

Christchurch International Airport: Creating Space for Future Generations



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Like many leadership teams, those at the helm of Christchurch International Airport (CIAL) understand acutely the urgency to reduce our emissions in order to give us a chance of keeping temperatures within 1.5 degrees, as increasingly unlikely as that may be.

They also recognise that while businesses and regulators familiarise themselves with reduction pathways, what is also critical is ensuring our move to a low carbon future happens alongside adaptation, with people and a just transition at the heart of thinking.

“To address our global climate crisis, we need to collectively undertake one of the most substantial transitions in human history,” says the airport’s Sustainable Transition Leader Claire Waghorn.

“For Aotearoa New Zealand, this may be the biggest change since colonisation – and we must do better this time round.”



And for CIAL, building a truly sustainable outcome that endures means taking inspiration from a mātauranga Māori approach, where those most vulnerable are considered and the rights of future generations to inhabit a safe planet and live meaningful prosperous lives are honoured.

An intergenerational history

You only need to look at its history to discover why intergenerational thinking is second nature at CIAL, and a crucial part of future planning.

In 1935 a surveyor named Mr A.R. Galbraith was tasked with the job of mapping where an airport might be established in Ōtautahi Christchurch. Issued with a council bicycle, protractor, pencils and notepad, he went about mapping out 1000 hectares of land to the west of the city.

While Mr Galbraith obviously didn't have all the answers as to future use of the land back then, he understood that setting this land aside for the purpose of an airport would be incredibly important to future generations. Five years later, in 1940, Christchurch Airport officially opened.

A Green Transition Plan

The company's decarbonisation journey started in 2006, becoming the first airport in the world to have an independently audited carbon footprint. Benchmarking themselves against airports they most admired for their leadership in carbon, waste and water management, they developed their Green Transition Plan – in effect, their first emissions reduction pathway. It laid out the projects needed to undertake across the business to demonstrate global best practice.

As its work progressed, CIAL quickly became recognised globally for their leadership in this space, becoming the world's first airport to reach the highest level of airport carbon reduction in November 2020.



This led to a number of requests from within the sector to share their learnings – stretching from the Ports of New York and New Jersey to Asia Pacific Airports, to those in Australia and at home.

“We made a conscious decision then that everything we do in sustainability will be open-source. To have a fighting chance at addressing our climate, we need everyone on board, so we wanted to share all we have learnt in this space. We began formally mentoring some, and running workshops and presentations for others,” says Claire Waghorn.

A Just Transition

Alongside sharing their knowledge, developing an understanding of transitional risks also plays a major part in the CIAL team’s planning.

“What we know is transition will not affect everyone equally, so we must consider those most vulnerable within our pathways, and allow space for the voices of future generations,” Claire says.

An example of those considerations came as the team forged ahead with the reduction pathway for land-based transport, and found they had to pause when they got to taxis and shuttles.

“Where we wanted to expedite policy to swap combustion engine taxis for zero emission alternatives, it became apparent this would grossly affect the livelihood of a group without the immediate capital to make that transition.”

“So, we found another way – signalling that in time we would give preference to zero emission alternatives. Thankfully now we also have government incentives for purchasing clean vehicles, which further supports the transition of that group,” says Claire.

CIAL also consciously invites groups expressing concerns about their business to talk directly with them – be that Extinction Rebellion, School Strike For Climate, young or old, technical or otherwise. The team believes being open to dialogue, especially with those of seemingly divergent viewpoints is critical to a just transition.

“In doing so, we can better address the impact of our transition, and in some cases, realise ultimately we share a vision to protect the needs of future generations.”



Those future generations were front of mind when the airport company announced late last year the development of a large-scale renewable energy precinct known as Kōwhai Park. Through the generation of zero emission renewable electricity, including battery storage, and green hydrogen the park aims to serve the needs of future generations as the team continue to work to decarbonise aviation and the wider region.

“Some 80 years and many Master Plans later, we remain grateful to Mr Galbraith for his intergenerational foresight. We still don’t have all the answers, but we remain guided by our just transition principles of honouring people, planet and prosperity in parallel, both now and in considering the needs of our future generations.”

About Christchurch International Airport

We believe, as citizens of the South Island, it's our responsibility and privilege to be caretakers of this very special place. Our focus is to seek out, develop and implement more sustainable processes whereby all change becomes a permanent feature of our business and within the Airport campus. We are focused on evolving our business to be enduringly sustainable and we choose to focus our sustainability efforts across five key areas of water, energy, waste, land and noise.

About SBC

SBC is a member organisation that connects businesses, partners, and sectors to create impact that no single business could achieve alone. We work with executives and sustainability professionals to maximise their positive impact for shareholders, communities and the environment. We hold our members to account by asking them to fulfil member commitments. We deliver impact by championing our members to be at the leading-edge of sustainability and inspire other businesses to take action.