

Review of the Rapid Building Assessment System



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Acronyms Used in the Report

Acronym	Meaning
BAU	Business as usual
BCO	Building Control Officer
CDEM	Civil Defence Emergency Management
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
FENZ	Fire and Emergency New Zealand
MBIE	Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
RBA	Rapid Building Assessment
RBAs	Rapid Building Assessors
TA	Territorial Authority

1. Executive Summary

Two extreme weather events in 2023, the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle, marked the first instance for the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) to deploy Rapid Building Assessors (RBAs) at a national level. Over 240 local and MBIE RBAs were dispatched, completing 10,000 rapid building assessments. Given the magnitude of the emergency response and the widespread damage to buildings, MBIE has commissioned a review to better understand how the rapid building assessment system functioned during the response and to identify areas for improvement. This review provides an overview of assessors' views on the training, notification and deployment process, resources and tools, conducting assessments and wellbeing processes.

The data used to inform this review was obtained from 22 in-depth interviews with RBAs who had been deployed to the two emergency events, with the lines of questioning informed by three in-depth interviews with key informants from MBIE's **Building System Performance team**. In addition, all RBAs had the opportunity to participate in the review via an online survey, with 47 completed surveys received.

1.1 Training

Current RBA training is perceived positively. Real-life examples, role-plays and scenario work are considered particularly valuable. The balance of theory (e.g. how the wider RBA process works) and practice (what equipment is needed, opportunity to practice using Survey123 etc.) is well received, and the lived assessment experience of facilitators enhances the credibility of the material delivered. In-person sessions are considered best practice, allowing the tailoring of sessions to the needs and interests of attendees, and providing an environment conducive to sharing experiences and asking questions.

The key weakness of the current training is a lack of provision. Many RBAs were either untrained at the time of their recent deployment or training had been done too long ago to be useful. This led to inefficiencies in the deployment of staff in the field, inconsistencies in assessments and time wasted doing re-assessments, and negative impacts on assessors who were mentally unprepared for the role, particularly dealing with the public.

Moving forward, training can be enhanced by offering more sessions, including the provision of (potentially compulsory) refresher training, broadening the scope of the training to address a wider range of hazards, greater detail on use of the placarding system, and assisting RBAs to be better aware of, and prepared for, the wellbeing challenges of their role.

1.2 Conducting Rapid Building Assessments

More than a third of RBAs did not feel prepared on their first day of deployment, a lack of training and insufficient resources being key contributors.

Daily briefings were essential to the efficiency of assessments, providing an opportunity to review tools as a team to ensure consistency of approach and placarding decision criteria, to minimise duplication of effort and to disseminate information. Debriefings were equally valuable, providing opportunities for RBAs to share experiences – **to check for consistency of approach and to ‘download’ mentally and emotionally before returning home.**

Whilst RBAs were generally happy with the overall co-ordination, for both events, considerable time and effort was wasted early on due to a lack of preparedness, including no maps being available, insufficient technology and technology malfunctions, resources being out-of-date and communication methods not being hazard-proof.

For both the Auckland Anniversary Weekend flood and Cyclone Gabrielle, the local RBA resource was insufficient. The time delay in deciding whether building/construction sector professionals without RBA training could conduct rapid building assessments and in deploying RBAs from outside the affected region resulted in assessments taking longer to be completed and local assessors feeling overwhelmed and overworked.

Welfare/support officers were essential to the RBA process, engaging with homeowners so RBAs could complete assessments quickly and objectively. Welfare/support officers also acted as spotters for hazards, provided administration support and information about local geography, could facilitate access to less receptive communities and provided a sounding board for assessors to de-stress.

Interactions between local and MBIE-deployed RBAs, and between RBAs and other organisations involved, were very limited. Being physically located together would have facilitated greater interaction which may have resulted in increased sharing of information and resources, and opportunities for creativity and synergies in terms of assisting affected communities.

The current placarding system is not considered fit-for-purpose for flooding events as it doesn't **take account** of the fact that the risk changes over time as the water recedes. A flood-specific set of decision criteria that is well communicated to both RBAs and the public, and improved design of the placards themselves, will reduce confusion for both RBAs and homeowners/occupiers.

1.3 RBA Wellbeing

Two-thirds of surveyed RBAs (68%) reported negative mental and emotional impacts as a result of doing rapid building assessments; 36% reported negative physical impacts.

The need for quick assessments to ensure public safety, the initial shortage of RBAs, technology challenges and RBAs' strong sense of obligation to the public resulted in most working long (10 hours+) days consecutively. Whilst supports to assist with RBAs' mental and emotional wellbeing during deployment were appreciated, the pervading culture was not to make use of these.

Most RBAs had little or no down time between RBA work and business-as-usual, either because no leave was offered (especially to those deployed outside their region) or because of an obligation they felt to move the backlog of work in their substantive roles. However, RBAs were tired, had low morale and were typically less productive on returning to work and workloads often had to be reduced to accommodate this. RBAs call for more down time between RBA deployment and returning to work.

Whilst post-assessment support was offered, uptake was low as RBAs perceived EAP service providers lacked a sufficient understanding/appreciation of the RBA experience to offer meaningful support. More debriefing opportunities throughout the month post assessment, via a range of channels and with a range of organisations, would be welcomed.

1.4 Interactions with Public

RBAs' business-as-usual experience dealing with the public contributed positively to them feeling prepared for public interactions during assessments. Support from a welfare officer, having a more senior team member close by and having high quality information to provide to homeowners/occupiers also contributed to a sense of preparedness.

However, despite feeling prepared, for many RBAs, dealing with the public was the most challenging part of assessments. The public had little or no understanding of the role, role boundaries or legal authority of the RBA and consequently often bombarded the RBA with questions they **didn't** have the remit to answer. This led to frustration for both parties. Public misperceptions of the placarding system were common, with particular fear around **being 'red-stickered'**, **homeowners believing that this earmarked** the house for demolition. Misperceptions sometimes resulted in tensions during assessments.

Whilst RBAs had information to provide to homeowners, this was either out-of-date or the decision criteria and support available changed so rapidly that information prepared quickly became obsolete. Using a range of channels to provide the public with a general overview of the RBA process and the role of RBAs, clearly explaining the placarding system, **and providing 'how to' guides to navigate different aspects of the recovery process** will be well-received by the public, will improve the efficiency of the RBA process and positively **impact on RBAs' mental well-being**.

1.5 Retention and Recruitment of RBAs

Almost all assessors interviewed intend to continue as RBAs. Time away from family is the key disincentive for remaining in the role.

Whilst most assessors would encourage others to consider becoming RBAs, a lack of training opportunities, the high level of stress, abuse the role can attract and lack of clarity around the placarding system were detractors to promoting the RBA role. Raising the public profile of the RBA role, greater rewards/recognition of RBA work and easy access to information about the role may generate more interest in the RBA role.

Views on a formal RBA qualification are mixed. Whilst it would upskill RBAs, provide greater consistency of role execution, validate the RBA role and provide reassurances to RBAs working with those they **don't know, many of the attributes of a good RBA can't be taught, and formal study requirements may discourage some** from taking up the role. Given that knowledge of construction/building is essential to RBA work, it is felt that a formal qualification should only be offered to those with industry experience.

1.6 Conclusions

Overall, the Rapid Building Assessment structure is perceived as a sufficient system for an emergency response framework in New Zealand. RBAs trained prior to the emergency event were well-prepared for their role and felt well-managed by their immediate team leader in the field. However, TA being unprepared and slow decision making from MBIE made RBA work more challenging. The placarding system was not fit-for-purpose for flooding events, resulting in inconsistencies in the criteria used to issue placards which in turn created confusion and frustration among both RBAs and the public.

Despite having competencies from their business-as-usual role, dealing with the public during an emergency event is the most challenging part of the RBA role. Whilst accompanying welfare/support officers were an invaluable resource in dealing with homeowners/occupiers reassuringly and sensitively, RBAs were often overwhelmed by the volume of questions from the public and lacked good quality information to adequately address these.

However, whilst a range of shortcomings with the RBA deployment during the recent emergency events were identified by this review, one of the key benefits of the recent emergency events is that RBAs and TAs are now considerably better prepared for future emergency events than they were. Some staff not trained at the time of the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods/Cyclone Gabrielle have now received RBA training, and RBAs reported having maps prepared and packs of equipment made up ready for deployment:

Best Practice Service Provision

Based on the findings of this review, the RBA system will be most successful when:

- Training session provision meets demand, training is provided in-person and includes real-life examples, role-plays and scenario work as well as coverage of wellbeing impacts and strategies.
- In an emergency event, the volume of work is quickly identified and RBAs from outside the region are deployed in a timely way if a need is identified.
- Local and MBIE-deployed assessors are integrated so that different knowledge sets and experiences can be shared, and comraderies established.
- Sufficient staff, equipment and technology are available. MBIE takes a strong leadership role in supporting this and has a physical presence during the emergency event.
- Emergency organisations are located in the same space and meet regularly to share information and resources.

- Daily briefings and debriefings are provided throughout the assessment period.
- There is a consistent set of hazard-specific decision criteria for the issuing of placards, with this well communicated to all RBAs and to homeowners/occupiers.
- RBAs are accompanied by a skilled welfare/support officer when visiting properties. No RBAs work alone.
- Communication methods used in the field are hazard-proof and robust, allowing team members to remain in contact, both for safety reasons and so RBAs can check processes and placarding decisions with others in a timely way.
- The public have a good understanding of the RBA role, the legal status of assessors and extent of their responsibilities. They also have an accurate understanding of the placarding system and the post-assessment process.
- Relevant, up-to-date, user-friendly information about the RBA process and what to do post-assessment is easily accessible to homeowners/occupiers via a range of channels.
- Wellbeing support is made available during, and for some time after, the emergency event, is tailored to the RBA role, is normalised (for example, having counsellors attend debriefing sessions) and the culture of the teams promotes help-seeking behaviour.
- Downtime between conducting RBAs and returning to substantive work is compulsory, with RBAs not penalised for taking this time.

2. Introduction and Research Objectives

2.1 Introduction

The Rapid Building Assessment (RBA) programme ensures that Aotearoa New Zealand is equipped with a sufficient number of experts prepared to conduct prompt building assessments in the aftermath of building damage resulting from emergency events. Qualified building/construction sector professionals, known as Rapid Building Assessors (RBAs), can be mobilised to conduct rapid building assessments. Generally, RBAs are experienced professionals such as building inspectors, building compliance officers, engineers, and/or geotech specialists.

MBIE holds numerous legal responsibilities to organise, train, and sustain the national proficiency of RBAs. This guarantees an ample supply of expertise and leadership nationwide and ensures consistent methods for deploying or mobilising RBAs in emergency situations. Assessors must meet specific competencies and are expected to undergo the MBIE rapid building assessment training programme. For Tier 2 (team leaders) and 3 (assessors) there are online training modules to complete. For Tier 2, there is also an in-person scenario-based training session facilitated by MBIE, whilst Tier 3 have an in-person training facilitated by a territorial authority (TA).

Once an individual has completed the training, they are added to the MBIE RBA register and are issued with an RBA identification card. In order to stay on the registry, RBAs must keep up the competencies set by MBIE and are expected to be available for deployment at any time of an event.

When an emergency event occurs, RBA teams are tasked with evaluating damaged structures and potential hazards to ensure the safety and well-being of building occupants and the public. RBA teams document damage to buildings and allocate appropriate placards to denote building usage restrictions, such as restricted or prohibited entry, based on the extent of damage and risk to safety.

Operating in dynamic and unfamiliar environments, RBAs often collaborate with unfamiliar team members, depending on deployment location. Additionally, they may encounter individuals who have been displaced or traumatised, contributing to a potentially stressful work environment.

Two extreme natural weather events in 2023, the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle, marked the first instance for MBIE to deploy RBAs at a national level. Over 240 local and MBIE RBAs were dispatched, completing a total of 10,000 rapid building assessments.

2.2 Purpose of Research and Research Objectives

Post deploying MBIE-trained and registered RBAs at a national level early this year where states of emergency were called, MBIE are now seeking feedback from the assessors on how well the Rapid Building **Assessment system works. This research aims to provide MBIE with an overview of assessor's views on the** notification and deployment process, training, resources, and tools, conducting assessments and wellbeing processes. MBIE would also value any feedback on the sorts of information and resources that are needed to better support homeowners who are impacted by an emergency.

GravitasOPG sought to understand the following research objectives:

- Did the assessors feel they were trained effectively and understood the end-to-end process?
- How well supported/managed were assessors by their territorial authority and/or managers?
- Is the placarding system fit for purpose for non-structural events like flooding?
- How did the system work during a wide-spread event/national state of emergency?
- How could MBIE support and resource the system more effectively?
- Reassessment and follow-up process
- **Social impacts of rapid building assessments and placards (from an assessor's perspective)**
- Did assessors have the right tools and support for interaction with the public?
- How well did the public understand the process?
- Was the public information fit for purpose to ensure home and building owners understood their roles and responsibilities?
- Attitudes towards assessors and placarding system
- Identifying whether they felt prepared enough for field work (including from the host territorial authority and from MBIE training etc.)

This report addresses the key research questions above in relation to MBIE's Rapid Building Assessment process. The findings of the research will likely inform decisions regarding the structure of the Rapid Building Assessment process in its current form and identify what, if any, changes may need to be initiated to strengthen and enhance the process.

3. Methodology

A mixed method approach to data collection was used for this Rapid Building Assessment review with data drawn from a range of sources.

3.1 Literature Review

Rapid Building Assessment documentation provided by MBIE was reviewed, including:

- MBIE Building Performance material for RBA
- Field guides
- RBA training workshop materials
- Placard definitions
- Deployment briefing materials
- Documentation of emails in preparation for Cyclone Gabrielle

3.2 Qualitative Data Collection

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were undertaken with three members of MBIE's **Building System Performance team** who provided background information on the Rapid Building Assessment system. These interviews provided useful contextual for the research team to inform the development of an analytical framework which guided the analysis of the findings and to inform the development of the discussion guide and questionnaire.

In-Depth Interviews

Twenty-two in depth individual and paired online interviews were conducted with current RBAs.

Sampling and Recruitment

MBIE provided contact details for all current RBAs. In most cases, only email addresses were available, so RBAs were contacted via this method. A brief introduction to the review and the research team was provided along with confidentiality reassurances, with RBAs asked to contact the research team if they were interested in providing their feedback via an in-depth interview.

GravitasOPG's business-to-business recruitment team followed up with all RBAs who expressed an interest in taking part in the review. Quotas were set and RBAs selected to ensure a mix of participants by:

- region
- tier
- local or MBIE deployed
- gender.

Development of Discussion Guides

Informed by the key informant interviews, the discussion guide was designed collaboratively with MBIE to ensure that the key evaluation questions were addressed, whilst also allowing for free-flow conversation among participants on points of interest related to the RBA system. A copy of the discussion guide used is provided in Appendix 10.1.

Conducting Interviews

Interviews were conducted between the 18th of September and 20th of October 2023. All were facilitated by **Gravitas’s executive research team**. **Interviews took between 45 and 80 minutes** depending on the participant’s experience doing RBA work. **With participants’ permission, all interviews were audio recorded** and transcribed so that no information was lost between the data collection and analysis stages. Table 2.1 provides a description of the participant profile.

Table 2.1: Profile of Participant RBAs

Stakeholder Group	Number of interviews
Tier	
Tier One	5
Tier Two	7
Tier Three/unknown	10
Emergency Event	
Cyclone Gabrielle	13
Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods	9
Gender	
Male	18
Female	4

3.3 Quantitative Data Collection

A survey of employers was conducted, both to quantify the extent to which experiences and perceptions expressed in the qualitative interviews were representative of the wider RBA base and also to ensure that all RBAs had an opportunity to contribute to the review. The survey questionnaire content and language were informed by the qualitative and key informant interviews, with many questions drawn directly from the discussion guide. The final content was approved by **MBIE’s** Building System Performance team. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 10.2.

The survey was conducted between 3rd and 15th of November, with two rounds of email reminders sent to non-responders over this period. An embedded link to the survey was sent to the email addresses provided in the MBIE RBA database which consisted of n=210 records. For completeness, those who had participated in the in-depth interviews were also able to take part in the survey if they wished.

Reflecting the open-ended nature of many of the questions, and also the high level of engagement from RBAs, the survey took an average of 25 minutes to complete. A total of 47 completed responses were received.

The response rate was 22%. The maximum margin of error on a sample size of n=47 (adjusted for the small population size) is $\pm 12.6\%$ at the 95% confidence interval. Given the large margin of error, the statistical results presented in this report should be considered indicative only. Table 2.2 provides a profile of survey respondents.

Table 2.2: Profile of Survey Respondents

RBA Characteristic	Number of Interviews
RBA Tier	
Tier 1	4
Tier 2	25
Tier 3	4
Unsure of tier	14
Length of Time as RBA	
Less than 12 months	16
One to two years	6
Three to five years	7
Six to ten years	9
More than ten years	8
Not sure	1
Type of Employer	
Territorial Authority	40
Private business	7
Business-As-Usual Role*	
Building inspector/Building Compliance Officer	33
Consent processing/regulatory administrator	7
Engineer	7
Design professional	3
Manager (Not specified)	2
Emergency Event Attended**	
Cyclone Gabrielle	39
Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods	24
Deployment Location	
Local area	23
Outside local area	14
Both local and elsewhere	10

* Some RBAs have multiple roles

** Some RBAs attended both events

Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis

The qualitative data collected was analysed using deductive and inductive analysis, combining thematic and content analysis. Thematic analysis identified key patterns, themes, and relationships in the data. Content analysis provided a sense of data prevalence within the patterns, themes, and relationships identified.

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and cross tabulated by key respondent characteristics including RBA tier, emergency event attended and whether local or MBIE-deployed RBA. Qualitative data and quantitative data were synthesised to inform findings and recommendations.

Limitations

The limitations of this review have been identified as follows:

- Members of the public/homeowners and occupiers whose property received a Rapid Building Assessment and/or who had interactions with RBAs were not included in this research. All information on public perspectives on the RBA process were drawn from feedback from RBAs, key informants and media sources.
- No feedback was collected from those who may have been RBAs at the time of the emergency events but no longer do this role.

4. Training

Key Highlights

- Current RBA training is perceived positively. Real-life examples, role-plays and scenario work are considered particularly valuable. The balance of theory (e.g. how the wider RBA process works) and practice (what equipment is needed, opportunity to practice using Survey123 etc.) is well received, and the lived assessment experience of facilitators enhances the credibility of the material delivered.
- In-person sessions are considered best practice, allowing the tailoring of sessions to the needs and interests of attendees, and providing an environment conducive to sharing experiences and asking questions.
- The key weakness of the current training is a lack of provision. Many RBAs were either untrained at the time of their recent deployment or training had been done too long ago to be useful. This led to inefficiencies in the deployment of staff in the field, inconsistencies in assessments and time wasted doing re-assessments, and negative impacts on assessors who were mentally unprepared for the role, particularly dealing with the public.
- Moving forward, training can be enhanced by offering more sessions, including the provision of (potentially compulsory) refresher training, broadening the scope of the training to address a wider range of hazards, greater detail on use of the placarding system, and assisting RBAs to be better aware of, and prepared for, the wellbeing challenges of their role.

To execute and fulfill the RBA role, assessors need comprehensive training to meet the standards of the competency framework. Training ensures that RBAs understand the end-to-end process and can confidently undertake building assessments during or after an emergency.

4.1 Training Delivery to Date

Among surveyed assessors, 60% reported having received MBIE-facilitated in-person training. A further 13% had received MBIE-facilitated training online (delivered via Teams). Forty percent had received RBA training provided by their employer (some in addition to the MBIE training). Four percent of assessors had received no formal RBA training.

4.2 Strengths of Current Training Provision

RBA response to the training received was predominantly positive. Being able to share real-life examples of assessments through videos and photos, and the role-playing and scenario work were considered the most valuable aspects. As well as allowing them to discuss/practice how to react in an actual event, the scenario work and role-plays were beneficial in helping RBAs identify what to expect physically, mentally, and emotionally – and to identify how they might **react in a 'live'** situation.

What I found really invaluable is the scenario-based training where we are shown different buildings and different scenarios and what placards you would affix.

It was the photos and the evidence they showed as to why it was a [particular] category building. It was the way they presented it all, and they showed you the damage and where to look and things like that. It was pretty scary to think potentially I'd be making those calls after an earthquake. It was good.

The latest [training session] I've just done has been fantastic. We were doing role-playing. You learn about different roles, logistics, the main leaders, who is in media, health, and safety. You all put on different vests and come up with scenarios. What resources have you got, how are you dealing with the media, what questions are the media asking, how are our victims doing, how are our guys in the field?

Overall, RBAs found that the materials and resources used in the training sessions were appropriate and the structure of the sessions were logical. The high-level overview of the RBA system as a whole was considered sufficient. Other strengths of the training highlighted by RBAs include:

- Training was delivered by a facilitator with a lived experience of doing rapid building assessments. This enhanced the perceived credibility of the information being delivered.
- Opportunity to practice using Survey123 (online assessment tool).
- Going through the RBA assessment guidebook together, to allow assessors to check parts of the process that they may be unsure of.
- Coverage of practical topics such as how to lead a team, dealing with the media, health & safety, and equipment required.
- Provision of an overview of the RBA system and powers under the Civil Defence and Emergency Management Act (2002)¹.

Perceptions of In-Person Training

In-person training is considered 'best practice' by all RBAs who received training this way. As Table 4.1 shows, surveyed RBAs were particularly positive about the relevance of the training to their level of experience and the training being engaging and thought-provoking. Whilst still rated positively by the majority of surveyed RBAs, perceptions were least positive for being provided with the awareness, skills and knowledge needed to deal with the mental and emotional aspects of the RBA role.

¹ [Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002 No 33 \(as at 01 June 2018\), Public Act Contents – New Zealand Legislation](#)

Table 4.1: **Surveyed RBAs' Perceptions of In-Person Training**

Aspect of face-to-face training	Share giving positive rating*	RBA comments
Relevant to level of RBA experience	93%	
Being engaging and thought-provoking	93%	
Being well-organised and easy to follow	86%	
Helping you understand the end-to-end RBA process	86%	
Providing you with the operational skills and knowledge needed to carry out rapid building assessments	79%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training only covered earthquakes, no other hazards • Not enough scenarios covered • Training needed to demonstrate how to achieve the assessment and record key information in the timeframe that is expected
Providing you with the awareness, skills and knowledge to deal effectively and safely with building owners/occupiers	75%	
Providing you with the awareness, skills and knowledge needed to deal with the mental and emotional aspects of the RBA role	71%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training needs to acknowledge that mental and emotional aspects of role can change depending on what the emergency is and how people that you visit react to you or are dealing with the situation themselves.

Base: n=28 RBAs who had received in-person training

* Rating 'good' or 'very good'

By comparison, 67% of RBAs that have used MBE's online training resource rate them positively for preparing them for the RBA role.

Strengths of in-person training identified by RBAs interviewed included:

- Sessions are less formulaic; better able to be tailored to the needs, interests and questions of the group more easily than online sessions:

Ideally [the training is best] face-to-face. You learn a lot when you're talking to people and from the questions people bring up when the tutor gets off topic than you would in a very formulated way online.

- Sessions are more interactive, with attendees more willing to share experiences, respond to questions and ask for clarification than they would be online. The ability to ask questions and seek clarification has allowed areas of inconsistency in understanding and process to be identified and addressed:

I think training is better face-to-face to get that response. If you've ever delivered training electronically you don't get any feedback especially when people switch off their camera and go and make a cup of tea or something.

- **Greater opportunity for trainers to pick up on participants' body language and nuanced reactions to materials being shown to assist in assessing level of understanding, level of engagement and level of comfort with materials being presented:**

*The way we had our session, everybody was in a big semi-circle. When [trainer] put up a picture of a scenario of a house – “What do you think this should be?”. To look around and have an open discussion with everybody and **see everybody's reactions** was really valuable. I think you would miss the inference that you can't always get via Teams. You see the little nuances and subtleties that you don't necessarily get on Teams. In-person is a better solution, and it encourages open discussion a lot easier.*

- Opportunities to meet/network with other assessors, both formally (for example, when working together on a group activity) and informally (before/after the training), to share ideas, experiences etc. These networking opportunities also assist with team integration in the field as RBAs from across regions are familiar to one another.

4.3 Training Challenges

The most frequently mentioned criticisms of the RBA training are the lack of it or that it was only delivered after deployment. More experienced assessors reported that there have been gaps in RBA training over recent years, with many having undertaken initial training more than four years ago, with no follow-up/refresher training. It was noted that in some cases, staff who had received training were no longer in their roles and that new staff undertaking rapid building assessments had not received RBA training.

*People leave. I think that's why there was an issue in Auckland. The experienced guys had retired and you just had **newbies**. If you don't have that ongoing training, you're going to be back to chaos again.*

Some RBAs noted that their organisation/team had requested training, often multiple times, however MBIE had no training capacity available.

We asked MBIE on many occasions to get training for our new staff and refreshers for existing RBA staff and nothing eventuated. It seemed that the greater time that elapsed between major events around the country, there was either no perceived need or no budget assigned by MBIE to regularly provide training opportunities for existing and new RBA staff. Very poor foresight by MBIE.

Our team leader had requested training for us but at that stage MBIE wasn't offering it and I believe there was quite an issue. I believe training was requested a number of times for us but there were no training slots available.

Some Tier 3 RBAs (assessors) explained that, prior to deployment, they had received no RBA training. In some cases, post-event training has been provided (and was well received) but these RBAs queried why it had not happened sooner and acknowledged that their decisions in the field may have been different, particularly in the first couple of days, had they been trained prior to deployment. Other assessors had still not received any RBA training at the time of this evaluation, nine months after their most recent deployment.

I have had zero training. I think they did say that there's some modules there if you want to do them online, but in my line of work I'm too busy to do that stuff and the face-to-face would be better use of my time.

RBAs were also critical of insufficient communication on upcoming training opportunities including dates etc.

Some assessors expressed frustration that MBIE had not provided sufficient RBA training opportunities prior to the weather events of 2023 but then were suspicious of the initial assessments done by the untrained RBAs. Some of these initial assessments were subsequently re-done by qualified assessors, a process that created inefficiencies due to duplication of effort and also created an unhealthy relationship of mistrust between RBAs and MBIE (and considerable confusion for homeowners). Assessors also reported that having a mix of trained and untrained assessors working together in the field created friction as teams sometimes struggled to agree on the best way to prepare for, organise and carry out assessments.

To get consistency within the team without training is hard. That's where we were stuck. We were with guys that hadn't done this before who thought they needed to do things way more thoroughly than they were expected to do.

I think there were four trained and four untrained in my team. We did find that the guys who had been trained were all orientated towards earthquakes so there was the argument that these buildings have to be yellow[-stickered] because they don't have toilet facilities but that's because we knew there was damage further down.

Other less positive aspects of both the pre- and post-emergency events RBA training identified by RBAs include:

Logistics

- Insufficient capacity within each session. In some cases, only a small number of assessors from a team were able to attend the MBIE training, even though the level of experience was the same across the team so the training would have been appropriate for all.
- The perceived cost, with frustration expressed at the belief that the training was initially free but is now charged for. (It should be noted that MBIE does not charge for RBA training. RBA mis-conceptions suggests that communications around training costs would be useful.)

Content

- Over-emphasis on earthquakes and their impact, with insufficient coverage of other natural hazards (although it is noted that this is likely to change once more materials (photos, video etc) from the recent flooding events is made available to trainers)

I think it probably is enough for [earthquakes] but there are other natural disasters out there that potentially they could have covered in another day.

The training was tailored around earthquakes even post the floods because they didn't have a chance to update their information in the course.

- Insufficient coverage of the placarding process, including what constitutes a red, a yellow and a white, and the difference between Yellow 1 and Yellow 2.

Acknowledgement

- Some assessors who completed training some time ago were not recognised as official RBAs and had not been provided with their RBA ID card. Others received an ID card but with no numbering or expiry date. RBAs without a card were not sure of their number and/or tier and were unaware of any way to check this as MBIE holds the RBA register.

We did the initial course some years ago, but we never got recognised as RBAs. So, our ID card says we did the course, but there is no numbering or date on it. We were never on the MBIE RBA system. I think because we were one of the first guys, they just forgot to register us. But haven't followed us up since and our ID cards are still the same today.

4.4 Enhancing the Training Offer

Assessors have suggested a number of improvements that are solutions to the challenges mentioned above. Assessors would like to see the following developed and/or incorporated into future training sessions:

Logistics

- MBIE to make more spaces available in their training sessions and/or provide more frequent training opportunities.
- Making RBA training (and refresher training) compulsory.

*The last time the training [opportunity] came up, **my employer at the time didn't have time for us to do it. It needs to be made very clear to the employers that this has to be done and that it can't be done quickly.***

Content

- Training tailored to natural hazards other than earthquakes, specifically tailored to flooding, or the training being more hazard-agnostic.

*The focus should be more on flooding. Flooding events seem to be much more common and require **utilisation of RBAs a lot more than an earthquake.** We've had a good number of earthquakes since Christchurch, which potentially do a lot of damage, **but we've matched that with the flooding,** and the flooding events have caused a lot more problems in terms of displacement and damage. I know that we need to be prepared for both, but given the current utilisation I would have thought that flooding would be the headline act.*

- More scenario-based work and sharing of stories from actual experiences – ideally drawing from a range of different hazards. Have RBAs who have conducted assessments during states of emergency share their stories. Include more opportunities to use Survey123 to collect and record information, and also opportunities to role-play how to deal with property owners/occupiers empathetically whilst not over-stepping the RBA remit in terms of offering advice.

More real-life events with photos showing the placards used and the reasons why these were used.

- Greater coverage of the use of the placarding system, in particular the use of the yellow placard.
- Incorporate team-cooperation or team-dynamic exercises.

*Some interpersonal skills within a team dynamic would be quite useful. One of the issues I had when I was in Hastings was that I was running a team of 6 or 8 people, and there were a number of personalities within the team. If that dynamic was talked about a bit more in the training – **you're not going to get everything you want, you are going to have to listen to your team leader, you can't go off and run things how you expect them to be run, you need to report back in at your set designated time – and I think reinforcing some of those things would have been quite useful.***

- Offer training in a range of practical skills required as part of the RBA role including basic first aid, four-wheel driving training, safety around electricity, and use of two-way radios.
- Include coverage of conflict de-escalation when dealing with the public.

Council provides the de-escalation courses, but I think you can't spend enough money on learning to communicate with people. I think that's huge. Just the basics like 'these are 10 steps I think you should do, then we send them to these people and here's the phone number'.

- Training on how to deal safely with highly emotional customers/members of the public.
- Greater coverage of wellbeing aspects of the RBA system including what to expect post-deployment, strategies for keeping in a good state of mind, how to recognise if you are not mentally well, and understanding what support is available.

Having a course on psychological self-awareness, how to de-escalate a person and to be able to do the task but also to identify self-hazard, some way of identifying and understanding one's own self safety.

- More information about how the RBA system works and links with other organisations such as Civil Defence.
- Training content to be continuously updated, drawing on experiences from most recent hazard events.

Perspectives on Refresher Training

Assessors agree that there is a strong need for RBA refresher training. Among surveyed assessors, views were mixed as to how frequent this training should be, with 40% suggesting every two years and a further 35% recommending every three years. One in five assessors believe refresher training should be done annually whilst others suggested it be done every time there is a significant change to the Building Act, statutory obligations or requirements. Some suggested that a date by which refresher training needs to be completed should be included on the RBA card as a reminder.

Every two or three years. We do our Site Safe to go onto building sites every two years so it should be pretty much the same.

Refreshers on a two-yearly basis or even an email sent to us saying please complete this refresher course and when you submit it, it registers or does whatever in the background. Then if you do, you will retain your status as an RBA.

There is a strong preference for refresher training to be provided in-person, with assessors willing to travel within their region to attend. Around half of surveyed assessors are accepting of the refresher training being facilitated online; a third are open to online self-learning options.

It was felt that the refresher training should be substantial, particularly if it is only done every two to three years. RBAs note that, if there is no emergency event in this intervening period, a lot will be forgotten – **“so we don't just want them touching on a few highlights and changes.”**

Other Supports Provided by MBIE

Additional supports suggested by assessors include:

- Improved communication from MBIE on updates and changes to any RBA-related resources. This includes any changes to RBA forms, documents, Survey123 and/or placarding process.
- Improved communications around upcoming training opportunities. These could be done via regular (monthly, bi-monthly) online catch-up meetings.

Updates and changes around anything that's happened. That could be through email, because I haven't really had anything even from emails or anything like that from MBIE around if there's any changes have been made.

- Provide opportunity for a regional/national RBA post-event debrief session. This would potentially have therapeutic benefits for RBAs by allowing them to share their experiences, whilst also providing a valuable learning opportunity for policy staff and trainers in terms of identifying areas of concern, areas of inconsistency of understanding etc.
- Provision to RBAs of pre-packed backpacks containing all equipment required for their roles.
- **Provide 'cheat sheets'** for appropriate wording and restrictions to be used on placards.

5. Conducting Rapid Building Assessments

Key Highlights

- More than a third of RBAs did not feel prepared on their first day of deployment, a lack of training and insufficient resources being key contributors.
- Daily briefings were essential to the efficiency of assessments, providing an opportunity to review tools as a team to ensure consistency of approach and placarding decision criteria, to minimise duplication of effort and to disseminate information.
- Debriefings were equally as valuable, providing opportunities for RBAs to share experiences – to check for consistency of approach and to **'download' mentally and emotionally** before returning home.
- Whilst RBAs were generally happy with co-ordination overall, for both events, considerable time and effort was wasted early on due to a lack of preparedness, including no maps being available, insufficient technology and technology malfunctions, resources being out-of-date and communication methods not being hazard-proof.
- For both the Auckland Anniversary Weekend flood and Cyclone Gabrielle, the local RBA resource was insufficient. The time delay in deciding whether building inspectors without RBA training could conduct rapid building assessments and in deploying RBAs from outside the affected region resulted in assessments taking longer to be completed and local assessors feeling overwhelmed and overworked.
- Welfare/support officers were essential to the RBA process, engaging with homeowners so RBAs could complete assessments quickly and objectively. Welfare/support officers also acted as spotters for hazards, provided administration support and information about local geography, could facilitate access to less receptive communities and provided a sounding board for assessors to de-stress.
- Interactions between local and MBIE-deployed RBAs, and between RBAs and other organisations involved, were very limited. Being physically located together would have facilitated greater interaction which may have resulted in increased sharing of information and resources, and opportunities for creativity and synergies in terms of assisting affected communities.
- The current placarding system is not considered fit-for-purpose for flooding events **as it doesn't take** account of the fact that the risk changes over time as the water recedes. A flood-specific set of decision criteria that is well communicated to both RBAs and the public, and improved design of the placards themselves, will reduce confusion for both RBAs and homeowners/occupiers.

5.1 Preparedness

Given that, at deployment, some building compliance officers and building inspectors were not aware that they were RBAs, it is not surprising that many who conducted rapid building assessments immediately after the recent weather events felt unprepared. While those who had no prior training or awareness of the RBA system were much more likely to feel unprepared, all assessors felt some level of apprehension at the start of their deployment.

Among surveyed RBAs, 63% felt prepared, including 17% who felt very prepared on the first day that they were deployed. RBAs involved in assessments post-Cyclone Gabrielle were more likely to feel prepared (68%) than RBAs working in Auckland after the floods (50% prepared).

RBA's identified a range of variables that contributed to them feeling prepared on the first day they were deployed to carry out assessments, by far the most frequently mentioned being previous experience doing RBA work.

Key contributors to feeling prepared to conduct assessments

(Listed by frequency of mention)

- Previous RBA deployment experience
- Having necessary equipment readily accessible (often personal equipment, stored at home/in private vehicle)
- Personal background in building inspection and/or compliance
- Briefing provided by local TA
- RBA training received
- Field guides reviewed
- Competent, confident team leaders
- Being paired with an experienced RBA and/or an RBA who knew the local area
- (Cyclone Gabrielle) Weather warnings allowed time to prepare – practically and mentally
- Field intelligence/information captured by drones, early reconnaissance
- Engagement of specialists/specialist resources in place e.g. geotechnical engineers
- **Having time 'on location' to coordinate teams and become familiar with team members before commencing assessments**

I felt confident having been involved in the Christchurch earthquake recovery - and the need to think and judge carefully but efficiently re placards, safety etc. The training we did some years back was good for background, and the field guides do help. Nothing replaces experience though.

Insufficient training was the key contributor to RBAs feeling unprepared on the first day of conducting assessments. Some felt unprepared because they had not received any RBA training at all or the training being provided too long ago to be useful; others noted that, whilst they had received RBA training, this had not sufficiently covered flooding scenarios and/or the use of the placarding system.

Key contributors to feeling unprepared to conduct assessments

(Listed by frequency of mention)

- Lack of training generally
- Lack of training on the use of the placarding system specifically
- Lack of training on conducting flooding assessments
- Training done too long ago to recall
- Lack of resources/equipment available, particularly maps
- Limited/no communication or Internet access in the field - which significantly limits opportunities to seek guidance and can heighten a sense of isolation/vulnerability
- Tools/resources not designed for flood damage
- Limited briefing provided (briefing staff tired)
- Unfamiliar with area being assessed
- Lack of support people to accompany assessors (especially initially)
- Poor tracking of assessments completed to avoid duplication
- Lack of communication/co-ordination with other organisations involved, especially Civil Defence
- Information overload on the first day; a lot to take in

I was not trained at that time which made the experience daunting to start with. I became more knowledgeable and confident during the process.

This was the first time I had done RBA work, and it was at least two years since my initial and only training. I could remember some but not all of it.

There was a lack of guidance for flood damage. Many of the forms and field guides were around earthquake damage. And as we were not in the main areas of Auckland or Hastings and comms and Internet access were not that great, we didn't have the advantage of speaking to others to find out what they were doing.

5.2 Notification and Deployment Process

For the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods, members of the Auckland Council building inspection team were notified earlier in the day via their team leaders of a significant weather event forecast for the region. Team members were asked to prepare and be ready to be mobilised the next morning. Not all building inspectors contacted were trained RBAs and some were unaware of the RBA role at this point.

*My team leader gave me a call and said, "**Just be aware, you're likely to be called out for it, keep your phone on, keep everything up to date, make sure yourself and your property is safe, prep a go bag and just be ready for when we get the call**". It might have been Saturday morning I think, it was about 6.30 and I got a message "**Okay, head into the office**" and I think we were all in there by about 8 o'clock, a few stragglers around 8.30 or 9.*

Some assessors outside the Auckland region were also notified to be on standby. However, due to the lateness of the State of Emergency being declared for the Auckland floods, some were not called until days after the event happened; despite being ready, others were not called at all for deployment.

We didn't know what we didn't know. We didn't even know if we were going to be deployed out of the district either. There was contact from other councils but not MBIE and I actually had my bag packed for three days but didn't go.

All assessors who had been deployed post-Cyclone Gabrielle were prepared to be deployed a day or two before the cyclone struck. It was evident that RBA support would be needed due to the severity of the weather watch.

Challenges with the Notification and Deployment Process

Challenges noted by RBAs in the notification and deployment processes include:

- Some assessors expressed frustration with the notification process, reporting that MBIE initially rushed to ensure RBAs were ready for deployment but then left them waiting for several days with no further communication. This uncertainty caused difficulty for some assessors who had put their work and personal responsibilities on hold. Those who were not ultimately deployed were particularly frustrated **at being put on 'high alert' so early on.**

When I got the first email for the Hastings deployment I responded pretty much straight away and said I needed two days' notice to get on the plane. What happened with the Hastings deployment, it was basically "Hurry up and wait." The communication is probably not that great. We got the communication "You're going to be deployed", and then there's nothing. It becomes very difficult, and you end up putting your life on hold for a couple of weeks while you wait to hear "Oh by the way you're going tomorrow" kind of thing. I think the communication could probably be improved a little bit.

To be honest, MBIE was pretty slow in deploying us in Hastings. We should have been down there a lot earlier. We didn't care what our accommodation was like. Yes, it was nice to be in a four-star motel, but I was ready to sleep in the ute if needed. Honestly, I don't care whether the accommodation is a town hall or hotel. What's more important is getting there as soon as possible.

RBAs also spoke about the poor communication regarding whether flights were being provided or RBAs needed to make their own way to the location.

Poor communication leading up to being deployed and bad decision making in organising us to get there. Originally we said we would drive in, then they said they would fly us, so I cancelled the 4x4 booking, then they found out the airport wasn't operating so we were back to driving, which we were told at the 11th hour. Also was a pain trying to claim expenses. They just said to send in receipts, which I did so. Then they rejected this and said I had to provide them with an invoice and GST number, which I don't have.

Deploy quickly. Don't have people on standby for 10 days dragging it out. And coordinate the travel more effectively. I was initially asked to drive 10 hours to get to Hastings with no notice. That should not be happening. They should be using air travel - military or small private planes. Don't rely on Air New Zealand as the only provider.

Whilst RBAs understand that dates and times for deployment are not always easy to predict, there is a need for more regular communication. Daily emails are suggested to update RBAs on conditions 'on the ground' where the hazard is located and anticipated RBA need.

What would have been nice to see is an email saying, "Hey look, we've got Gabrielle coming, it's possible we're going to deploy RBAs." As they find out information, release that. "We've had contact from the Hawke's Bay region saying there might be a need for assistance. We are currently in negotiation; we might be looking at a deployment no sooner than a week or no later than a month's time". Obviously, you're not going to be able to give the certainty of "We've just had a cyclone come through, you're going to be deployed in three weeks on the Wednesday", it's just not possible. But it is possible to give updates and try to close that in and give people a bit more certainty in terms of what they're doing and making themselves available.

- In Cyclone Gabrielle, some assessors had their own properties impacted by the floods and needed to evacuate with their families, leaving them unable to assist with assessments initially. Others reported that a lack of communications technology (no cellphone towers, no Internet access) meant it was difficult for them to receive information about the deployment. For others, damage to roading infrastructure made it difficult for them to access the meeting point.
- Some teams were left waiting several days for MBIE to confirm if non-registered RBAs could be deployed in an assessment capacity.
- The lack of RBA access to the RBA register was problematic, with team leaders noting that there is no quick way for them to identify which team members have completed RBA training and what other trained RBAs might be available in nearby regions. Team leaders also questioned how often the register is reviewed to ensure those on it are still interested and able to work as RBAs. An online tool with a search engine is suggested to make it easy to access this information.

I didn't know if I was even a registered RBA. There's no way to see if you're even on a register, if you're current because MBIE holds the register. MBIE haven't provided RBA cards to people and most people don't know their RBA number. It's quite difficult to know who's current and what tier.

5.3 Briefing and Debriefing

Briefings

A core step in managing a rapid building assessment operation is to have daily briefing sessions. Of the surveyed assessors, 72% reported that, during the time they were conducting assessments, daily briefings were conducted (this share is similar for the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle). Twenty-four percent reported receiving occasional briefings from the TA. All surveyed RBAs reported that they had received at least a briefing/induction on arrival/on the first day.

All assessors found the briefings extremely useful and felt that it was a crucial part of the RBA operation. Key benefits included:

- Opportunity to review forms, documents, field guides etc. together to ensure a shared understanding (and hopefully greater consistency of execution) and provide an opportunity to ask questions.
- Minimising duplication by reviewing maps together each day to ensure properties already assessed had been marked as such.
- Opportunity to share information/updates from other organisations involved e.g. Civil Defence, FENZ etc.

We had briefings every morning. That annoyed some people but it's kind of necessary because you need to know what's going on and you need to know that teams aren't crossing over and that areas aren't being redone. It's an important part of that process.

RBAs generally spoke positively about the quality of the briefings, with some specifically noting that they became more informative and useful as time went on.

Our building consent manager would take it and I thought he was very good. It was pretty well run, and he'd go through different areas, what he'd heard through the comms centre and stuff like that. I thought they were well organised.

However, a small number of RBAs who had been deployed to a region days or weeks after assessments had begun noted that staff exhaustion had resulted in their induction briefing session being very limited/too brief and not always easy to follow.

Debriefings

Many assessors had a debriefing or **'team catch up'** at the end of the day. While de-briefs were typically less formal than morning briefings, most RBAs considered these sessions to be extremely valuable in a number of ways:

- To check all team members had returned from the field at the end of the day.
- To identify any potential health and safety issues observed – and if necessary, report these to the relevant organisation.
- To receive an update on issues that had occurred during the day.
- Opportunity to re-stock equipment required.

- To share experiences and examples of assessments done to help give assessors a sense to whether what they were doing was correct, and to ensure assessment consistency across the team.
- To **'download'** their experiences from the day. **Debriefing supported assessors' wellbeing, some** noting that it helped in **"not taking the day's work to bed."**

There was an opportunity for people to share lessons learned from the day, which was good. They were really, really good at making sure we all ended up where we needed to end up. Health and safety was front-of-mind all the time and we had a framework for check-ins during the day as well. I missed one of my check-ins and they rang me straight away and said, "Why haven't you checked in?" The debriefs were key. It was good to get everyone back on the same page, good to share learnings to take into the next day, and just from a morale perspective it was good to get everyone together as well.

*"What mental challenges did you go through? What mental blocks did you find today?" As long as the questions gets asked, it gives the person a chance to answer. If the **question's not asked, I'm not going to tell you. Some people won't just come out and say, "I'm not okay."** They need to be probed or hear someone **else say they're not okay first.***

At the start of the Auckland Anniversary Weekend flood assessments, RBAs were required to come back to a central meeting point multiple times during the day. Whilst acknowledging the importance of checking in for health and safety reasons, it was felt that these check-ins could have been done via phone and the travel time used to do more assessments. **Eventually these 'middle of the day' check-ins** were stopped, replaced with a check in and debrief at the end of the day.

Some assessors who were in the field for more than a week felt that debriefs became shorter and shorter as both team leaders and assessors became more exhausted.

Those debriefings became pretty much like "How was everyone's day? Crap? Oh, okay." Everyone was so absolutely exhausted that they just wanted to go and have a beer.

Some RBAs doing assessments post-Cyclone Gabrielle suggested that team debriefings may have been more worthwhile rather than trying to meet as a large group. This would have meant that not all RBAs had to wait around if a couple of RBAs were delayed coming back, and RBAs may have felt more comfortable sharing in a smaller group. Looking back, some team leaders also felt that there would be value in including counsellors in the debriefing sessions – to normalise them among the team so RBAs felt more comfortable approaching them and to allow them to identify anyone they felt may need support.

5.4 Organisation/Coordination

Among surveyed RBAs, two-thirds (67%) were positive about the overall co-ordination of the RBA team, including the coordination of local and MBIE-deployed assessors. However, a number of examples of inefficient co-ordination were identified.

- RBAs commented that there was a lot of waiting around/time wasting on the first and second days of deployment. Some assessors felt that this was due to the TA being unprepared.

*We were told to meet [at the council building] at 7.30am and we sat there until 10.30 or 11am waiting, waiting, waiting. No-one had a plan and people were trying to coordinate. The first person we dealt with palmed us onto somebody else. He came in and said, “Right I need a logistics guy to organise it for your team”. Some guy volunteered and then he had to start making up stuff on the spot. There was a lot of waiting. “Where are we going? What are we doing? Who is being teamed up **with who?**”. There was no structure regarding pairing us up.*

- No maps available. For the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods, 50 to 60 people are reported to have turned up to the briefing on the first day but no-one could be deployed as there were no maps available. Team leaders resorted to screenshotting and printing off maps online then physically cutting the map into zones to then divide among teams.

Auckland Council basically had to do a practical approach by printing out about 50 pages, laying them on the floor of the office, sticking them together with sellotape then divvying up the areas. I admire them for making something work instead of just running away but going forward, can we do better? Hell yeah.

*The organising of the maps, that was probably maybe two or three **hours**. **Guillotine it, and then we’d have overlaps, and what street is this one?** Some people would pick up the wrong pile of maps then **you’d hear “Where is this? Who knows this address?”** That cost us so much time.*

*It was very difficult to get an idea of the scale of the area to investigate. Google Maps is not a reliable tool – **and there wasn’t a single map up** on the wall in the office,*

- Lack of effective targeting of the RBA resource. RBAs had been deployed to areas that, whilst noted on maps as being prone to flooding, did not require any assessments to be done, whilst other areas where there was much greater need, were initially neglected. In some cases, requests for assistance that were made by the public to the TA via the contact centre were not being passed through to the RBA team, and hazards identified by other council departments were not being communicated to RBAs.

I went to an apartment building in a lower socioeconomic area. We didn't get there until Monday. Outwardly the building was fine. I went into the reception and couldn't see any issues. But a lady saw me in my high vis vest and said "Don't move. Don't go anywhere". Then the building manager came and said, "Look at this." The whole basement had been flooded up to 1.6 or 1.7 metres deep and all those apartments were uninhabitable. They had tried to accommodate as many people as possible in the upper apartments but there were a lot of people unhomed. Welfare needed to have been there a lot earlier, but we just didn't know about it. Apparently, they reported it early but with the volume of calls coming through, it obviously got missed.

That information coming through was fragmented and broken. For example, the operations team knew about a slip and the hazard, but they may have put that to roading and parks and forgotten about any buildings that were in there. We were catching up with jobs two weeks after the event.

RBAs noted that homeowners were useful sources of information as to where the worst impacts of the floods were.

- Local RBAs being deployed to do assessments a long way from their homes, resulting in excessive time be spent travelling. RBAs were particularly frustrated seeing other teams passing them in the opposite direction, **heading out to do assessment in the RBA's** own neighbourhood. These inefficiencies were compounded in the Hastings area where many bridges were inaccessible, resulting in exceedingly long trips to reach assigned assessment areas.

Team Coordination

Coordination between team leaders, assessors and welfare support worked relatively well in the field, some RBAs commenting that the support from their team was invaluable.

I'm just grateful we've got such a lovely team, and the builders, they all came in and helped. Can't speak highly enough of that. We definitely had the support we needed.

The RBA tier system should have assisted with identifying team leaders and helped with team organisation. However, many RBAs were unaware what tier they were. In some cases, RBAs questioned the choice of team leaders. In the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods, it was reported that some team leaders were self-nominated; post Cyclone Gabrielle it was perceived that some leadership/management appointments were based on seniority/age rather than leadership ability and experience. These RBAs attributed some of the assessment duplication and insufficient resourcing of the role to team leaders not having the necessary skill set for the role:

We had one set of maps for eight people. People were going to the same places, and obviously fence lines and landmarks were gone so the wrong houses were getting stickered. One team would go down one street and work their way up but there were cross-overs everywhere. A couple of the team leaders were not the best to lead the groups. It just felt like everybody was trying to do everything and nobody knew what anybody was doing.

Coordination Between Local and Deployed Assessors

In the case of Cyclone Gabrielle assessments in Hastings, RBAs deployed from outside the region were kept separate from the local RBAs, including being briefed by the MBIE team rather than local controllers and being assigned to a separate area of the region. As a result, they were unable to get a holistic view of the entire operation, including the placard decision criteria so it was almost impossible to ensure consistency with the work being done by local assessors. MBIE-deployed RBAs were concerned that the inconsistencies would create extra work, with properties needing to be revisited. These RBAs noted that being kept physically separate from other organisations working in the area resulted in a lack of access to information critical to doing the RBA role – such as road closures and weather reports.

*I was so mad at the end of that first day I nearly flipped out, I was so frustrated at the lack of organisation and the fact that there were **these two entities trying to do two things but it was like ‘that guy’s from MBIE’ and normal council staff**. Everyone rushed off and did their own thing in their own way rather than taking a unified approach.*

***We weren’t with** the Civil Defence Emergency Centre. We were in a totally different building. So, there was a real lack of communication. **Were roads open? We were finding places that we couldn’t get to.** And also the weather as it was constantly changing. Because we **were so far removed, we weren’t really privy to any of that information.** We would have to source that information out rather than it being readily available. We were kept very separate from the Hawke’s Bay people.*

Coordination with Other Organisations

Whilst the suddenness of both the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle were acknowledged, some RBAs were critical of the co-ordination between the RBA team and other organisations involved such as FENZ, Civil Defence, TAs and welfare organisations, with less than half of surveyed RBAs rating this aspect positively (48%). (Ratings are similar for the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle). RBAs note that the RBA team was kept very separate from Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) and other teams with very little communication between the two. Some felt that this may have been because CDEM **didn’t understand the role of RBAs in an emergency event or didn’t consider** their role important. This lack of interaction created confusion around roles and responsibilities, which potentially resulted in areas of duplication – and other areas potentially being missed altogether. The lack of communication and coordination with other organisations may have also resulted in missed synergy opportunities such as being able to provide greater welfare support for building owners/occupiers and being able to access necessary resources such as quality mapping.

In contrast, RBAs were very complementary about the welfare staff provided by the TA. Whilst it was noted that, **for many of these staff, providing welfare support was not ‘business as usual’ for them**, it was acknowledged that they played an essential role in supporting (and distracting) building owners, allowing the RBAs to carry out their role, and also providing administrative support to the RBA, both roles enhancing the efficiency of the assessment process.

5.5 Resourcing, Tools

MBIE assessors deployed from other regions typically brought with them as many resources as they could. This included charging batteries, tablets, and documents i.e., placarding, forms, and information brochures. MBIE assessors noticed the disparities in preparedness of resources between the local TA and themselves.

Equipment

Three quarters of surveyed RBAs (74%) rated the provision of the equipment needed to do rapid building assessments positively, with those deployed on the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods giving a similar rating to those working on the Cyclone Gabrielle assessments. In part as a result of the recent COVID pandemic, resources such as PPE gear, sanitary items, food, raincoats, gumboots, high visibility vests and other material items were generally reported to be widely available. Many RBAs reported having their own personal go-bag packed and ready for deployment.

Areas some RBAs felt were undersupplied included:

- Up-to-date placards
- Four-wheel drive vehicles. (Concern is raised about councils moving to fleets of electric vehicles – which are much less suitable to rough terrain such as water and silt, and having limited use during power outages)
- Overpants
- Hazard tape
- Power packs and cords
- Walking poles (to aid walking on rough terrain and also to measure the depth of silt and mud)
- Locator beacons
- Mini lasers for measuring the depth of the silt.

Not having the right vehicle for the right areas was not good. Most of the building inspection cars were adequate for the flat areas not too severely affected. The electric or hybrid cars were left behind as electronics obviously don't like water. For the other areas the inspection vehicles did not cut the mustard. Even the two-wheel drive utes were a waste of time and put the driver and welfare officer at risk, getting stuck and losing traction when going up a moderate incline to access rural properties.

*That [the emergency pack] was untouched for six years. So, the placards were all old. We chucked the whole lot out. The legislation all changed so all the old placards were rubbish. Then we found on **MBIE's website, here's the new stickering, here's the new forms. And we started printing them out, making packs up.***

Technology

Just over half of surveyed RBAs (57%) rated the provision of the technology needed to do their job positively, with those deployed on the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods giving a similar rating to those working on the Cyclone Gabrielle assessments.

Key areas of dissatisfaction in relation to technology included:

- Lack of communication ability in the field due to reliance on mobile phones for person-to-person communication, and a lack of Internet access. Assessors deployed in the Wairoa/Hawke's Bay area had no tablets or cell phone coverage. This also meant that Survey123 and GPS were inaccessible. RBAs often had to note where cellphone coverage was available and return back to these areas to send and receive information throughout the day – ***“At times we were driving for an hour to get suitable comms.”***

We didn't expect to lose all communication. The RBA system that's in place is great but being in Wairoa there are areas that we can't upload the RBA system because it just doesn't read the location. We have black spots. You have to come down out of the hills to work the system.

- RBAs were expected to use personal phones in wet and silty environments.
- Phone batteries drained quickly due to constantly trying to find GPs signals. Some RBAs reported having two phones to ensure they **could complete their day's work** before batteries went flat.
- Insufficient tablets available, requiring paper forms to be used.
- Lack of drones that could be used to do an initial reconnaissance of the affected area to safely assess the severity of the damage. Drones would have been particularly useful in assessing damage after the Muriwai/Piha slips. (It needs to be noted however, that drones can cause considerably anxiety for homeowners/occupiers if they believe they are being misused by those scouting for properties to loot. Communication to the public around the use of drones is strongly recommended.)

Survey123

Survey123 is an app used by RBAs to collect information during their assessment with this data then downloaded to a central database. RBAs agreed that the app offers a range of benefits over paper forms including speed of completion, automatic uploads to a central database, more weather-proof and the ability to quickly identify any properties missed as maps are populated with pins once assessments are completed.

However, a number of challenges accessing and using the app were reported by RBAs:

- RBAs involved with the Auckland Anniversary Weekend **floods couldn't** log into the app for up to three days, resulting in paper copies of the assessment form needing to be printed, distributed and used. This delayed assessments getting underway and also increased the length of the workday for RBAs as all paper assessments had to be manually scanned into the system at the end of each day. It was noted that the same difficulties with downloading and logging into the app had occurred after a weather event in 2021. RBAs involved in this event were frustrated that nothing had been learned from this previous event – ***“It's not like they didn't know!”***

[Using paper copies] slowed everything down. At the end of each day I'd have to come in, scan the paper in, attach the photos, send them off. All of that had to be done after you had finished out in the field. It was an extra hour each day after ten hours out in the field.

- The app was not always able to run due to a lack of Internet coverage and power outages.

Connectivity in our area was poor. I think there were 70 cell phone towers out of use, battery ran down, we had no power. No communication anywhere, so we couldn't send things through the app.

- In rural areas, Internet 'black spots' meant that RBAs could not always upload photos to the cloud.
- Lags in the system/system updating too slowly, which resulted in the same properties being visited/assessed multiple times:

We'd get a message – "Go to this property. It's been identified by Civil Defence or FENZ". But we'd already been to that property. Or you would arrive at that property and see it already had a placard. It just hadn't come off the list yet.

- Perception that too much unnecessary information is required to be collected, resulting in RBAs spending longer on each assessment than they need to.

No, the app is not user friendly. I've got an IT background and I didn't find it easy. It needs to be simplified on a dramatic scale. You could cut those question boxes down by 75% and still get the gist of what you need for an RBA. Rapid building assessment, rapid being the operative word.

There were some aspects of it that were a little bit time-consuming. It could have been simplified where you ask a question and if you went "Yes" then it would give you a drop-down box, then you had to go no, no, no, no, to move on to the next bit. "Has the sewage been affected?" "No" so you don't need to go through the rest. You had to fill every single box in.

- Inclusion of questions which RBAs felt showed a lack of understanding of the hazard – for example, 'What is the level of the flood' when RBAs were typically doing assessments after the water had receded.
- Multiple properties cannot be entered as having the same address.
- While the option of copying and pasting notes from one property to another is well received, the current function copies over the property address as well.

Suggested enhancements to Survey123 include:

- Drop-down menu at the start to allow users to select the hazard and also whether the affected property is residential or commercial – so subsequent questions are more tailored.
- GPS functionality so all the address details of the property are automatically populated.
- Allow more photos to be uploaded, at both the start and end of the assessment, but without drawing too much battery power.
- Have relevant fields auto-populate to reduce the amount of data entry.
- Reduce the amount of information that is collected/review the app to ensure all information being collected is relevant and useful. Consider making some questions optional so they can be skipped if the RBA does not feel they are relevant, or including 'not applicable' options:

The RBA system should not all have to be filled in. If you've got a wildfire and it says your silt level, well there is no silt level. So instead of having to fill it in you could just go Not Applicable, Not Applicable, instead of having silt levels where you're putting in zero, zero, zero.

Due to the challenges of accessing and using the app, RBAs believe that there should always be a good supply of paper assessment forms available as backup.

Staff Resource

In both the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle, the local staff resource has been insufficient and deployment of RBAs from outside the region had been too slow. This resulted in some properties not being assessed for several days. RBAs expressed concerns about this, given that the key purpose of rapid building assessments is to ensure public safety.

The issue was that we were deployed about 10 days after the event. We were meeting with people that had not seen any other officials in those 10 days. They were going through their buildings trying to salvage what they had, but it was practically an insult to be there so late when council hadn't been through doing welfare checks in the days prior.

More help needs to be given to TAs to help them identify when they need to ask for help. It's not after their in-house team are exhausted, and also coping with their own family issues.

Insufficient assessor resource also resulted in RBAs having to work long hours and for several consecutive days to get through the work required. This negatively impacted on their physical and mental health.

We could have done with more RBAs especially because everyone worked through the long weekend then the following long weekend as well. We had guys working 10 hours every day for 14 days straight. I imagine they started getting burn out. There were some tired guys and girls by the time we got reinforcements from down country.

Full deployment of staff was delayed by MBIE indecision as to whether non-RBA trained building inspectors could work as RBAs. As a result of this indecision a potential workforce were assigned to more menial roles such as drivers and fewer assessments were completed.

*We were going to go out the next day and do inspections but when **they found out that we hadn't had the training they weren't going to let us go out.** Instead, they sent us out in cars with other RBAs and a welfare officer – so there was going to be four people in the car. To me that was mind-blowing. If I had been affected by flooding and four people had got out of the car at my gate I would have been like **“What the hell's going on?!”** Four people just standing around while there are so many other homeowners waiting to be seen. **You're got people out there absolutely hurting and you're going to have four people turn up? I don't think that would have done anything for our public image.** That really annoyed me **so I said I wasn't going to do that.***

However, RBAs were appreciative of the deployment of specialists, noting that their presence had a calming influence on RBA teams by providing an easily accessible source of information and technical advice.

*Everybody's got different opinions and some of us had been personally affected so everybody wanted to get out and start helping people. But they made us aware **that you've got to cool your boots, there's processes to go through**, which can be frustrating but are necessary. It was good having those experienced people here. They knew what they were doing and you could go to them for advice.*

Homeowner Welfare Support

Across all weather events, RBAs noted an insufficient level of welfare support for homeowners./occupiers. Whilst ideally a trained welfare officer would accompany teams doing the assessments, in most cases there was no resource available to do this so TA compliance staff and TA staff from other customer-facing roles (e.g., librarians) accompanied RBAs and provided information to building owners/occupiers as to how to make contact with welfare services.

5.6 Support, Health and Safety

Support

Almost all surveyed RBAs rated the management and support provided by their immediate manager positively (91%).

The team leader was very good. Team leaders had us in groups, made sure we all kept in contact in the area we were working. When we finished the team leader did a follow up to see how we were.

RBAs were also positive about the management and support they received from the TA, 78% giving a rating of good or very good. Insufficient and/or inappropriate provision of resources that RBAs felt were necessary to do their job was cited as the key area of weaknesses.

In contrast, RBAs were less positive about the management and support from MBIE, less than half (41%) describing this support as good/very good. **Only 17% describe MBIE's support during the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods positively**, with RBAs unable to recall MBIE talking to them during the assessment period or taking the lead on any issue.

RBAs were also critical of the inability to access training for new staff and/or when changes are made to the relevant Acts so that they were prepared for the weather events, and also the fact that MBIE staff remained in Wellington during the weather events rather than coming to observe/manage activities on the ground.

Health and Safety and Meeting Personal Needs

Three quarters of surveyed RBAs (72%) felt that they had systems and support networks in place to do their job safely. Those deployed for Cyclone Gabrielle felt slightly more positively (74%) than those working on the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods (67%).

A lack of reliable communication was the main contributor to feeling unsafe during the assessments, particularly when RBAs were working alone (as was the case in Hastings), these RBAs expressed concerns about their own personal safety but also their inability to get help for someone they may come across that needed assistance.

Similarly, three-quarters of RBAs agreed that their personal needs were met when working in the field (in terms of the provision of food, accommodation etc.). Those deployed for the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods were slightly more positive about their personal needs being met (83%) than those deployed during Cyclone Gabrielle (76%). Dissatisfaction was most typically attributed to the provision of lunches – either not being provided in the first couple of days of work in the field or initially being provided at a central location which required RBAs to travel considerable distances in and out to collect them, resulting in a loss of assessment time.

Suggestions for improved support for RBAs including in relation to health and safety include:

- Provide opportunities for basic first aid training for all RBAs.
- Provide opportunities for four-wheel drive training
- Availability of shortwave radio, which can be used when there is no cellular access – and the provision of training in how to use these.

5.7 Working In The Field

The pervading narrative heard among assessors was that *'no training can fully prepare you until you are experiencing the real thing, boots on ground.'*

I think anyone's first deployment is going to be a bit of a shock to the system, and all the briefing in the world isn't going to prepare you for the first time you see some of these events and how they've impacted people.

There's nothing in the training that prepares you for walking in knee-deep silt and getting stuck so you can't physically move. There's no real preparedness for things like that.

Positive Aspects of the Actual Assessment Process

RBAs noted that working in teams was extremely beneficial, for a range of reasons:

- Having another person available to engage/distract building owners allowed RBAs to complete assessments quickly and objectively (**i.e. without being influenced by hearing the homeowner's story**).
- Having someone else driving the vehicle gave RBAs more opportunity to observe the area under assessment.
- Where **hazards were still present, support staff acted as 'spotters' to alert** RBAs to potential risks.
- Support staff also provided invaluable administrative support on site, including assisting with recording data in Survey123.
- Assessors deployed to regions outside of their own found it invaluable to pair up with local staff who were familiar with the local geography.

- Also valuable were local staff who had a good rapport with their local communities (particularly important in rural areas and communities more suspicious of authority).
- Having someone to talk to throughout the day was important for RBA mental wellbeing.

*We had people from animal management, licensing paired up with an [RBA] who knew exactly what to do. They were like a support person. **When you're out doing the assessment, they would be holding the tablet, holding the end of the tape where they can.***

*For an owner who has just had silt through their property and belongings, there was no power, no cellular coverage, nothing for days and they are at their wits ends, you are the first authority person they have seen. That interaction that goes on while assessing can be VERY intense, but in the meantime, you are trying to focus on recording the information on an app **and you're tired ...** Having someone else who can talk to that homeowner is so important.*

*The support people were absolutely invaluable. They basically provide a frontline defence for you. **They'll go and deal with the person and show empathy and sympathy and take that person over to the side and kind of neutralise them while you get the job done and move on. Without them you'd just get bogged down. And your general BCO has been beaten and bashed by so many applicants that they're not the greatest at showing sympathy and empathy, we're not the right person to engage with people. So these support people are invaluable; they're a must.***

Other positive aspects of the assessment process identified by RBAs included:

- The speed at which assessments were able to be completed. On average, assessors were able to conduct assessments within 20-30 minutes.
- The privilege to be involved and help the community. Whilst finding the assessment work physically and mentally demanding, RBAs drew considerable satisfaction from being able to make a positive contribution to affected communities.

*Overall for me the experience was a really positive one. I felt really privileged to be involved. I came away with a really positive experience. It was horrible for everyone to experience especially those who were impacted, **so I don't want to make light of it** but the experience was positive for me.*

*This is a role I do enjoy doing. Although it can be stressful, it is great to help out people where you can. **I'm very proud to be part of this great [work].***

Challenging Aspects of the Assessment Process

Challenges identified by RBAs included:

- In contrast to structural events such as earthquakes, RBAs working on flood-related events reported difficulties identifying the extent of the area that had been affected as flood waters had often receded by the time the assessments took place. Therefore, assessors had to rely on debris lines on houses.

- There were frequent duplications of assessments, in Auckland in particular. This appears to have occurred due either to a lag in the system that recorded assessed properties or delays in entering assessments undertaken on paper. RBAs found this duplication extremely frustrating and wasteful in terms of resources:

You'd turn up to do a rapid building assessment of a place and hold on, three other people have been here in the last two days. We're going over the same thing. You get frustrated at not being able to be efficient – and you looked like an idiot to the homeowner. You could see it on the news, we've got hundreds if not thousands of places that need to be checked and looked at and yet we've got one house that doesn't need to be checked, being checked by four different teams because we've got overlaps.

*The system would identify the position of what needed to be inspected then you would do the RBA and send it through. It should change colour on the system to show that it had been inspected but there was a lag. **It wasn't working properly so** the property was being assessed again and again, which is just a waste of time.*

- Communication between RBA teams in the Hawke's Bay region was challenging due to the lack of internet access and mobile phone coverage due to power outages and cellphone towers being damaged. Therefore, check-ins needed to be in-person, resulting in significant time being spent driving to and from check-in points each day.
- Some properties, especially in rural and hilly areas, were very challenging to access, often requiring long walks and/or steep climbs. Even RBAs who considered themselves to be very fit found accessing properties physically challenging – and exhausting by the end of the day – *“I think I walked 45 km in two days!”*

5.8 RBA Perspectives on the Placarding System

Among surveyed RBAs, less than half (41%) gave a positive rating for the placarding system being fit-for-purpose for flooding events; a third (33%) gave a negative rating. Those deployed during the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods were more positive about the placarding system (58%) than those conducting assessments post-Cyclone Gabrielle (35%).

A flooding event is different from an earthquake in that the level of risk changes over time. While a house that is inundated with flood water represents a severe risk **and so should be 'red-stickered'**, RBAs noted that, once the water subsides, the risk may diminish, and so a different placard may be more appropriate. RBAs conducting assessments after the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods reflected that they initially went in “too heavy”, issuing red placards because power points had been inundated with water. In response, extensive and sometimes heated feedback was received from owners and/or occupiers where buildings had received a red placard. RBAs noted that once the water subsided and an electrician could re-certify the electrical system, the risk diminished and, therefore, a yellow sticker became more appropriate. Visiting properties multiple times to reassess and re-placard was inefficient and also created considerable confusion for homeowners/occupiers.

That was one shortcoming we had on the first day we went out. We were briefed that, if we encountered a property that the person could not live in, it was a red placard, then later we had to go and downgrade those to a yellow. The threshold is safety – to say someone can't live in their house, it has to be unsafe. But things can change from one day to the next or from one week to the next so we had to go out and reassess properties. It can get quite confusing for the occupant.

A range of criticisms of the placarding system are cited:

Physical

- Placards can be hard to see and easily removed.
- Silt and rain make placards wet and difficult to use.

Understanding

- When a yellow placard is used it is not clear which parts of the building are safe and which parts are unsafe, and whether it is possible to enter the building to collect belongings, remediate and clean etc.
- Some RBAs were not clear on the distinction between Yellow 1 and Yellow 2 and when each should be applied.
- Limited explanations provided on the placards led to homeowner/occupier uncertainty around what was wrong with the house, what needed to be done and whose role/responsibility it was to undertake any work required. It was also not clear how homeowners/occupiers should find this information and from whom RBAs noted that this uncertainty was compounded by the first point of contact at call centres also lacking transparent and detailed information to be able to provide advice.

System

- A lack of consistency in the use of placards was observed, some RBAs describing these inconsistencies as “**massive**”:
 - For the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods, all three placards were used; in Hastings it was reported that only red and yellow placards were used in the post Cyclone Gabrielle assessments. Similarly, slightly different criteria for each placard were used Across the two emergency events.
 - The Auckland Anniversary Weekend **floods occurred over a long weekend with much of the city's** temporary accommodation occupied by visitors. Welfare stations set up at schools and community halls filled up quickly. RBAs became aware (through the media) that when they were red-placarding a property and telling the occupants that they needed to leave, increasingly occupants had nowhere to go. RBAs reported that, despite the placarding system being about ensuring public safety, the availability of alternative accommodation influenced their decisions, with red placards increasingly less likely to be used as alternative accommodation options were exhausted.
 - In the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods, because there was no criteria around electrical safety, a decision was made that, if water had been higher than power outlets, the building was unsafe unless it had been assessed as safe by an electrician. However, there was no system in place for electricians to signal that they had inspected the power outlets and deemed the building safe. Instead, RBAs had to rely on what homeowners and building managers told them **regarding electricians having visited, some of which RBAs knew wasn't true.** (It was

recommended that there be a form or certificate that the electrician leaves at the property to confirm that it has been assessed as safe.)

- RBA empathy created considerable inconsistencies – for example, some RBAs would initially yellow-sticker a severely damaged property to allow the occupants more time to remove their possessions. Those who observed this practice noted that, not only was this potentially putting **people's lives at risk but** it created considerable confusion, and in some cases anger, among homeowners/occupiers when the property was re-assessed, and the placard upgraded to red:

*There was too much variation because people were pulling on the **RBA's heartstrings**. It was really disheartening having to go back and change the sticker.*

RBAs note that this inconsistency will create issues at subsequent emergency events as RBAs arrive with different understandings of the placarding decision criteria they should be using. Inconsistencies also mean that time is often spent (wasted) at the start of the deployment having teams assessing the same properties **so they can 'calibrate' their assessments to check** they are consistent.

*In Hastings we got a briefing about what criteria would apply, whereas up in Gisborne there was a slightly different criteria in terms of that placarding. So, if I get sent to an event in Taupo for example, **it's going to be difficult for me to hit the ground running given I've had exposure to different criteria which have resulted in different placard outcomes. Different assessors will all bring different baggage, meaning you'll have different outcomes unless the controller takes time at each event to unpack that baggage and set the new criteria. I think it's a reasonable expectation to be more consistent than we currently are.***

- The value of the placards was questioned by some RBAs who noted that people were already doing what RBAs were asking them to (e.g. leave the property) so placarding their house seemed pointless. In some cases, insurance companies were already involved and building owners were following their advice. Some felt that the placarding system seems more like a data collection exercise for MBIE rather than providing any real support to the affected community.
- RBAs who had issued the same coloured placard to multiple buildings in the same area questioned whether the process could be made considerably more efficient by assessing damage at a neighbourhood/street level rather than having to visit each property. Some RBAs suggest that **'white stickering' the first property in the street** and having it notified that all other properties are part of this sticker would lead to much more efficient use of RBA time.
- Where yellow placards are issued, RBAs are not aware of any controls or checks in place to ensure occupiers are only using the parts of the building as specified on the placard. RBAs questioned whose responsibility it would be if the restrictions specified by the placard were not observed and someone was harmed as a result.
- After three days of using them, some RBAs were informed that they had been using out-of-date versions of the placards.

RBAs also raised safety concerns about the requirement for them to sign the placards with the potential to be identified by the homeowner/occupier. This was particularly a concern for RBAs conducting assessments

in their own local community. (Whilst the current placards require the RBA number to be entered rather than a name, some RBAs were unsure of their number so were forced to identify themselves by their signature):

I've got a very uncommon name. I'll come up on Google. People were sending me photos of my name in placards on their relative's house – "Is this you?" Whenever anything about the cyclone came on the news, I would run to the TV to make sure they weren't showing any of the red stickers because I didn't want my name showing. There are so many nasty people out there. You're just a target.

RBAs reported addressing this concern by not putting their name on the placard or using an illegible signature or using a different signature to what they use elsewhere.

5.9 Reassessment and Follow-up Process

Reassessments occur after the initial placarding phase. Once appropriate work has been undertaken to remedy safety issues and the homeowner has the required evidence to lift a placard, it is their responsibility to contact the local TA, who then will reassess the placard status. In instances where there has been significant damage, assessments may take some time to conduct, however TAs prioritise the reassessment of red placards. The difficulty for homeowners/occupiers while being reassessed is to understand that a placard may not be removed altogether. Instead, a reassessment may involve a downgrading of the placard.

In Wairoa, the lack of trained assessors initially undertaking assessments meant that MBIE assessors who were deployed into the area needed to reassess all buildings that were initially placarded by the local assessors.

*All of the placards they put up we had to re-assess that and make the right call, with the same people who had put the placards up. They still at that stage **hadn't** been trained. We did change a lot of the placards. They thought some things were worse than they really were, and they thought some things were better than they really were. Some of the reds should have been yellow and some of the whites should have been yellow as well.*

RBAs felt there needs to be more clarity around the process of "rechecks", including how it should be done and how the change in placard should be documented.

6. Wellbeing

Key Highlights

- Two-thirds of surveyed RBAs (68%) reported negative mental and emotional impacts as a result of doing rapid building assessments; 36% reported negative physical impacts.
- The need for quick assessments to ensure public safety, the initial shortage of RBAs, technology **challenges and RBAs' strong sense of obligation** to the public resulted in most working long (10 hours+) days consecutively. Whilst supports to assist with **RBAs' mental and emotional wellbeing** during deployment were appreciated, the pervading culture was not to make use of these.
- Most RBAs had little or no down time between RBA work and business-as-usual, either because no leave was offered (especially to those deployed outside their region) or because of an obligation they felt to move the backlog of work in their substantive roles. However, RBAs were tired, had low morale and were typically less productive on returning to work and workloads often had to be reduced to accommodate this. RBAs call for more down time between RBA deployment and returning to work.
- Whilst post-assessment support was offered, uptake was low as RBAs perceived EAP service providers lacked a sufficient understanding/appreciation of the RBA experience to offer meaningful support.
- More debriefing opportunities throughout the month post assessment, via a range of channels and with a range of organisations, would be welcomed.

6.1 In The Field

The need to get rapid building assessments done as quickly as possible, combined with a shortage of RBAs, particularly initially (see Section 5.5) resulted in RBAs working long days (10 hours or more) consecutively with few breaks. Among surveyed RBAs, 75% reported having spent at least five days doing assessments. More than half (53%) carried out assessments for more than a week; 11% worked for 15 days or more. Many RBAs reported feeling a strong sense of obligation to affected homeowners/occupiers, which is why they were prepared to work such consistently long days without a break:

*We were doing 10-hour days. You just get stuck in an area. **You've got people coming onto the street grabbing you as you're doing the assessments.** You are conscious that you can go home to your nice warm bed whereas these people have lost everything. You feel compelled to do extra.*

Some RBAs, particularly those deployed outside their home region, reported that, to avoid a backlog when they returned, they also continued their business-as-usual work in a limited capacity each evening – further extending the length of their workday.

One RBA noted that they had been given a '**stand down day**' but questioned the value of this noting that all local RBAs used this day to help those affected by the floods in other ways, rather than taking a break.

RBAAs were generally positive (67% giving a rating of *good* or *very good*) about the support provided to them to assist with their mental and emotional wellbeing during the time they were deployed; only one RBA gave a negative rating. RBAAs were made aware (typically at briefings at the start of the day and debriefings at the end) that counselling support was available to them while they were working in the field should they need it. However, very few RBAAs interviewed had utilised this support. Whilst some admitted that, in hindsight, they may have benefitted from speaking to someone trained to support people working in challenging roles, the pervading culture didn't encourage RBAAs to use this service:

I did notice quite a few inspectors were stressed at the end of the day. Dealing with upset customers does get to you. We did have people there, counsellors, but we didn't utilise them as much as we should have. Men don't tend to ask for help. It's a stigma. "Just have a teaspoon of cement and harden up."

Often, by the end of the day, RBAAs were exhausted and felt that they didn't want to talk anymore – including to a support person – *"I'd go home and lie down and that's me for the day."* Stress and exhaustion were compounded for RBAAs who had been personally affected by the floods and had to return to damaged homes.

Team leaders were aware of the physical and mental toll of doing rapid building assessment and where these went on for multiple weeks, local RBAAs were sometimes given the opportunity to swap between assessments and business as usual work.

6.2 Post Assessments and Employer Support

Two-thirds of surveyed RBAAs (68%) reported negative mental and emotional impacts as a result of doing rapid building assessments – this share was similar across weather events and by tier of RBA.

It wasn't until I got back home to [region] and everything was quiet. I think it was the first night - I was lying there in bed with the lights off and it was quiet, and I just burst into tears. I didn't get out of the bed the next day.

That's the thing I found the hardest was coming home where everything was beautiful, the weather was beautiful. I pretty much hated everyone for a few days after I got home. I didn't get out of bed for a couple of days because I was just like "You've for no idea of what other people are dealing with."

In addition, a third of surveyed RBAAs (36%) reported that they had been negatively impacted physically as a result of doing rapid building assessments.

Downtime Between RBA and BAU

For the most part, RBAs had little or no downtime between finishing assessments and returning to **'business as usual'**. Some (around 33% of surveyed RBAs) **had the 'luxury' of a weekend between the two** or were given one- or two-**days'** break (one RBA reported that their employer has a minimum standdown period of 24 hours after involvement in emergency events). However, the greatest share (67% of surveyed RBAs) returned to their usual roles the following day. Some RBAs noted that they had not been offered any leave **and the expectation was that they should return to 'business as usual' work immediately**. Others were offered leave but felt an obligation to return to work quickly to deal with the backlog of work that had built up while the rapid building assessments were taking place. Individual RBAs were reluctant to ask for leave as they knew this would put other team members under more pressure.

[While we were in the field] we were still getting phone calls from builders asking why we weren't inspecting their house. It's like "Have you seen the news mate?"

Others were saving their annual leave for something else and were reluctant to use it for post-deployment **'rest days'**.

When surveyed, RBAs were asked how they felt about the time they had between finishing the assessments **and returning to 'business as usual'**. More than half (61%) felt that, in hindsight, this time was too short. Almost all RBAs involved in the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods (81%) felt that the time was too short.

*I really should have taken a rest after the long days of doing assessments. Maybe then I **wouldn't** be so grumpy.*

Maybe having a couple of days (2 working) days break to recover, re-charge and then resume normal duties again would be good.

Team leaders report that, in hindsight, more down time may have been beneficial for some RBAs, who returned to work tired and often with low morale. Team leaders reported that some RBAs were initially less productive on returning with team leaders needing to reduce their workloads to give them time and space to recover.

I know a guy who went straight back to work on the next day. He got sent home partway through that first day. You could just see it in his face. I think his team leader ended up giving him the rest of the week off.

*I have never felt so mentally drained as I have over the last six months. The phone calls, emails and **property inspections have created a huge 'business as usual' workload. Everything has just compounded.***

*The transition from emergency response to BAU is not as smooth as leadership would like it to be. **You're** doing adrenalin-pumping, work-your-guts-out stuff for a wee while then get told to stop that on a Thursday and show up to work on Friday for business as usual. There needs to be time off. That after-care needs to be recognised.*

Awareness and Use of Support Available

Half of surveyed RBAs (50%) gave a positive rating for the support they were provided with to assist with their mental and emotional wellbeing once they returned to business as usual; one in five (20%) gave a negative rating. Most employers made counselling services available to RBAs – or more typically made RBAs aware of general counselling services provided by the organisation. However, team leaders were aware of very few staff who had accessed these services, in some cases because RBAs perceived that the **counselling staff wouldn't have sufficient understanding of what they had been through** to be able to offer useful and/or meaningful support.

*When I got back, my boss said, "**We've** got the EAP if you need to have a chat with them." **That's** fine - I knew that service was there for me to use. But I think the support needs to come from people that have done [the RBA role] **before**. **You can't offer support for a situation you know nothing about.***

In other cases, RBAs felt that they were too busy to attend support sessions:

I haven't been to a** session, but I know I probably should go to be fair. Quite often on a [weekday] **they've got free clinics where you could go down and see someone. But as building inspectors, we're fully booked every single day so there really isn't time to do it.** The help is there if you want to ask for it. Truth is, the nature of us as **inspectors and building inspectors, we're probably not the kind of guys to take that kind of help.

Some RBAs who had been deployed from other regions as individuals, rather than as a team, reported not feeling supported when they returned to work as their manager/others in the team **couldn't empathise with** what they had experienced. No leave and little wellbeing support was offered.

When asked what other supports and resources would have been useful to assist with their mental and emotional wellbeing, RBA suggestions included:

- More comprehensive debriefing process, including opportunities to share/discuss what pressures or challenges RBAs faced.
- More support services available – and publicise these more comprehensively, and have them available for longer:

Post deployment support would have helped. It's hard to come home to everything being fine when you have just returned from a disaster zone, where the people you are dealing with have lost everything.

- Making a '**psychological first aid**' course available to RBAs

- Providing an opportunity for RBAs to get together after the event, to share experiences and informally debrief with each other.

A month later have a catch up with all the people that were involved. Maybe hearing how somebody else dealt with it might make the scenario you were facing in your head not seem as bad as it was.

- Opportunity for a face-to-face debrief with MBIE staff – to provide feedback on changes that could be made to processes; possible additions to training programmes etc.
- Personal follow-up phone call during and/or after the event – to provide someone to talk to and also provide an opportunity for RBAs to provide feedback.

You never say you want to talk to somebody, you never admit that, but it would have been nice to have somebody to give me a call and say “Hey, just checking in.”

7. Interactions with Public

Key Highlights

- **RBA**s' BAU experience dealing with the public contributed positively to RBAs feeling prepared for public interactions during assessments. Support from a welfare officer, having a more senior team member close by and having high quality information to provide to homeowners/occupiers also contributed to a sense of preparedness.
- However, despite feeling prepared, for many RBAs, dealing with the public was the most challenging part of assessments. The public had little or no understanding of the role, role boundaries or legal authority of the RBA and consequently often bombarded the RBA with questions they **didn't** have the remit to answer. This led to frustration for both parties.
- Public misperceptions of the placarding system were common, with particular fear around **being 'red-stickered'**, homeowners believing that this earmarked the house for demolition. Misperceptions sometimes resulted in tensions during assessments.
- Whilst RBAs had information to provide to homeowners, this was either out-of-date or the decision criteria and support available changed so rapidly that information prepared quickly became obsolete.
- Using a range of channels to provide the public with a general overview of the RBA process and the role of RBAs, clearly explaining the placarding system, **and providing 'how to' guides** to navigate different aspects of the recovery process will be well-received by the public, will improve the efficiency of the RBA process and **positively impact on RBAs' mental well-being**.

7.1 Preparedness/Training for Interactions with Public

RBAs regularly interact with the public **in their 'business as usual' roles**, often in heated situations. So consequently, prior to deployment, most assessors felt that they were prepared for dealing with the public. Among surveyed RBAs, just over two-thirds (70%) described themselves as being prepared for dealing with home/building owners and occupiers; 30% felt unprepared. Feelings of preparedness were similar by emergency event. Tier 1 RBAs were most likely to feel prepared (75%).

*The building department of most councils do get picked on a lot. In our normal day-to-day job people might not necessarily like what you have to say **so we're used to that.***

RBAAs cited a range of contributors that had prepared them for interactions with the public – and others that made dealing with the public more challenging:

Key contributors to feeling prepared to deal with public

(Listed by frequency of mention)

- Experience dealing with the **public as part of 'business as usual' job**, especially where there is potential for conflict
- Being accompanied by a welfare officer or support person (or both), especially where this person had experience working with the public in potentially heated situations e.g. compliance officers, traffic wardens
- Having attended de-escalation courses provided by their employer
- Having up-to-date, comprehensive, consistent information available to provide to the public (flyers etc.)
- Provision of a communications device that can trigger an emergency alert if required

Key contributors to feeling unprepared to deal with public

(Listed by frequency of mention)

- Lack of RBA training generally
- Conducting assessment in own community/dealing with people known to the RBA
- Working alone/without a support person
- Lack of awareness of post-assessment process for customers/post-assessment process constantly changing

7.2 Assessor-Public Interactions

Whilst surveyed RBAAs generally rated that relationship between RBAAs and homeowners/occupiers positively (65% describing the relationship as good or very good), for many RBAAs, interactions with building owners were the most challenging aspect of the role, particularly when the building owner or occupier is reluctant or resistant to leaving the property despite the risks identified by the RBA.

RBAAs report that the response from the public to assessors was mixed. Building owners/occupiers were reported to generally be welcoming of RBAAs onto their properties.

The vast majority were just happy to see somebody there to help, to offer some guidance.

However, in a small number of cases where there was significant resistance from the homeowner/occupier to having RBAAs on their property and having their property assessed. In these cases, RBAAs did not enter and conducted their assessment from the road instead.

Among surveyed RBAs, only 15% rated building owners and occupiers' understanding of the RBA process and their RBA role positively; two-thirds (67%) described the understanding as not so good or poor. Public understanding was particularly low for the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods, just 8% giving a positive rating. Assessors interviewed also reported that the public had a low understanding of the RBA role being to protect public safety, with some seeing RBAs as central or local government agents **“coming to take away their houses.”** RBAs **reported that, while they didn't like being perceived** unfavourably, they were familiar and often comfortable with this role through their business-as-usual role in inspections or compliance.

For RBAs working in small towns, knowing the building occupiers can be both beneficial – **“They don't want to yell at you because they know you”** and a drawback – **“They yell at you because they know you. They vent their frustration at you.”**

Public reaction to RBAs in Hawke's Bay was noted to be considerably more positive where assessors wore Civil Defence-branded high visibility vests as opposed to council-branded clothing.

*One of the properties we went to, we turned up in a council vehicle and they started screaming at us as soon as we hopped out. I said, **“I'm nothing to do with the Council, I am Civil Defence”** and they were **“Oh, wonderful.”** The situation de-escalated immediately. I think it made a big difference not having that council uniform.*

However, views were more mixed on the use of unmarked versus council-branded vehicles with RBAs noting that a council vehicle provided a level of legitimacy even if the homeowner/occupier had a negative view of council. As looting became more common, RBAs in Hawke's Bay reported that homeowners/occupiers became increasingly suspicious and uneasy about having unknown people on their property. Having a council-branded car provided reassurance.

*I went up to Eskdale to a property we had missed. I pulled in and was having a look at the property and a guy came down on a quad bike with a shotgun across the front of it. He asked what I was doing and told me **I shouldn't be snooping around.** I said, **“I'm with the Council just doing some survey works.”** Having a marked vehicle in that case was definitely advantageous. With an unmarked vehicle it could have been a whole different situation.*

One of the most common questions RBAs were asked by homeowners was what authority they had to act. Over the first couple of days of assessments, RBAs developed an explanation that was quick to deliver and easy for homeowners/occupiers to understand. However, having to constantly explain the process was mentally draining for RBAs.

The biggest challenge RBAs faced was displacing occupiers when buildings required a red placard. Older and more experienced RBAs reported finding this process easier than newer RBAs – and in some cases, less experienced RBAs requested support from more experienced RBAs to speak to particularly disgruntled occupants:

Some people don't like authority and they don't like someone younger than them telling them what to do or even placing a placard on their property - "I don't want Council involved. I don't want you here." Having that team approach helped. I'd have a team member ring me and say, "I've got an angry person here." and I'd say "Move on to the next house" and I would go and deal with that person. I think I could explain things a bit better.

It is not the RBA's role to advise building owners on their next steps, so assessors were unprepared for the number of questions they received. RBAs felt disheartened, and in some cases guilty, not being able to offer advice or reduce uncertainty, particularly if they could see the homeowners/occupiers in distress. More experienced RBAs expressed concerns about less experienced RBAs discussing issues around insurance, costs, how to find tradespeople etc. with building owners, noting that there is a fine line between being empathetic and overstepping the RBA remit.

RBAs working in Hawke's Bay reported some homeowners/occupiers being very frustrated at the time taken for their properties to be assessed and were critical about areas they perceived to have been less impacted being assessed before theirs.

*[The public] knew which areas we had been to. They were quite shocked that **we'd been to Havelock** which had surface flooding and yet there were other areas that had had water over the roofs and we **still hadn't been out to there.***

RBAs also noted that building owners were frustrated at the lack of support available post the assessment.

Once we left there was anger again. "There's no answers. No-one's telling us anything." They were given flyers – "Contact this number". Well, you can imagine calling a number at Council and you're on the line for hours trying to get an answer so that turns to anger as well. They ended up being angry because they couldn't get any answers as to what was happening.

I was saying "Well you have to talk to your insurance company." But I still felt like a bit of a fraud on that one because I really didn't know. I wanted to say, "Yes someone is going to follow me, reassess your house and we will have an answer for you", but it just wasn't our place.

7.3 Impacts of the Placarding System on the Public

Among surveyed RBAs, only 15% **rated building owners and occupiers' understanding of the placarding system positively**; over half (56%) described the understanding as not so good or poor. Perceived low levels of public understanding were similar across the two weather events.

In terms of the public's understanding of the placarding system, on a scale of 1 to 10, I'd rate it a negative 5.

Awareness of the meaning of a red placard was particularly problematic. Some building owners were fearful of a red placard, believing that this meant that they would never be allowed back in their home and/or that their house would be demolished and so, in some cases, would not let RBAs onto the property or tried to remove the placard. In contrast, RBAs also encountered homeowners that requested their property to be **“red stickered” as they believed that** red-stickered properties would be demolished and a new house built to replace it.

Some were stoked when you red placarded them because they thought their house was going to get flattened and get a whole new house. But we explained it just means it's unsafe and it's going to be assessed and potentially you will have to relevel it and carry on. So from that point of view, I don't think people understood.

Home occupiers were also keen to remove red and yellow placards, **describing them as ‘burglar calling cards’** as the prominent placement of the placard signalled that the home was unoccupied.

The yellow placards are bright. They are out there. And I think maybe on the front door is not a good place to put them. Maybe they should be on the back door.

RBAs handed out flyers on what constitutes a white, yellow and red placard. However, initially some RBAs were distributing outdated pamphlets, and it was noted that the decision criteria for the placards frequently changed, so the flyers were becoming obsolete almost as soon as they were being printed. RBAs also noted that, because they had low understanding of the placarding system, building owners had no idea what their responsibilities were once the placard has been placed on the property.

Media reports suggest that confusion around the placarding system continues to be an issue for some homeowners/occupiers, many months after the weather events. Whilst placarding decisions are made to protect public safety, decision criteria are based predominantly around structural hazards. There is a public perception that little or no consideration is given to health hazards – so while a property might be given a white placard indicating that it is safe to live in problems such as mould may make the building uninhabitable from the perspective of the homeowner/occupier².

The problem is the council this time sent out building inspectors to our place to have a look at it and they were only interested in the structure of the building. But the council's regulations say a yellow sticker is a hazard. It doesn't specify just the building hazard. It's a hazard. Black water is a health hazard. White sticker means we can live in the house, but we can't because it's full of mould. (Homeowner)

² <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/486853/stressed-homeowners-in-west-auckland-want-government-to-step-in-over-managed-retreat>

7.4 Perspectives on Information for Public

RBAs appreciated having information that they could leave with building owner/occupier. This reduced the time they needed to spend at each property providing verbal explanations, helped give homeowners/occupiers a sense that something was happening, and having something to give made RBAs feel that they were making, at least a small, acknowledgement to the building owner of the situation they were dealing with – **“Hopefully it showed we cared.”** However, RBAs were aware that the information they had available became obsolete very quickly due to changes made to decision making protocols, support services available etc. – to the point that RBAs stopped giving them out.

*The first lot we got were 12 years old. They were there so we took them out, but we soon realised that the information was ridiculously old. Then we were handing out stuff related to the Nelson flooding. The amount of pamphlets we printed out was huge as they were changing daily – **to the point where it wasn't worth giving them out because we knew that the information was contradicting itself.***

Just a third of RBAs (33%) viewed the information provided to building owners and occupiers to help them understand the RBA process, RBA role and the placarding system positively; 39% described the current information as not so good or poor. Perceptions of the information were similar across RBAs deployed to the two emergency events.

Similarly to what was reported in the media, RBAs note that building owners became increasingly frustrated at the lack of good quality information. RBAs were critical of the lack of extra resource provided to manage homeowner/occupier enquiries resulting from the assessments, believing that MBIE should have taken the lead on this. Instead, TAs were left to improvise – for example, printing off information from websites and **preparing their own ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ documents.**

To address the lack of information, some communities decided to host community meetings to seek answers. However, the media reports that, whilst these were successful in bringing the local community together, they were less than successful in providing answers to homeowners'/occupiers' **questions:**

*They used to have meetings in their community centre where the head of building regulatory went there and they were just attacked from all sides because they **couldn't** get an answer. “Council is not geo tech engineers and until they make a decision, I'm sorry we can't give you an answer”. People want answers. **There's people who still haven't been able to move back, it's not nice.***

Mentally, it's draining. It's a slow killer because no one knows any direction. We've had [community] meetings and things like that. Council's there to answer our questions, but none of them have been answered³.

³ [‘We'll be fighting it’: Red-stickered cyclone-hit residents send clear warning as Govt delays decisions - NZ Herald](#)

Community-Initiated Information Sources

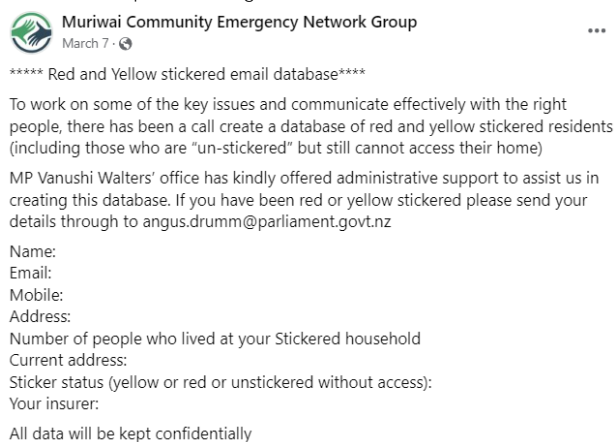
Due to the lack of information provided to the public by central and local government, many community groups set up information sharing tools, typically on social media platforms. These forums were (and still are) a space to communicate, ask questions and offer support for one another. In some cases, community groups had more up-to-date and accessible information than what was provided by RBAs. Muriwai Community Emergency Network Group was set up in response to the 2023 Muriwai landslides to provide “*access to the latest and correct information*”. Those who ran the page were part of the Muriwai Emergency response team and were connected to official groups including Auckland Emergency Management and first responders (FENZ, Police).

“The Muriwai Community Emergency Group, posts updates on its Facebook page, including details of fundraisers and meetings with the council, as well as mental health sessions to help residents cope.”⁴

Outputs from this forum included:

Up-to-date information/resources:

- Advice and details around red and yellow placards using the Auckland Emergency Management resource links.
- A ‘**stickered residents’ group**’ was formed by those most affected. To collect accurate information, a voluntary database was set up by the Muriwai Emergency Response Team to effectively communicate and work on key issues around placarding.



- There was information around how MBIE is supporting the emergency response, however the response team noted that some information was out of date in places:

⁴ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/the-detail/story/2018882674/cyclone-gabrielle-why-many-in-muriwai-can-t-move-on>



- Updates on electricity, including which parts of the community were without power, or had just restored power.
- Work and Income assistance links were posted for those who needed bedding, food, resources, or applications to apply for subsidies of medical costs.
- Information regarding Civil Defence payments and eligibility.
- Any latest updates were posted straight away from all official sources such as Auckland Emergency Management.
- Links to the emergency relief fund, grants by Auckland Council.
- Zoom links and in-person details for council meetings and government official share sessions.
- Up-to-date information from The New Zealand Claims Resolution Service.
- Health and safety updates that included roads and streets that were inaccessible.
- Links and information on geotechnical updates in the area.
- Updates on access to clean water and networks for getting water topped up by tanker services.

Suggestions for Enhancement to Public Information Provision

The following suggestions are made to improve the provision of information to the public affected by natural hazards:

Content

- Provide a general overview of the RBA process, including showing that there is no link to insurance companies and that the process is part of the declaration of a state of emergency.
- Information about RBAs – what their key role is (ensuring public safety), what their role involves, their legal powers (explained simply) and what is outside their role and responsibility– **“so people are prepared for why we’re there and what we are doing.”**

*A short video could go out to the public from RBAs, telling our story, **showing that we’re human and that we’re just out there to do a job.** These people are only seeing what the media is showing them. Just a simple message. **“We’re human too.”***

Another issue we had, especially in some of the rural areas, was “Look, we’re not here to check what you’re growing and smoking. That’s not why we’re here. We just want to make sure that the building’s safe”. That kind of thing wasn’t as easy to deal with as it should have been. A quick TV campaign might have helped.

- To dispel myths, provide clear explanations about what each colour of placard means/what action is required to be taken. **“After Christchurch, everyone thinks red means flatten the house.”** Information on the back of the placard or QR codes on the placard **that link to information on the TA’s or MBIE’s website** was suggested.
- Provide **clear, concise ‘how to’ guides** to direct the public on the next steps in the recovery phase, including how to clean their houses appropriately and safely, working with insurance companies, making repairs and the consenting process. RBAs would like to see this information designed in a way that allows homeowners/occupiers to take the lead on their own recovery journey rather than just pushing them back to TAs for support.
- Provide information on how long repairs may take – **“as most people thought they would be back in their homes in a month.”**
- More information, as early as possible, about available welfare options including from government agencies and service providers.
- Provide Civil Defence preparedness information, particularly what to have prepared should you have to leave the property immediately.
- Information on the process to follow-up/review placards and what to do post-assessment to get placards removed.

Information Channels/Information Dissemination

- Provide more information on the TA website and ensure this is easy to find. Include a QR code on flyers that links to the relevant section on the TA website.
- Provide short video clips (**hosted on the TA’s website**) which provide an overview of the different aspects of the RBA process (discussed above). RBAs/support staff could provide cards or flyers to make building owners aware of these videos.
- Provide information about the assessment and placarding system via mainstream and social media.
- Provide information sheets with rates bills.
- Ensure information is disseminated immediately after the event/on commencement of the assessments – **“not three days in.”**
- Consider providing information throughout the year so people are informed prior to hazard events occurring.

Put a campaign on the radio, or TV, like Tik Tok or something – “Look here’s what our guys are going to be coming to do, let them know if you’ve any problems, check if your building is safe. If your stormwater or wastewater has collapsed let them know.

It was way too late to show them the placard after the event. What should happen is the local council should be sending more information throughout the year to keep people informed.

8. Retention and Recruitment of RBAs

Key Highlights

- Almost all assessors interviewed intend to continue as RBAs. Time away from family is the key disincentive for remaining in the role.
- Whilst most assessors would encourage others to consider becoming RBAs, a lack of training opportunities, the high level of stress, abuse the role can attract and lack of clarity around the placarding system were detractors to promoting the RBA role. Raising the public profile of the RBA role, greater rewards/recognition of RBA work and easy access to information about the role may generate more interest in the RBA role.
- Views on a formal RBA qualification are mixed. Whilst it would upskill RBAs, provide greater consistency of role execution, validate the RBA role and provide reassurances to RBAs working with **those they don't know, many of the attributes of a good RBA can't be taught**, and formal study requirements may discourage some from taking up the role. Given that knowledge of construction/building is essential to RBA work, it is felt that a formal qualification should only be offered to those with industry experience.

Whilst **they don't consider the role especially appealing**, RBAs agreed that rapid building assessment is an important role and one that can yield significant job satisfaction when well supported.

I don't really like doing rapid building assessments, but I know it's important and there's so much satisfaction that you've helped other people get through it. It's like being a policeman or a paramedic. You're seeing people at their worst often. It's not nice, it's traumatic. But it needs to be done, and there's a lot of satisfaction associated with the stress.

All assessors interviewed said they would continue in the RBA role, and among surveyed RBAs, almost all (94%) planned to continue; 6% were undecided. Time away from family was the key disincentive to continuing.

Almost all current RBAs (87%) would be likely to encourage other members of their team or appropriate professionals that they know to become RBAs. A lack of training opportunities, the high level of stress, abuse the role can attract and lack of clarity around the placarding system were given as reasons for being unlikely to encourage others to become an RBA.

To preserve RBAs' interest in the role, many would like to see more focus from MBIE on recruiting other professionals in the field.

Suggestions to Encourage Further Recruitment of RBAs

A range of suggestions were made to encourage recruitment of RBAs, including:

Formal Qualification for RBAs:

- Among surveyed assessors, half (51%) supported the idea of a formal RBA qualification. The remainder typically had mixed views. Only 6% did not support the idea.
- Key benefits of a formal qualification included:
 - The ability to upskill RBAs to give them a more comprehensive set of skills required for the role.
 - Potential for greater consistency in terms of how the role is executed (including issuing placards); **promotion of 'best practice'** processes.
 - Validation of the RBA role and acknowledgement/recognition of its challenges and complexities.
 - Provision of a structured pathway for those interested in training for more specialised roles.
 - Setting more realistic expectations about what the role involves.
 - Providing reassurance that other RBAs they may be working with have at least a minimum level of training and skills for the role.

The decisions made when doing RBAs require a level of skill and judgment that can have significant implications for building owners. Having formally qualified RBAs is more professional, provides higher quality effective approach and supports a higher level of capability and efficiency.

- While in favour of a formal qualification, some RBAs also noted that a careful selection process was critical to ensure that candidates also possess the other important attributes that cannot be taught as part of a formal qualification. These are considered by RBAs to include empathy, ability to handle stress/remain calm under pressure and physical fitness. Others felt that having practical experience is the most important competency for an RBA and questioned how this would be gained as part of a formal qualification.

[RBAs] need to be a person who is practical thinker, knows how buildings/structures go together and the ability to assess that structure and identify the issue (or not an issue). I've seen people who excel at getting qualifications – they know their stuff theory-wise but have no clue applying it in the real world.

It's that under pressure, on-site 'in the moment' stuff that you can't teach in the classroom.

- Extra administration, extra costs and an unnecessary duplication with other qualifications and/or current RBA training were cited as reasons against a formal RBA qualification. Concern was also raised that study requirements may put some people off wanting to become RBAs.

It seems like creating something for no real purpose over what we have. Would that be better than good in-house training and refreshers that don't require too much time or infrastructure? And since most of the issue ongoing is knowledge retention when there are no events for several months or years, how would that change just by having a qualification? I'm not convinced it will offer any significant improvement but will add time and costs.

General agreement among RBAs was that the formal qualification should only be offered to those already working in the building industry. It was felt that a stand-alone RBA course, without prerequisite knowledge and/or skills, would not adequately cover an understanding of construction and how buildings work, which was considered critical to the RBA role:

People need to understand how a building works and is put together to understand the damage to it. Doing a short course does not give you this. RBAs need to be either a builder or engineer to understand this. Just because they look at plans and process them to a code does not mean they understand how it is built.

Greater Promotion of Training Opportunities

- **Enhance managers' awareness of RBA training opportunities so that the appropriate staff can be identified, and RBA training included in their professional development plans.**
- Offer more training opportunities – to show a clear pathway to developing expertise.
- Offer more training to private organisations (e.g. building and engineering companies).
- Provide all training free of charge.

*Increase the amount of training available. A one- or two-day **course doesn't exactly make us experts.***

Raise Role Profile

- Using advertising and social media channels to raise the profile of the RBA role within TAs and other relevant businesses. RBAs believe that this would have the added benefit of increasing awareness and understanding of the RBA role generally so that, in future events, the public is more welcoming and accepting of having RBAs on their property.

Promote Career Advantages

- Highlight the growing demand for RBAs in the construction sector.
- Emphasise the potential for career advancement and professional development within the field.

Industry Partnerships

- Foster partnerships with construction companies and government bodies to create awareness about the role of RBAs. Some assessors mentioned raising awareness through the Licensed Building Practitioners scheme.

Technology Integration

- Showcase the use of advanced technologies and tools in residential building assessment to attract individuals with an interest in cutting-edge applications (such as the use of drones in natural disaster settings).

Networking Opportunities

- Facilitate networking events where aspiring RBAs can connect with experienced assessors. Use experienced RBAs to facilitate share sessions for those considering becoming RBAs, providing information about what the role entails, training available and recent experiences in the field.

The training could include a person coming in who has been an RBA. Speak for 20 minutes, half an hour about my experience. People are going to relate, and their empathy is going to come into play. Then it will make them start to think whether they can do this thing or not.

Recognition and Accreditation

- Advocate for industry-wide recognition and accreditation for RBAs to enhance the credibility and reputation of the profession.
- Showcase success stories and accomplishments of established RBAs to inspire newcomers.
- Offer increased rates of pay to those trained as RBAs/**offer an 'in field bonus'** to make the role financially more appealing.
- **Offering 'days in lieu' after an event** is both appealing to potential new recruits and also beneficial to RBA wellbeing.

Accessible Information

- Ensure that information about the profession, including prior experience and/or qualification requirements, is easily accessible through online platforms and information materials.

However, RBAs also emphasised that not everyone is suited to the RBA role, particularly due to the physically challenging and stressful nature of the work, and that careful selection processes are required:

I think there is a fine line with this. Just because you are suitably qualified does not mean that you are suitable for this type of work. It takes a strong backbone along with an immense amount of empathy to do this work, and not everyone is cut out for it.

You have to be careful here as you only want the right people becoming RBAs. You need to target competent people - that have knowledge of how a building goes together, understand structure and NZ building ways, is fit and able-bodied, can walk or be on their feet for 8hrs, sure-footed. MBIE probably needs to liaise with the emergency leads/building managers in each TA and have them shoulder tap potential recruits.

9. Conclusions

Overall, the Rapid Building Assessment structure is perceived as a sufficient system for an emergency response framework in New Zealand.

This review found that RBAs who had been trained prior to the emergency event were well-prepared for their role – as far as this was possible given that all emergency events have some element of unpredictability – and had a good understanding of the end-to-end RBA process. During the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle, RBAs felt well-managed by their immediate team leader but felt that their TA could have provided better support (particularly through better provision of resources) and that MBIE needed to act more proactively and decisively, including around the timely deployment of RBAs from outside the region and in confirming the role of non-RBA trained building/construction sector professionals. Support from MBIE during both events was underwhelming, with insufficient communication with RBAs from outside the region around deployment and a lack of a physical presence during either event.

The placarding system is not fit-for-purpose for flooding events **as it doesn't take account of the changing** level of risk over time as floodwaters recede. This resulted in inconsistencies in the criteria used to issue placards and consequently considerable additional work was needed to reassess buildings and potentially change placards. This created confusion and frustration among RBAs and the public.

Despite having competencies from their BAU role, dealing with the public during an emergency event is the most challenging part of the RBA role. Whilst accompanying welfare/support officers were an invaluable resource in dealing with homeowners/occupiers reassuringly and sensitively, RBAs were often overwhelmed by the volume of questions from the public and lacked good quality information to adequately address these.

The public lacked knowledge of the RBA process, the RBA role and the placarding system which created inefficiencies and stress for both parties. Some members of the public were reluctant to have RBAs on their properties and reacted strongly to the placards being issued. Public misperceptions based on media **coverage of 'stickering' after the Christchurch earthquakes** and the prevalence of looting of red and yellow-stickered properties also created tension around placard issuing.

A lack of training is identified as the key detractor from the success of the RBA system at present, resulting in:

- RBAs feeling unprepared for the role,
- Inconsistencies in approach and use of the placarding system,
- A lack of preparedness for dealing with the public and
- Not having full appreciation of the possible impacts of the role on physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and not having effective strategies to deal with these.

However, one of the key benefits of the recent weather-related events is that RBAs and TAs are now considerably better prepared for future emergency events than they were. Some staff not trained at the time of the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods/Cyclone Gabrielle have now received RBA training, and RBAs reported having folders of maps prepared and packs of equipment made up ready for deployment:

With the second response, we straight away knew “Okay, we’re all going to meet at this office and be set up in pairs and go from A or B.” You knew what was expected of you, you knew how to access Survey123 and how to fill in the forms. You knew how it all worked and you got through so many more assessments so much quicker. We were so much more efficient on that second time around.

Best Practice Service Provision

Based on the findings of this evaluation, the RBA system will be most successful when:

- Training session provision meets demand, training is provided in-person and includes real-life examples, role-plays and scenario work as well as coverage of wellbeing impacts and strategies.
- In an emergency event, the volume of work is quickly identified and RBAs from outside the region are deployed in a timely way if a need is identified.
- Local and MBIE-deployed assessors are integrated so that different knowledge sets and experiences can be shared, and comraderies established.
- Sufficient staff, equipment and technology are available. MBIE takes a strong leadership role in supporting this and have a physical presence during the emergency event.
- Emergency organisations are located in the same space and meet regularly to share information and resources.
- Daily briefings and debriefings are provided throughout the assessment period.
- There is a consistent set of hazard-specific decision criteria for the issuing of placards, with this is well communicated to all RBAs and to home owners/occupiers.
- RBAs are accompanied by a skilled welfare/support officer when visiting properties. No RBAs work alone.
- Communication methods used in the field are hazard-proof and robust, allowing team members to remain in contact, both for safety reasons and so RBAs can check processes and placarding decisions with others in a timely way.
- The public have a good understanding of the RBA role, the legal status of assessors and extent of their responsibilities. They also have an accurate understanding of the placarding system and the post-assessment process.
- Relevant, up-to-date, user-friendly information about the RBA process and what to do post-assessment is easily accessible to homeowners/occupiers via a range of channels.
- Wellbeing support is made available during, and for some time after, the emergency event, is tailored to the RBA role, is normalised (for example, having counsellors attend debriefing sessions) and the culture of the teams promotes help-seeking behaviour.
- Downtime between conducting RBAs and returning to BAU is compulsory, with RBAs not penalised for taking this time (for example, being offered days in lieu rather than requiring annual leave to be used).