia - makes it worse.

The Alliance focuses on training new entrants to the construction business as well as upskilling existing workers and getting industry supervision for the training.

The first main focus is in the development around Auckland International Airport, the 'Ara hub' where people from South Auckland are being employed and trained in construction and associated skills.

Having the Ara hub as an exchange, bringing together construction companies needing skilled workers and local people willing to be trained, is proving valuable in addressing unemployment issues in South Auckland.

The Ara hub is working to a 30-year plan for growing construction skills to facilitate Auckland's growth.

The partners in the Alliance include industry training organisations working in construction and infrastructure BCITO, Connexis and Competenz, training providers UNITEC and the Manukau Institute of Technology and construction firms Fletcher Building, Hawkins, Dominion Constructors and Naylor Love.

What these groups are doing to address Auckland's skill shortage is brilliant. It's forward thinking, collaborative, and shows a great deal of initiative.

This kind of innovation is what Kiwis are known for and may be a good example of the way we can approach other wicked problems.

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