

Whakaāio ā-rongo sensory modulation training package

Evaluation report – phase two

April 2025

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Acknowledgements

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Te Pou is a national centre of evidence-based workforce development for the mental health and addiction sectors in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Background

International and Aotearoa New Zealand research indicates that sensory modulation approaches can lead to reduced agitation and feelings of overwhelm, improved emotional regulation, and decreased need for restrictive interventions (Azuela, Sutton, and Van Kessel, 2023; Craswell et al., 2020; Scanlan & Novak, 2015). Whakaāio ā-rongo sensory modulation techniques enhance people's inherent strengths and resilience to help them maintain a good balance of mood. These approaches not only support effective self-regulation but also significantly reduce the need for restrictive practices like seclusion and restraint. This aligns with the global commitment to eliminate such practices, promoting a more compassionate and supportive mental health service response and environment (Adams-Leask et al., 2018; Chalmers et al., 2012; Cummings et al., 2010). The guidelines to the Mental Health (Compulsory Assessment and Treatment) Act of 1992 promote rights-based and recovery-oriented approaches in mental health services, recognising that seclusion and restraint are not only ineffective but can also harm well-being and recovery (Ministry of Health, 2023).

To promote the use of Whakaāio ā-rongo sensory modulation across diverse roles and settings in health, Te Pou has developed a comprehensive [suite of learning resources](#), the Whakaāio ā-rongo training package. The training package aims to enhance well-being by exploring the science behind sensory processing, arousal, and emotion. It provides guidance on identifying opportunities for its use and introduces assessment tools, practical strategies, and environmental modifications.

The suite of resources within the sensory modulation training package includes (for detailed outline, see Appendix A):

- an e-learning module: introduction to sensory modulation
- a series of six booklets: containing more developed content, opportunities for application and reflection activities
- tools and resources: that are easily printable to use in your mahi
- comic and associated videos: which follow Tom in his journey seeking wellbeing through a sensory lens.

The resources have gained substantial traction since their release. By the end of February 2025, the main webpage had received 20,754 views, and the training resources were accessed 9,177 times. The table below shows the number of downloads and video plays for each resource.

Table 1. Overview of downloads and video plays metrics of the resources

Total downloads	6165
Print-friendly version	220
Implementation guide	539
Six booklets	2,526
Tools and resources	2,823
Tom's Journey: Comics	57
Total video plays	3012
Tom's Journey: Comics	1448
How to use the training package	1326

The resources are being utilised nationwide (see Appendix B for a breakdown by Aotearoa New Zealand cities and internationally), including in countries like Australia and the United States. The table below highlights the top countries by pageviews.

Table 2. Overview of metrics on pageviews by location

Total pageviews	20,754
New Zealand	18,644
Australia	1157
United States	291
Ireland	146
Canada	109

Te Pou planned a two-phase evaluation project to understand the use and impact of the sensory modulation resources on people's mahi. The first phase, published in early 2025, ([Whakaāio ā-rongo sensory modulation training package evaluation report](#)) looked at completion rates, pageviews, and feedback from surveys and online forums. The results showed strong interest, high engagement, and positive feedback. Respondents reported better understanding and ability to identify when to use sensory modulation.

This report presents findings from phase two of the evaluation, which used qualitative inquiry to gather detailed feedback on experiences and the impact of the resources on peoples' mahi.

Aim and objectives

To seek feedback on the use, usefulness, and impact of the suite of resources in implementing sensory modulation in their mahi.

1. Determine how the resources are being used.
2. Gather feedback on the usefulness and impact of the resources in implementing sensory modulation strategies.
3. Identify challenges and collect suggestions for improving the resources and implementing sensory modulation strategies in workplaces.

Method

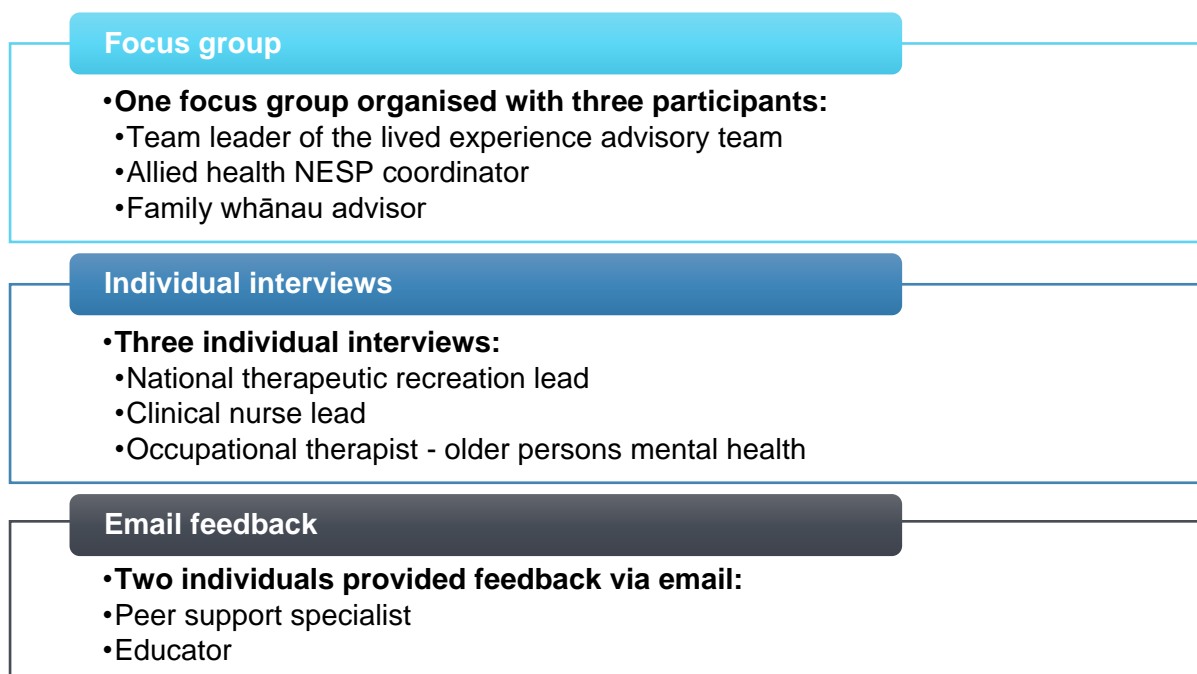
To gain further learning and insight following phase one, an in-depth qualitative approach was employed using focus groups and individual interviews. This method was chosen to gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of the experiences of those using the resources. It allowed participants to share their insights and perceptions after having the opportunity to implement the learnings. Some participants from phase one volunteered to be part of this phase and were offered the chance to join a focus group or individual interview. Additionally, the invitation was extended to other key stakeholders known to the project team, as their insights were deemed crucial for a comprehensive understanding. The interviews and focus groups were conducted over Microsoft Teams, recorded, and transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed using MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2023). Any information that could lead to the identification of participants was carefully removed to ensure confidentiality.

Results

Participants

Eight participants provided in-depth information on their use of the suite of resources. Three participated in a focus group and three took part in individual interviews. Despite their keen interest, scheduling conflicts prevented some people from arranging a suitable time. Consequently, two participants provided detailed feedback via email. The resources are designed for anyone who wants to build their knowledge in the application of sensory modulation, and it is possible that they have been used by people in roles beyond those who participated in this study. Nonetheless, we were able to speak to participants holding a wide range of roles. Figure one shows the details of the participants, including their roles.

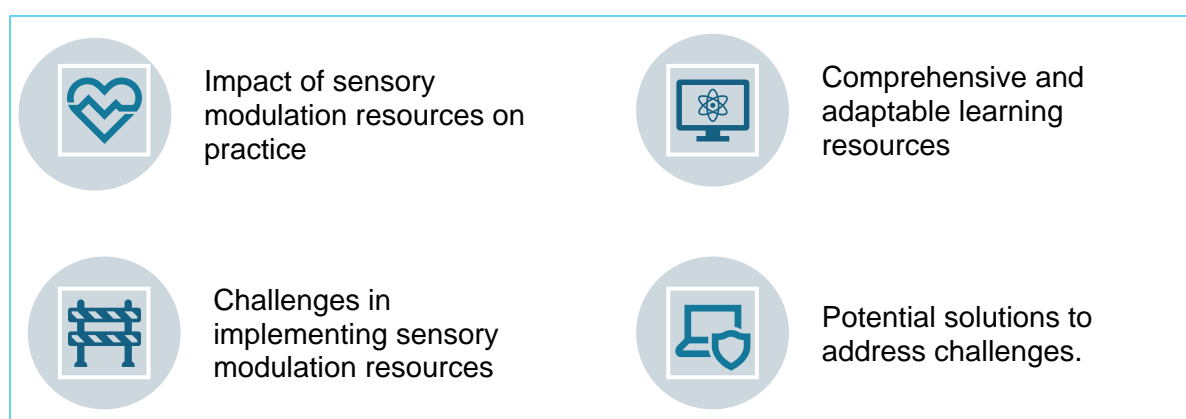
Figure 1. Participants' role and engagement



Key themes

The analysis of focus group discussions, interview transcripts, and emails provided valuable insights into the use and impact of the resources. It also highlighted some challenges and offered recommendations for improvement. Four key themes emerged from this analysis, which are further elaborated in the report.

Figure 2. Four key themes



1. Impact of sensory modulation resources on practice

Participants have reported changes in their own practice and that of their kaimahi after using the resources. These changes include a better understanding of sensory needs, increased awareness of culturally appropriate sensory modulation resources, and connecting suitable resources to people and whānau. These outcomes align with the intent of the training package, which aims to help participants feel supported in applying sensory modulation techniques, identifying opportunities to use these approaches alongside whānau, and developing personalised sensory modulation plans.

Enhanced Critical Thinking and Awareness

Participants shared that the resources impacted their own critical thinking skills and their kaimahi regarding sensory needs and the use of sensory tools, including nature-based solutions. This aligns with one of the key learning outcomes of the training package, which is to learn environmental modifications to promote sensory regulation and participation in daily activities.

“I think enhanced critical thinking skills in the sense of they now have a bigger awareness about sensory needs as a whole opposite to just this is something that we're going to be doing for the resident. It's something we should be thinking about. It not only serves its immediate purpose but also encourages staff to think creatively about other solutions they can implement.”- National therapeutic recreation lead

“I guess since the Te Pou resources and going through it, I could see the use of nature-based connections and environmental modifications. This inspired me to look for free, natural items that can be used as sensory resources and fidgets.”

Occupational therapist - older persons mental health

Support individuals and whānau and connect them with suitable techniques

The tools are intended to support individuals in using sensory modulation not just in their mahi but also in their personal lives. Participants shared that the availability of the suite of resources has enabled them to find suitable techniques for various settings and people in both professional and personal contexts. Participants also stressed the importance of involving whānau and getting these resources out to them.

“We now have these amazing resources from Te Pou that we can discuss with people and help them connect with an appropriate resource. It’s great to see how these resources are becoming more integrated into our practice, gradually changing the way we work. I weave it, the resources, through my work, but I also weave it through my home life as well, both for making myself a bit more grounded or making my children more grounded.” - Team leader of the lived experience advisory team

“It’s crucial that whānau are also informed about the sensory modulation techniques so they can provide the necessary support. We share these resources so they can understand how to de-escalate situations and recognise the strategies or techniques that the person requires.” - Family whānau advisor

“There is also a whole bunch of families living in the community that are supporting the loved ones with disability, with mental health challenges and addictions. I don't know how many times I have come across families asking me. It's just because I don't know what to do with my mom at home so if we could somehow get these resources to them would make wonderful difference.” - National therapeutic recreation lead

Aotearoa New Zealand -specific and culturally appropriate resources

Participants perceived the resources as relevant to the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and effective in promoting the use of culturally appropriate resources. This alignment is particularly noteworthy, as some of the resources from the training package emphasise the importance of being guided by the person and their cultural context.

“The biggest change for me was that it inspired me to think more about the cultural sensory modulation aspects. In my experience in Australia, I worked with adults with autism who had various sensory needs. We often used fidgets and other resources, but they were typically the plastic items you could get from department stores. This new resource has broadened my perspective on incorporating culturally appropriate sensory modulation tools.”- Occupational therapist - older persons mental health

“I have been using some of the Sensory Modulation Workbooks 1 - 6 resources as a lot of the information within them is applicable to students with sensory challenges, even without experiences of trauma. I have found the content and the way it is presented effective and culturally appropriate for a New Zealand context.” - Educator

Positive impact on forensic practices

Making resources more accessible, such as through downloadable packages is seen as beneficial. This ensures that more people have the tools they need to support their recovery.

“I mean, you know, having worked with you on zero seclusion projects within the forensic sector, it felt like a very slow process at the time, but I think I have seen a huge shift in practice. The fact that there's less seclusions and sensory modulation is becoming, you know, second nature. Which is great to see and these resources that we can download them for the forensic unit, it's going to be a lot better as well because it gives more people options.” - Family whānau advisor

2. Comprehensive and adaptable learning resources

All eight participants found the suite of resources to be well put together in a useful and engaging format. It reportedly took about six to seven hours to go through all the resources in detail. The resources were found to contain a balanced mix of scientific teaching and practical tools. Participants appreciated the ease of understanding and the respectful language throughout the materials.

“I thought the resources were really well put together and you know, easy to understand because sometimes it can feel like these concepts, can be hard to understand for some but it was very practical”- Clinical nurse lead

Participants shared their use of various resources and that some of the resources were versatile and adaptable, catering to both individual and group formats. For example, the ability to modify tools, such as sensory modulation cards, to fit individual needs enhanced their effectiveness and relatability.

“Sensory modulation cards have been very useful because we have been able to adapt them and then also create our own out of that. Depending on the need of the people, such as people living with dementia, they seem to relate so much better with graphics or pictures.” - National therapeutic recreation lead

I found the e-learning to be very easy to understand and informative with a nice balance of scientific teaching and practical tools. I especially liked the ‘Therapeutic use of self’ lesson, I think I already do this but to bring it into awareness was golden! - Peer support specialist

The videos and comic books were highly valued for their visual learning aspects and the inclusion of lived experience voices. Cultural resources, particularly the video on colonisation, were praised for their clarity and impactful messaging.

I find the videos useful. Because I'm a person that learns more from looking at something. I've had great feedback about the comic book. Potentially just a great resource to be quite honest, and I for my team and all the different training they do will weave in and out of it, basically using most of it. - Team leader of the lived experience advisory team

“I thought that that video that talked about you know the colonisation and what happened to people was very beautifully put together. I think it can be quite hard to articulate well, and video made it quite achievable” - Clinical nurse lead

Sensory screening tools with well-structured templates were considered practical and useful in both inpatient and community settings. Information brochures were also useful for raising awareness among whānau.

“Sensory screening tool is the one I have used the most, where people can kind of go through and yeah, there's the sensory modulation cards and like, where people have examples where they actually start writing down or building their own sensory kits” - Family whānau advisor

3. Challenges in implementing sensory modulation resources

Participants appreciated the resources and were eager to engage with them. However, they also faced challenges in using and implementing these resources. These challenges can be broadly categorised into organisational issues, difficulty comprehending the topic, accessibility-related issues and the need to strengthen the relevance of the resources.

Lack of organisational support

Key issues included a lack of support from leaders and limited staffing in health. They also mentioned the lack of resources and challenges in obtaining funding for sensory tools. These factors make it challenging to engage with new training packages, even if they are designed to be flexible.

“The inpatient settings are such that I think a lot of nursing staff are not even able to do a lot of the basic training. So having the time to kind of step away from that work to probably be able just to put some time into the resources is probably really, difficult.” - Allied health NESP coordinator

“In some facilities the sensory room is kind of like an old little cupboard that isn't great. Sometimes, it gets used for storage, or it's locked. Financially, things are tight. Now, accountants are scrutinising every line of spending, questioning everything. It's not just sensory items; there's a lot of scrutiny on all our expenditures.” Team leader of the lived experience advisory team

Low awareness and perceptions of inefficiency

Participants shared that not everyone in healthcare has prior experience or knowledge in sensory regulation. This makes it hard for some users to understand the terminology and jargon but also some participants observed that staff members still prefer traditional methods, such as medication, over sensory modulation techniques. In education settings, it can be challenging for teachers to identify a sensory situation to meet the varying needs of all students.

“There is no understanding, sometimes some people can have a high sensory movement requirement and then we're being asked to medicate people because they're constantly doing laps around the facility or going into people's rooms and things like that. Some of the people that we work with, they've got very well-established ideals around what they believe is good and helpful and sometimes all they want is medication. It's very hard to get buy-in from some care staff, sometimes because they see it as more work.” - Occupational therapist - older persons mental health

“Some staff members have never been taught or come across sensory stimulation or sensory modulation, especially those new to healthcare. Training them on these concepts takes longer and this has been a challenge for some. Understanding what sensory modulation is about, the stages of human development, how our senses

develop, and how everything is linked together in sensory experiences is crucial.”

- National therapeutic recreation lead

Accessibility-related issues

The participants mentioned that locating specific resources on the Te Pou website was challenging for some. The necessity of using filters and the lack of intuitive navigation made it difficult to find what they were looking for. Additionally, the participants emphasised that the resources were not sufficiently promoted, particularly in areas like the justice system and social agencies. Despite having a range of options online, not everyone engages effectively with online resources and needs diverse training formats.

I have known about e-learning but in terms of navigating the website, I probably wouldn't have found the resources if someone didn't help me. I wouldn't know where to look for it, or that there's kind of all these other resources there. - Peer support specialist

“I did a training for the police and there was 24 people there and I took them on and showed them these resources. They didn't know the resources existed and I think people in social sector who would benefit with these resources are still unaware of these resources.”- Team leader of the lived experience advisory team

Need to strengthen the relevance of the resources

A few participants shared that the resources lacked information or focus on addiction, which is crucial for alcohol and drug services. Some also shared the lack of cultural sensory kits that cater to the diverse needs of the people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

“The basics of sensory modulation is for all of us, for every person to have a, you know, we do it naturally but, there is a correlation between the types of substances people use and their sensory modulation needs. While the resources available are excellent, they need to be adjusted to better address the addiction perspective.” - Clinical nurse lead

Looking on the website, there is something around cultural considerations. But it doesn't go into a lot of detail about, what does it look like. It kind of talks to principles and stuff, but for the clinician to kind of be able to pick it up and go, OK, well, what about this? And what about that? I think you're having more kind of explicit cultural recommendations or advice, or suggestions might be quite useful. - Allied health NESP coordinator

4. Potential solutions to address challenges

All participants appreciated the availability of these learning resources but felt they could be enhanced for better accessibility and implementation. Suggestions included improving webpage layout, increasing awareness, establishing a champions network, securing leaders' buy-in, developing more culturally specific and addiction-specific resources, and providing hands-on and specialised training. The suggestions are listed below.

Improving accessibility of the resources

Participants shared that the accessibility of the resources could be improved and included suggestions such as the following.

1. Clear tab and navigation on the main Te Pou webpage to make resources more visible and easier to find on the website.
2. Include all relevant materials on e-learning such as, videos, comic books, and other tools, making them easier to find.
3. Implement hover descriptions for each resource and opening links in a new tab could improve navigation.
4. Develop a centralised hub or portal for whānau that includes resources specific for whānau.

Awareness and continuous promotion

Raising awareness of the resources were considered crucial. Participants suggested various ways to actively promote the training package, including:

1. Host regular workshops and webinars to introduce and demonstrate the resources.
2. Gain support from leadership by creating and sharing evidence-based summaries and personal narratives. A participant (family whānau advisor) shared “*The leaders want evidence as to what's working, what's more financially beneficial, and if someone is not going into service because they've learnt the sensory modulation tools.*”
3. Establish a champions network of trained individuals who are informed about the resources and involve whānau as champions of sensory modulation.

Need for more resources

Participants appreciated the various formats and the array of resources but stated need for additional resources such as the following.

1. Strengthen the cultural components of the sensory modulation package by developing more culturally relevant resources. One participant shared “*we probably needed some more cultural components, not just for Māori and Pacific peoples but also for other nationalities as well.*”
2. Develop resources focused on the addiction sector for clinicians and inpatient units.

3. Create resources in very plain language as a prerequisite for introducing kaimahi who are new to sensory modulation, benefiting those not in health.
4. Develop resources specialised for working with specific populations, such as older adults, neurodivergent individuals, and those with complex trauma histories.
5. Offer hands-on workshops to accommodate different learning styles, allowing staff to practice using sensory modulation tools and techniques in a supportive environment.

Conclusion

Overall, the resources from the Whakaāio ā-rongo sensory modulation training package are regarded as engaging, versatile, and valuable for both personal and professional development. The inclusion of various formats, such as videos, comic books, and e-learning modules, ensures a comprehensive understanding and practical application of sensory modulation concepts. The impact on participants aligns well with the intent of the resource suite, significantly enhancing critical thinking skills among kaimahi and leading to a broader understanding of sensory needs. Participants have also noted an increased awareness of environmental modifications and culturally appropriate sensory tools. Many individuals seeking services find sensory modulation to be a powerful tool in their kete of tino rangatiratanga and healing. The training package has empowered them to better manage their sensory experiences, leading to improved well-being and self-regulation.

The resources have enabled participants to find suitable techniques for various settings and individuals, both professionally and personally. There is a strong emphasis on involving whānau in understanding and supporting sensory modulation techniques. The resources have been effective in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, inspiring participants to incorporate culturally relevant sensory modulation tools. However, there is a need for more culturally specific resources to better serve diverse communities.

Making resources more accessible, such as through downloadable packages has been beneficial, ensuring more people have the tools they need for lives that matter to them. Participants suggested several areas for improvement to enhance accessibility and implementation. These included improving webpage layout, implementing hover descriptions, and developing a centralised hub for whānau. Regular workshops, webinars, and leadership support are crucial for raising awareness and promoting the training package. By addressing these areas, the Whakaāio ā-rongo sensory modulation training package can become more accessible and effective, helping more people benefit from its resources.

Future considerations

Te Pou will consider the recommendations by participants to enhance the accessibility and usability of the resource to inform quality improvement activities.

1. Consider the suggestions made by participants to enhance the accessibility, awareness, and effectiveness of the learning resources, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of all participants.
 - Improve website navigation and accessibility.
 - Support uptake of the training package by the workforce to increase visibility of the benefits of a sensory modulation approach.
 - Create and share evidence-based summaries and personal narratives on the benefits of sensory modulation resources to gain support from leadership and stakeholders.
 - Identify and support sensory modulation champions who bring a whānau lens
 - Support kaimahi to access the sensory modulation national community of practice as a forum for sharing ideas around using the training package. .
2. Add links to relevant resources.
3. Keep healthcare professionals informed about updates and changes to the resources.

Thank you to those who generously provided insights and feedback. The feedback forms part of the Te Pou quality improvement process and will be used to further strengthen the training package, supporting uptake of sensory modulation and working towards least restrictive practice.

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Appendix A: List of resources

1. E-learning modules
2. Sensory modulation Booklet 1: Theory
3. Sensory modulation Booklet 2: Cultural responsiveness
4. Sensory modulation Booklet 3: Assessment
5. Sensory modulation Booklet 4: Sensory modulation approaches
6. Sensory modulation Booklet 5: Sensory modalities
7. Sensory modulation Booklet 6: Using in practice, bringing it all together
8. Comic following Tom's journey and associated videos
9. Arousal rating scale
10. Sensory kit template
11. Sensory cards and guidance for use
12. Sensory resources list
13. Sensory modulation procedure template
14. Using sensory modulation to support de-escalation
15. Guidelines for the use of weighted blankets
16. Sensory screening tool
17. Guideline for the use of essential oils
18. Sensory modulation brochure for the person
19. Sensory modulation brochure for whānau

Appendix B: Table showing Number of Pageviews by New Zealand Cities

New Zealand	18,644
(not set)	466
Ashburton	3
Auckland	6,705
Blenheim	19
Cambridge	29
Christchurch	2,445
Drury	2
Dunedin	1,212
Feilding	3
Gisborne	284
Gore	42
Greymouth	12
Hamilton	1,591
Hastings	663
Havelock North	6
Helensville	3
Invercargill	42
Kaikohe	2
Kerikeri	3
Levin	70
Lincoln	1
Lower Hutt	368
Masterton	36
Morrinsville	10
Mosgiel	2
Motueka	2
Mount Maunganui	69
Napier	109
Nelson	898

New Plymouth	35
Oamaru	3
Palmerston North	321
Papamoa	7
Paraparaumu	15
Porirua	119
Pukekohe	7
Queenstown	37
Rangiora	21
Red Beach	3
Richmond	17
Rotorua	203
Silverdale	38
Taupō	21
Tauranga	328
Te Awamutu	7
Te Puke	3
Tīmaru	66
Upper Hutt	98
Waiheke Island	2
Waiouru	23
Wānaka	12
Wellington	1,721
Whakatāne	60
Whanganui	311
Whangaparāoa	2
Whangārei	67