

# EMBRACING INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE TO TRANSFORM AOTEAROA'S STORMWATER MANAGEMENT – LESSONS FROM A WINSTON CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

Stormwater management in New Zealand has rapidly evolved over the last 20 years. The introduction of development controls and the integration of green infrastructure in our cities have become the norm. How stormwater effects are managed is now a key consideration of any significant development. The challenges of intensification, in an urban and rural setting, are now also better understood. However, problems continue to arise, and through improved understanding of the impacts and the true effectiveness of implemented measures, we are often realising that current practices are not sufficient or appropriate anymore.

As part of a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship, I had the opportunity to spend seven weeks meeting with industry leaders in Scandinavia and the United States of America in late 2023, understanding how other countries are managing their stormwater challenges, all for the purposes of sharing the learnings for the benefit of the industry in New Zealand. My travels took me to Stockholm, Copenhagen, Lemvig, Oslo, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Humboldt, Oxford, Denver, Boulder and Portland, offering varied approaches to stormwater related issues and opportunities.

This paper outlines the approaches of other cities and the key learnings of the fellowship. Learnings that include: the importance of an unwavering focus on the prevention of problems rather than the reliance on mitigation in light of the nature-based solutions catchphrase, clearly understanding the context of implemented measures undertaken elsewhere before adoption locally, the need for effective awareness and education initiatives, and the value of connecting people to water.

I believe New Zealand should investigate further the use of: green roofs, stormwater charging, maximising existing assets through the use of smart control, systems that require less maintenance, stream management corridors and initiatives that improve water literacy and raise awareness of the issues.

My travels reinforced that likeminded practitioners are grappling with very similar stormwater management issues across the world. Sharing experiences, failures and learnings nationally and internationally is a key way in which we can bring about positive change in Aotearoa in relation to water management.

It is essential that we continue to improve our management practices by challenging the status quo and being open to doing things differently, for the benefit of our natural environment and local communities.

## **KEYWORDS**

**International approaches, learnings, stormwater management, flood risk, green infrastructure, stream restoration, Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Aotearoa has a special affinity for water. We are an island nation, surrounded by rivers, lakes and the ocean. There is a plethora of activities Kiwis enjoy doing in or on the water. Holidays often revolve around the use of or being near a lake, the beach, or a river. For Māori, water (wai) is part of their identity and is the essence of life.

This special relationship New Zealanders have with water and the need for improved water practices, has recently brought about national legislation including the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management (NPSFM) and National Environmental Standards (NES) for Freshwater. These policy documents outline the need to better protect, value and enhance our water. They put weight on Te Mana o Te Wai, recognising that the water around us has a life force and identity. Te Mana o te Wai speaks to the aspirations of many Kiwis who want clean, bountiful rivers and lakes for the generations to come. The legislation recognises that the mauri, mana and health of each body of water should be the primary consideration before looking at using it for other purposes<sup>1</sup>.

With potential changes to how water infrastructure is managed, the wastewater, water supply and stormwater services could well be delivered in the future by larger regional organisations. These organisations will have the capacity and the legislative and societal drivers to improve water management practices across the country. With revenue sources significant enough to deliver efficient, consistent and world leading services.

Due to New Zealand's unique geographical features and cultural and social desire for improved water practices, we have the potential to be world leaders in water management. To unlock this potential, we need to be open to better ways of doing things including being abreast of innovative and revolutionary thinking from around the world. Adoption of international best practice will be crucial in improving our resilience to climate change and the water quality of our waterbodies we enjoy and cherish.

I firmly believe that we can and need to be, world leaders in the way we manage water and the environment. Our communities are demanding it and we are not alone in the challenges we face. Learning from rest of the world will be an important step to meet these challenges and expectations. The fellowship gave me a unique opportunity to explore how leading countries and cities are meeting their water management challenges and investigate innovative solutions and thinking that can be adapted to the New Zealand environment for better water quantity and quality outcomes.

Kei te ora te wai, kei te ora te whenua, kei te ora te tangata

*If the water is healthy, the land and the people are nourished*

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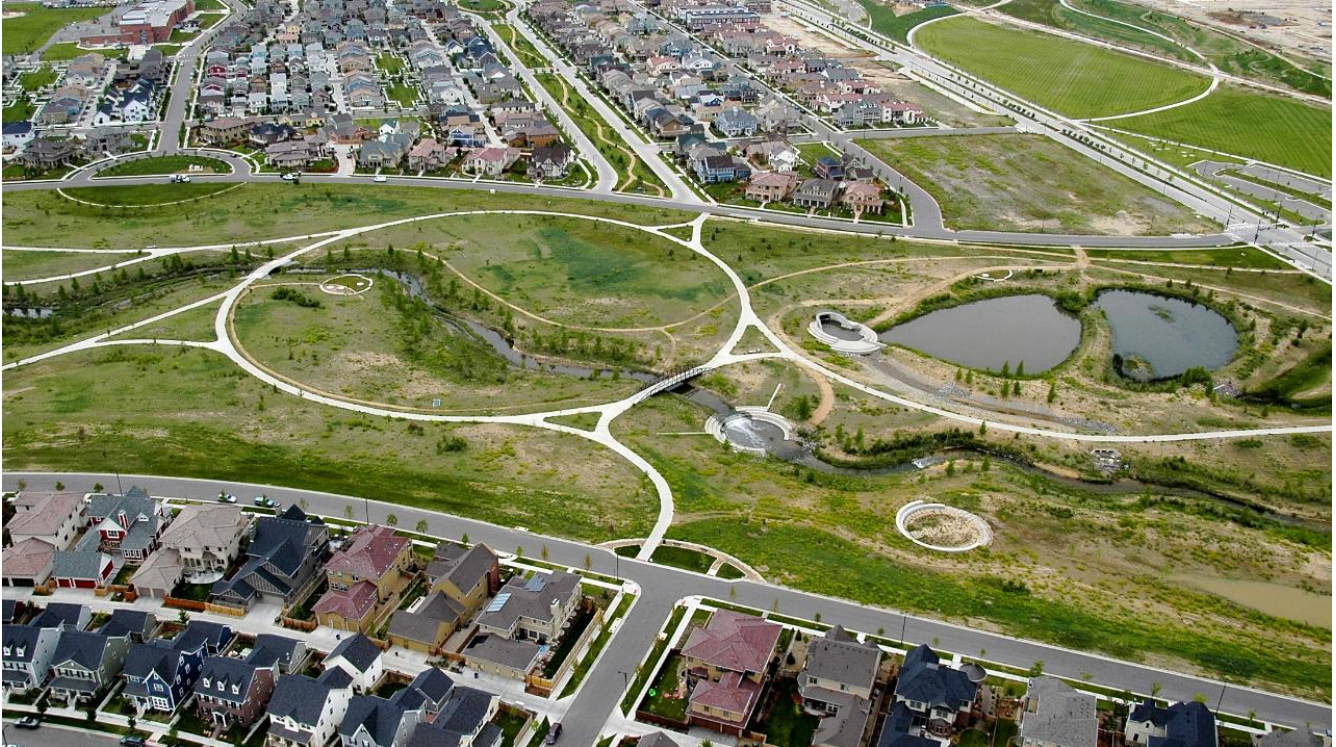
<sup>1</sup> Taken from [https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/our\\_stories/wai-ora/](https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/our_stories/wai-ora/)  
Stormwater Conference & Expo 2024

## 2 UNIQUE PRACTICES

On my travels I experienced a number of perspectives and practices that are different to what is often implemented in New Zealand. These ranged in their effectiveness but are useful to learn from either way, so we can manage stormwater and freshwater in New Zealand better for the benefit of our communities and the environment.

I found the following practices enlightening and different to what we do:

- Implementing smart asset management is becoming common practice in the USA. As an example, retrofitting stormwater ponds to become 'Smart Ponds', with the ability to control water levels remotely (on a smartphone or website) leading to reduced downstream flooding, improved water quality or stream erosion outcomes. New ponds installed with this capability have been shown to require a smaller footprint as well, which is gaining traction. Auckland, for instance has over 600 of these type of stormwater ponds and wetlands to manage which could benefit from such an approach.
- Implementing stream management corridors in Denver (Figure 1) which gives room for the river or stream to flood and move over time, based on calculating the anticipated width that the stream or river needs. They use development contributions to widen the streams in preparation of increased flows from impervious development to both improve flood capacity and reduce the likelihood of widespread erosion, but also to create linear parks along the watercourses that everyone can enjoy.



*Figure 1: Stream management corridor at Westerly Creek, Denver (Source: Mile High Flood District)*

- Prevalence of green infrastructure less common in New Zealand, specifically green roofs, but also 'climate roads' and tree pits. I found green roofs to be much more

common overseas, likely due to our cities still being relatively small on the world stage (where space is a premium), but also due to the recognised heat island effect in larger, hotter cities. Incorporating green roofs particularly in our cities, is something we should consider further.



*Figure 2: Cira Green, Philadelphia ('park in the sky') – green roof, urban park and 'roof top' bar (Source: greenroofs.com)*

- Stormwater charging or tax (a separate rates bill) is standard practice in Philadelphia and Portland and is based on the percentage of the property that is impervious. This helps to educate and influence the behaviour of people to reduce stormwater effects (e.g. allowing more water soak naturally into the ground). This hasn't been implemented in New Zealand to date but may be an effective way to help increase and secure funding for stormwater management while preventing flooding and water quality issues, by changing behaviours.
- There is a big focus on reducing the maintenance requirements of existing green infrastructure in Philadelphia. Through strict development controls requiring onsite retention, thousands of private raingardens and green infrastructure have been created. Significant maintenance and compliance are now needed to ensure the systems achieve the intended benefits. We have a similar potential problem in some of our cities.

- In Oslo combined (stormwater and wastewater in one pipe) pipe renewals are restricted to lining of the pipe rather than a full replacement. The reduction in the pipe capacity, from the liner, is offset by reduced stormwater entering the combined system, through the construction of green infrastructure to absorb water or by 'unlocking historic streams' to convey stormwater above ground. A driver for this was largely due to prohibitive costs associated with pipe renewals that involve replacing pipes by conventional excavation and relaying. This could be an alternative to the traditional stormwater pipe renewals to reduce costs and to 'green' our cities further.

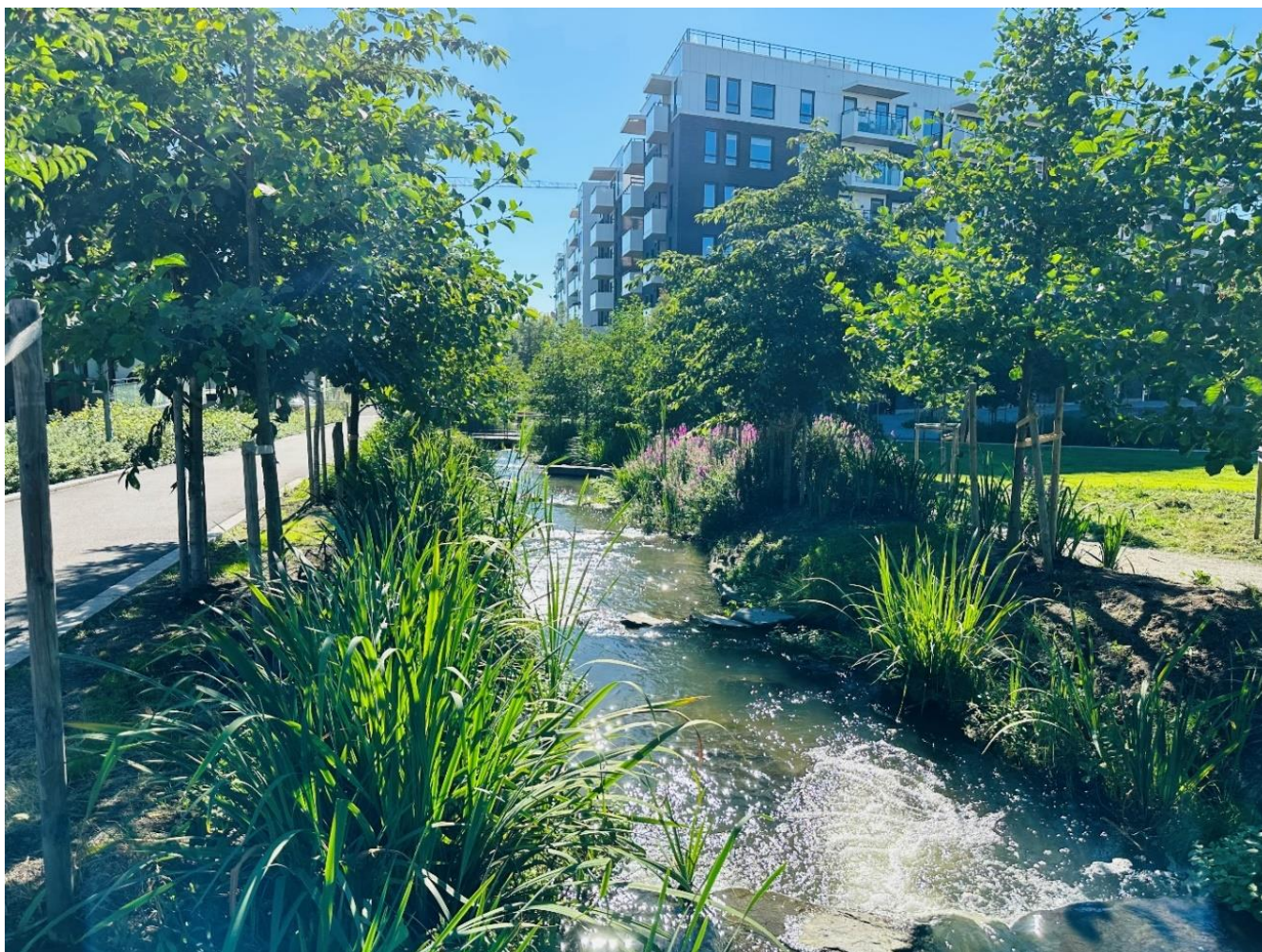
### 3 KEY LEARNINGS

After reflecting on the various perspectives, insights and experiences from my travels and interactions, that I was privileged to be part of, the key learnings from this trip include the need to:

- **Understand the context** of approaches implemented elsewhere before adoption
- **Focus on the prevention of issues** rather than relying on mitigation or adaption options
- **Facilitate cross-organisation collaboration** for improved outcomes
- Recognise the importance of **education and awareness** to unite people
- **Connect people to water** so that it is rightly valued

These learnings were themes of the trip that repeatedly arose in discussions, field visits to projects and in problems that organisations were facing (e.g. the lack of funding to address issues). They are the culmination of thoughts and perspectives on how we can successfully effect change in our industry and practices in our country.

These learnings are outlined in further details in the subsequent sections.



*Figure 3: Daylighted stream adjacent to street conveying stormwater diverted from the combined wastewater-stormwater system in Oslo*

### **3.1 UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF IMPLEMENTED MEASURES UNDERTAKEN ELSEWHERE BEFORE ADOPTION LOCALLY**

Cities and countries are facing similar challenges to New Zealand with regards to water management. New Zealand is not alone in its devastating flood events, urban development in floodplains and in the degradation of water quality and our environment. But we do have differences and these need to be well understood before considering the viability of adopting alternative international and even various approaches nationally.

Understanding the context is the first step in managing risk, and associated flood and environmental risks are no different. Every country, city, land, region, area is unique. We cannot blindly adopt a practice seen elsewhere whether overseas or in another part of New Zealand and expect that solution will suit. However, a more planned and considered approach will ensure sound management approaches are implemented successfully for the New Zealand environment.

Factors that are relevant to consider, with regards to stormwater management, are the location's climate, soils (e.g. permeability and erodibility), stormwater system, topography, nature of flooding, people and culture of the city or country etc. As an example, I witnessed Stormwater Conference & Expo 2024

some interesting stormwater management practices in Oslo, but upon further investigation, Oslo's 100yr 24hr average recurrence interval (ARI) storm event is predicted to be barely more than a third of the magnitude of Auckland's. As a result, their practices may be less effective considering Auckland's climate.

It is best to understand the drivers of certain management approaches – i.e. what led to their decision to approach it that way. Approaches and implemented measures may be specific and suit a city, region or country and may not be appropriate to adopt locally.

Furthermore, the context needs to be combined with a good understanding of what the 'problem' is. It is crucial that the problems we are facing on a micro and macro scale are well and correctly defined, to ensure that the appropriate solution is implemented. Flawed problem definition is the cause of a lot of the recurring issues we face. A theoretical example of this, is for someone to say "this house flooded due to water flowing overland" and they go on to say "due to an under-capacity stormwater pipe". Based on this version of the problem, the correct solution appears to be to upsize the stormwater pipe, to ensure that there is no overland flow and that the house doesn't flood. When in fact the real problem is that historically we consented a house in an overland flow path, or there is not an adequate overland flow path around the house to safely convey the flood water.

In summary, New Zealand is a unique country with varying landscapes and challenges. We need to define problems appropriately, and consider the variability and differences of our country before adopting different stormwater management practices from around the world.

### **3.2 FOCUS ON THE PREVENTION OF ISSUES RATHER THAN THE RELIANCE ON MITIGATION OR ADAPTION OPTIONS**

We fall too easily into the trap of trying to mitigate the issues that we experience from urban or rural intensification. As practitioners most of our work is focusing on addressing the 'symptom' and not actually the underlying problem. We avoid trying to change the behaviour of people or a practice and put our effort into attempting to mitigate the resulting effects.

We struggle with implementing preventative measure, I believe, due to a few reasons:

- Prevention involves changing people's behaviour – which is often difficult to do and requires investment of time, money and the skillset of trained individuals.
- It is often challenging to demonstrate the benefits of an implemented strategy or policy (both forward looking or retrospectively).
- There is a tendency to build and maintain physical infrastructure over implementing an effective strategy or policy.
- We are focused on how to address an individual problem at a location without stepping back to consider the collective issue or wider cumulative effects.

We have lured ourselves into a false sense of security thinking we have mitigated the effects, at least down to an acceptable level. However, as time goes on, we are realising that our practices are not effective enough, lead to unintended consequences, or there are things that we didn't understand well enough about our environment.

An international example of this, which I discovered on my travels in the USA, is where a chemical compound found in car tyres, 6ppd, has recently been found to be toxic to salmon and other fish. When tires wear down through contact with roads, these particles are released and when it rains these particles are washed downstream to streams and other water bodies. This is a significant and emerging issue for the pacific northwest of the USA.



*Figure 4: 6ppd-quinone – a toxic chemical found in tyres has been recently discovered to be deadly to coho salmon (Photo by Roger Tabor, US Fish and Wildlife)*

### **3.3 FACILITATE CROSS-ORGANISATION COLLABORATION FOR IMPROVED OUTCOMES**

One of the barriers to improved water management practices, particularly in our cities in New Zealand, is the lack of integration and apparent disconnect between organisations. Naturally organisations are setup with a fixed vision and mandate, for them to focus their work on, however this vision is often narrow and specific to their own organisation and can lead to a 'silo' based mentality, with associated biases.

On my travels to Scandinavia, I noticed effective collaboration between entities and organisations. In Stockholm there were roading engineers constructing stormwater sensitive 'climate roads' and tree pits. In Copenhagen they had a hybrid team in charge of retrofitting their parks and reserves with water management in mind. In Oslo there were wastewater engineers implementing green infrastructure or stream daylighting to separate stormwater from the combined system, to ultimately reduce the treatable wastewater volume. Another example of where I observed collaboration was in Stockholm, where the



water organisation pays an employee to be based in the transport organisation to facilitate good outcomes.

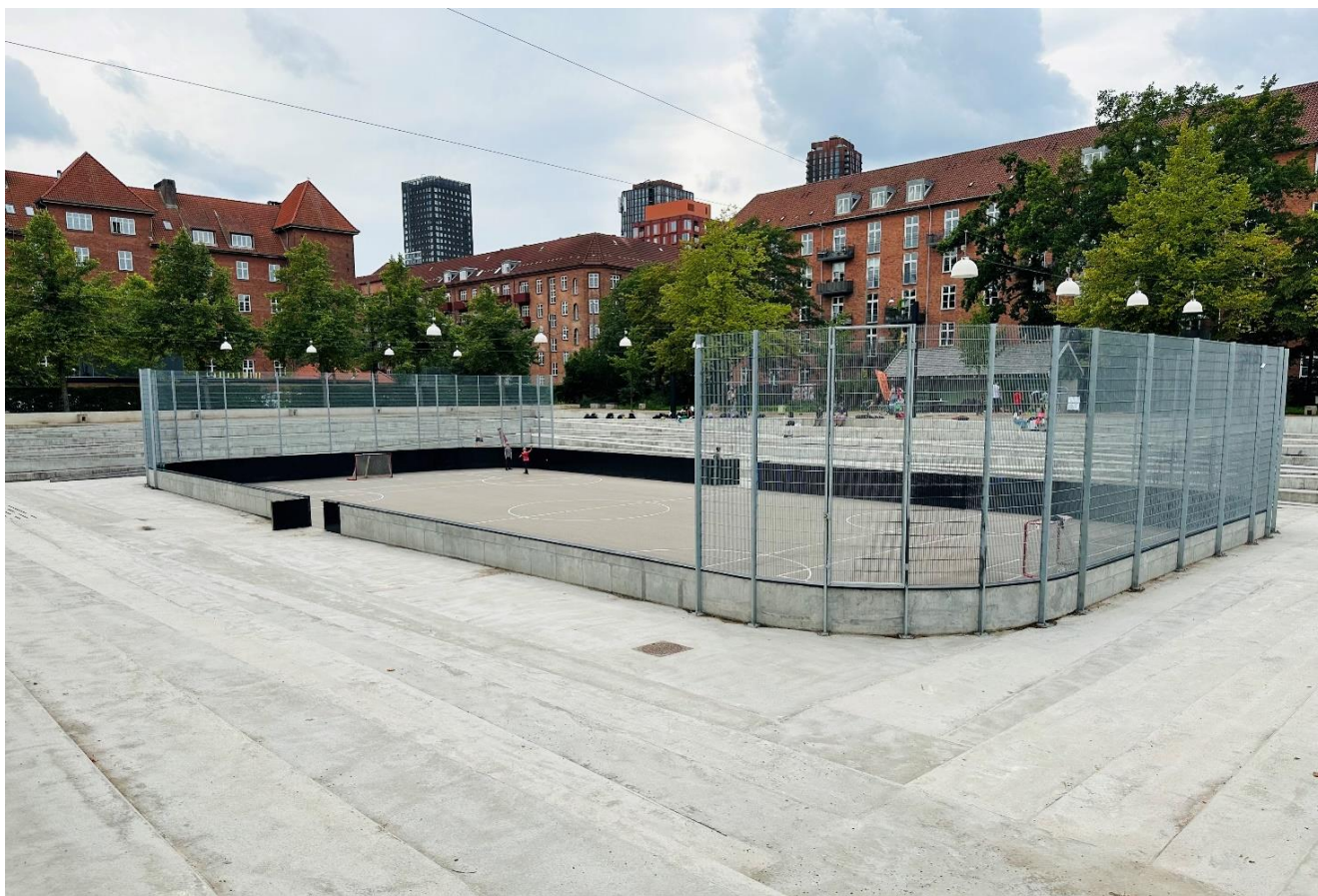


*Figure 5: Enghaveparken – Climate Park, Copenhagen (Source: State of Green)*

Some thoughts on how we can have more effective cross-organisation collaboration:

- Formally tasking teams and organisations to collaborate
- Having a shared vision or outcome that multiple organisations are trying to achieve
- Seconding or having permanent staff in other organisations to promote collaboration
- Organise regular webinars with other teams, organisations and industries to share, educate and inspire

This seemed to at least partly explain Scandinavia’s ability to have multiple organisations on the same page – to facilitate the integration of water management solutions in the city landscape. Cross-organisation ‘pollination’ and collaboration is critical to achieving better outcomes for the community and environment and something that we in New Zealand need to further encourage.



*Figure 6: Sunken multi sports 'court' designed to temporarily store flood water as part of Enghaveparken, Copenhagen*

### **3.4 IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND AWARENESS OF THE ISSUES**

One of the things that become evident through the course of my travels was the importance of educating and making people aware of the stormwater management issues. We need to focus on raising awareness, educating and increasing engagement in water issues in our communities, 'sister' organisations and politicians to get better traction.

Generally, people don't know where their water comes from, where it goes, what the issues are, or how to help. We need everyone to be onboard, not just those in the room. We tend to 'preach to the choir' but need for others to see the importance of the issues. Improved water literacy in the community will bring about better behaviour and practices associated with water management and help to secure funding of initiatives.

I believe it needs a targeted approach to all areas and levels of society including schools, the wider community, politicians and the media. Recently 'water' has been given a lot of attention from the media in New Zealand, but there is still a long way to go to get the right messages across. We need more social scientists, teachers and marketers in our water industry.

Extreme rainfall events are becoming more common but are still rare. People easily forget about what previously happened and get complacent or are new to areas prone to flooding. In Ribe, in Denmark and Washington D.C. there were sculptures and monuments standing to visually remind people of the historic flood levels that occurred in the past.



*Figure 7: Historic water marks in Washington D.C., USA (Source: Wayside Studio) and 100-year-old flood column in Ribe, Denmark*

I visited the Klimatorium in Lemvig, Denmark. Its purpose to bring people together to discuss and address the climate challenges we face. The ground floor was dedicated to raising awareness of the issues through interactive exhibits demonstrating the climate challenges such as sea level rise, and coastal and stream erosion, as well as presenting some innovative solutions. The setup was similar to a science museum.



Figure 9: Interactive exhibits at the Klimatorium in Lemvig, Denmark

At the Denver aquarium there is a flash flooding simulator, demonstrating the power and speed that water can have, bringing this type of flooding to life for people. At the West Tennessee River Basin Authority, they have tools to demonstrate the effect of channel straightening on peak flows, velocities and timings, and the subsequent stream erosion.

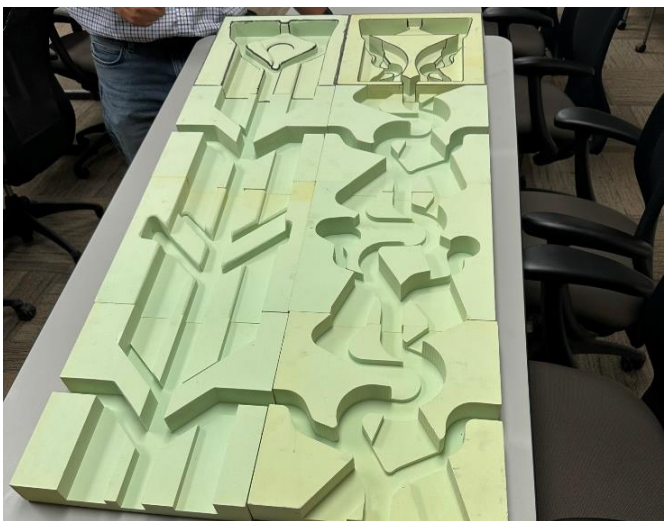


Figure 8: Dynamic education tools at the West Tennessee River Basin Authority

To bring about effective change in New Zealand, I believe we need to invest more in demonstrating the challenges we face to the community, bringing our challenges and issues to life.

### 3.5 VALUE OF ‘CONNECTING’ PEOPLE TO WATER

A key theme that came through the meetings and site visits was the value of connecting people to water. I believe if water is absent, dirty or unclear it will eventually not be an important part of people’s lives, but if people see and interact with water they are more likely to value and appreciate it.

Historically, we’ve piped stormwater – effectively hiding it below ground. With this approach in a normal rain event stormwater is captured by gutters or catchpits and drained away in pipes never to be seen again. However, when an extreme storm event occurs, people are often surprised to see water flowing overland, but this is exactly what will happen when the pipes cannot take the flow (they are typically not designed to do this). This reliance on the piped infrastructure is not helping address fundamental issues of understanding. Our communities need to be more ‘in tune’ with the climate as this will help everyone to be on the same page as to the issues and appropriate management approaches.

In Copenhagen, Oslo and Denver in particular, there were many great examples of projects and practices with a focus on people interacting with water. Projects that introduced stepping stones for people to walk down and across streams, for people to swim and dive into the ocean and streams daylighted adjacent to footpaths and streets for people to hear, see and experience nature.



*Figure 10: Westminster Station Park, Denver (Source: Mile High Flood District)*

In Denver they have introduced online, engineered water parks, including rapids and standing waves for recreational rafting and surfing. Spaces don't need to be as engineered as those examples but the principle, in terms of connecting people to water, so it's rightly valued in society still applies.



*Figure 11: River Run Park Denver (Source: Endless Waves)*

We need to develop spaces for people to play, celebrate and interact with water. We have good examples in our waterfront areas, but we could be doing a lot more. Concerns over safety often prevail and provide barriers to re-connection to our water bodies which is so critically to better management and outcomes.

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

Overall, this fellowship has been a transformative journey, equipping me with the perspectives needed to make a meaningful contribution to the stormwater industry in New Zealand. Through this experience I hope to inspire others to think differently about how we approach managing stormwater. I have shared my experiences back in New Zealand through conversations, presentations and articles and my hope is that with enough exposure the industry can pivot to a different approach and focus.

As recent destructive flood events have demonstrated, there is a need for improved practices in how we manage flood risk in the country. With our lakes, streams and rivers currently suffering from increased contaminants from agriculture, forestry and urban development, we need to change how we do things if we are to expect the water quality

that we desire in our freshwater and coastal waterbodies. With aging infrastructure and a lack of investment we need a significant increase in funding alongside doing things smarter.

Armed with the learnings, lessons and best practice from around the world and combined with local indigenous knowledge, we can respond to our current challenges with fresh perspectives and renewed zeal to ensure this country remains a great place to live and to visit.

My recommendations for the water industry of New Zealand align with the key fellowship learnings. We need to embrace international practices and learnings while at the same time:

- Understanding the context of approaches elsewhere before adoption
- Focusing on the prevention of issues rather than relying on mitigation or adaption options
- Facilitating cross-organisation collaboration for improved outcomes
- Recognising the importance of education and awareness to unite people
- Connecting people to water so that it is rightly valued

I am grateful for the opportunity that the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust has provided me for this fellowship and wish to thank them for their confidence and investment.

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