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Celebrating Owen Pickles' years serving the Chatham Islands

• Last Updated 16 Jan 2024

From just Owen, two staff members, and an old computer they fired up once a week to check emails, to now, the Chatham Islands Council has seen a whole lot of change in the last twenty years.

Owen has served in Local Government for over fifty years, twenty-two of which he has been with the Chatham Islands Council. It's a lifetime of dedication and service and deserves significant recognition. Throughout that time, the world has changed, the Chathams has changed, and Owen has been there for it all.

Initially, when Owen first took on the role of General Manager, as it was called at the time (now Chief Executive), he was there to determine whether he could make the Council work or wrap it up. But with a lot of hard work,

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Owen got the Council running and set about determining how to get the funding to support it.

Owen's favourite projects and achievements

Roading project

A lot of the job has been about securing funding for the Council. One achievement Owen is especially proud of is the [roading programme](#). In early conversations with [Waka Kotahi\(external link\)](#), then New Zealand Transport Agency, Owen had to fight for the Chathams to get the funding they needed.

After some back and forth, he eventually got approval to accept Downer's \$4M tender for the work required and the relationship with Waka Kotahi has been strong ever since. The majority of roading work is funded through Waka Kotahi, these days the only problem is trying to find the local share.

Despite it being a gravel network with all its seasonal problems, visitors have passed on compliments that it's the best gravel network they've ever seen.

Owenga wharf project

Replacement of the Owenga wharf is another project Owen fought for. It's a fishermen's wharf and the main link to Pitt Island, but application after funding application was denied.

Eventually, after a conversation with Dame Annette King, who was Minister for Transport at the time, the funding was approved, and the work was done. But time doesn't stand still and now, the wharf needs repairing again.

Waitangi port project

A project Owen enjoyed being at the coalface for was the Waitangi port project. Built in the 1990s but with 'concrete cancer' due to being made with saltwater, the visiting Minister for Internal Affairs was frightened when a lump of concrete from the exploding wharf ended up in his boat! Once the funding was approved the project went well.

These are just a few examples of the many projects and achievements we can thank Owen for during his time as Chief Executive. The road is still not easy, and the Council is still struggling for money, with ongoing petitions to the Government for funding. But at least for Owen, that's Paul's fight now!

[Watch this five-minute video of Owen sharing some more reflections \(external link\).](#)

Owen's wife, Lynette reflects on their life at the Chatham Islands

It's a lifetime of hard work, and he hasn't done it alone. Throughout it all, near and far, Owen's wife, Lynette, has been supporting him. Here's her side of the story...

Before the Chatham Islands

Owen and I met working at Invercargill City Council and Local government has been a part of our lives ever since. When the position of General Manager came up at the Chatham Islands Council, it wasn't somewhere I'd ever been inclined to go before, but with some encouragement from LGNZ and Society of Local Government Managers, Owen applied for the job and got it.

Moving to the Chathams

I was quite happy to go, I was probably more relaxed than Owen! Our daughter was overseas and once I knew we could bring the cat and dog, I was relaxed about it.

When we first arrived, we were taken to our house and left to our own devices. The only problem was that we had two containers of our furniture being shipped over, but they hadn't arrived yet! Then, due to rough weather, the boat couldn't tie up so we had to wait even longer. Our poor cat and dog were waiting to fly out, but the flight was delayed and delayed, and I was worried about our animals being caged for such a long time. Air Chathams reassured us they were doing alright. When the plane did arrive at 1 am, Owen got up and collected them straight away! Air Chathams runs much better now than when we started.

The animals fit right in. They loved the place. Libby, the basset hound, was a novelty on the Island. We went to the beach every day for a walk, and we soon became well known.

Working for the Council

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When we first moved to the Island in January 2002, I had no intention of working. But over the first year, Owen felt he could use my skills and experience.

I joined the staff part-time as Council Secretary. There was a back room that you could hardly get into because everything was dumped in there, and they cleared it out, so I had 'my cupboard' to work in. We used to joke about that.

Amongst other things, I took meeting minutes and set up a filing system. I remember I used to order the groceries to come in on the boat once a month. I learnt quickly not to order the perishables. The lettuce was in no state to eat if the boat was delayed!

During our time, Owen was awarded the opportunity to go to British Columbia to study remote island communities. We spent a week in the town of Ladysmith, another week on the Charlotte Islands, went to the local government managers conference in Vancouver, and took a ride on the rocky mountaineer train. I appreciated being able to go with him; it was a fantastic experience.

I stopped working for the Council at the end of 2011 because of my 'stupid condition'. I still feel fondly for the Chathams, if it weren't for my health, I would still be living there.

I moved off the Island at the end of 2012 for my health, and Owen has been splitting his time between the Mainland and the Chathams since then. We learnt to adapt, skyping every night. When reception was bad on the Island he would call on the landline so we could still talk. I never expected it to go on this long though!

Looking to the future

It's the end of an era and both of us are coming to terms with the fact that it will be no more. I am part of the reason he's unable to stay any longer. I can potter, but I need him here a bit more. But then, he needed to retire sooner or later.

I'm looking forward to having him home a bit more. I get on his case when his cleaning's not up to scratch! But he's pretty placid most of the time so he lets it go. I'm sure the cat will be relieved to catch a break from my rants.

I loved the season of life with the Chathams. I'd still be there if I could, it was a great experience.

Post-interview update: Owen's health focus, island connection, and plans

Since the interview, Owen's health is now the number one priority. It's another challenge, but Owen has proved he's no stranger to challenge.

He cares about the Island and will still be invested in its wellbeing, and try to retain a link where he can.

When he's up to it, Owen will keep himself busy. He's already having conversations about some work as a Justice of the Peace and he'll likely spend a bit of time at the Riccarton racecourse, where he's a member of the race club.

Thanks, Owen for all the years of work.

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