

Kāpiti Coast
Older Persons' Council
A Voice For Our Community

INFORM - ADVOCATE - EMPOWER

The New Zealand Herald of Thursday Aug 11, 2016 in the report entitled "Westpac bank branches to close" lists the Waikanae branch as one of those to close.

The Kāpiti Coast Older Persons' Council has a responsibility to speak for over 25% of the Kāpiti population, twice the national average. However in Waikanae it is even more dramatic: latest census figures show that in Waikanae 3918 of the 10632 residents are aged 65+; 37%.

Westpac is reported as saying that over the last five years, online transactions increased by 61 percent and in the last year online logins via a mobile device have increased by 33 percent, and the Kāpiti Coast Older Persons' Council recognises the convenience that represents to the bank. However while some older people use internet banking, most have a strong preference for in-branch banking, preferring face-to-face service, the chance to talk to people, and the security of seeing their bank transaction take place and receiving a paper record to prove it. Older people, by definition, are not "digital natives".

It is not uncommon for older people to face increasing difficulties with mobility, physical disabilities such as sight loss, hearing loss or arthritis, or cognitive decline which can make it difficult to remember passwords and security codes.

Westpac claims to understand these issues. In your media release of 27 August 2015 "*New Zealand's first dementia-friendly bank*" you say in part:

"With two out of every three New Zealanders touched by dementia, Westpac is training staff to help recognise, understand and respond to the needs of customers living with dementia and their carers."

"International findings show those with dementia have difficulty using banks and can be confused over legal documents such as an enduring power of attorney and that can stop carers from carrying out financial decisions on behalf of their loved one."

"It's a wide ranging issue that banks can provide some assistance and comfort in during stressful times including helping prevent vulnerable customers from becoming victims of fraud and other financial crime."

The Kāpiti Coast Older Persons' Council submits that for these laudable sentiments to have substance, Westpac should make every effort to retain the personal interaction that local branches make possible, especially in Waikanae with its unique demographic characteristics.

Other issues for older people include:

- For some the cost of getting online is prohibitively high
- A lack of computer or digital skills or confidence disadvantages many
- Some have concerns about security issues amid frequent reports of scams and financial abuse.

University of Queensland law lecturer Dr David Morrison, who is researching the problem, says the move to online banking has left older and disabled people vulnerable as they rely either on relatives, which can lead to elder financial abuse, or they're relying on carers and caring institutions who have policies, but there's all sorts of "unofficial things that happen" that can exploit the elderly.

University of Queensland Social Work Professor Jill Wilson has done extensive research on managing older people's assets, and says the more people can keep control of their money, the better protected they are. Professor Wilson says that when you're physically less able to get access to cash with fewer banks for people to go to, they have to go to money machines - not necessarily in areas that they're comfortable in - or they give people their pin number, with obvious inherent dangers.

The money machine option is one that many older people are wary of because of the dangers of having a lot of money in their hand to pay their bills. For older people the local branch is preferable and much safer. If older people are being financially abused by people that have access to their account, when they walk into a local bank often the tellers would have some idea that there was something the matter and they could raise issues. But when it's all done electronically such abuse it's much more difficult to monitor, it's much more depersonalised.

As an alternative to closing the Waikanae branch, the Kāpiti Coast Older Persons' Council submits that Westpac embraces the unique economic opportunity by establishing the first age-friendly bank, built on:

Customer service – make sure that staff are trained to recognise the specific needs of older people, to listen to what customers say to them and to respond appropriately, especially with regard to cognitive decline, scams and financial abuse.

Physical design – design branches to be easily accessible, arrange suitable alternative physical services in the absence of a branch, ensure all customers know about accessibility options.

Systems – make sure information is handled reliably and processes are carried out in ways that meet the needs of older customers.

Products – remove arbitrary age limits and design financial products to fit the shape of later life as it is lived today.

The Kāpiti Coast Older Persons' Council believes that a bank is a community of stakeholders with a variety of interests, situated within a larger society. The more a bank sees itself as interdependent with that larger society and with responsibilities to all its stakeholders, the easier it will be for the bank to adopt practices that are friendly to older people.