

Submission on NZ Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Housing Affordability

February 2012



Introduction

The Whangarei Accessible Housing Trust (WAHT) is committed to providing affordable, accessible housing for people with disabilities in Whangarei, as well as supporting and providing information, advice and support relating to housing and accessibility issues.

The Trust was incorporated in October 2006 and is governed by a Board comprising a chairperson and four trustees. Two trustees represent CCS Disability Action, who partner with the Trust. The other three trustees are personally acquainted with the issues relating to living with disability, and ensure that the Trust Board directly represents the community it serves.

We are part of the Northland Housing Forum Working Party which ensures that we work collaboratively with other organisations in the region to address the housing issues at hand.

We currently have twelve rental properties in Whangarei, eight of which we purchased and then refurbished and four new build houses. They all meet Barrier Free NZ standards in terms of accessibility.

Social Housing

The Trust fully endorses the summary of issues in terms of the social housing context as outlined in the "Cut to the Chase" document. The individuals and whanau that the Trust primarily works with are among the most disadvantaged groups in society i.e. disabled people. Home ownership, whilst not a human right per se, is a concept / ideal which is entrenched in several articles that form part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, namely Articles 19, 23 and 28. Objective 8 in the New Zealand Disability Strategy is also about supporting quality living in the community for disabled people.

Our Trust is acutely aware of the financial and attitudinal issues facing the people we support or who come to us for assistance. People with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and have lower household incomes than those without disabilities. Moreover, they are more likely than people without disability to live in households in the more socioeconomically deprived areas of New Zealand.¹

These realities represent huge barriers to people with disabilities owning their own home or renting a home. Another problem they face is the lack of fully accessible housing stock available to rent or buy. The importance of fully accessible housing with features such as wet area bathrooms, wider hallways, level access etc. so people with disabilities can live independently cannot be underestimated.

¹ *Living with Disability in New Zealand: Summary*, Ministry of Health 2005 pp 38-47
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The Commission is absolutely correct when stating that the challenges faced in the social housing sector are more complex than simply providing a house to those who cannot afford to rent or buy. Our Trust works in partnership with CCS Disability Action Northern Region so that people have access to a range of supports within a holistic framework.

The community housing sector in New Zealand is small and fragmented.² Community-based providers such as ourselves, although small in scale, can and do provide quality outcomes to our tenants. This quality of living cannot be measured accurately using a simple “cost per bedroom” analysis, as the stand-alone properties we provide are always going to be more expensive than blocks of one or two bedroom flats. So although the supply of social housing stock may not increase markedly through the work of small providers, their contribution is still important and deserving of support from the government. Encouragement of greater collaboration between social housing providers may be a way of increasing scale and this could be facilitated by such agencies as the Social Housing Unit.

The “Home and Housed” report identified three recommendations to develop the non-governmental sector, specifically working with non-governmental sector groups and Iwi to develop the ‘pre-housing’ and ‘cost-based’ sectors that can deliver more intensely supported housing for high needs individuals, transfer either capital or dwellings to selected NGOs to initially meet 20% of this sector’s needs in five years, thereby developing a number of scale and niche providers and support with IRRS (income-related rent subsidy), not AS (accommodation supplement) payments to develop the financial viability of NGOs serving the ‘high needs’ segment.³ The definition of ‘high needs’ is “Circumstantial, physical or behavioural characteristics which make it unlikely that a person would be able to sustain a tenancy or own a home in the private sector.”⁴

As a niche provider serving the ‘high needs’ segment, we would welcome any changes to the current system which would enhance housing affordability for the people we represent. We acknowledge that it will take time to develop and implement these changes. Housing affordability is a problem which affects many income groups. However, in New Zealand we have historically recognised that those in greatest need require the most assistance and any new initiatives or directions should continue that tradition.

² *Home and Housed: A vision for Social Housing in New Zealand*; Housing Shareholders Advisory Group, 2010 page 55

³ *Home and Housed: A vision for Social Housing in New Zealand*; Housing Shareholders Advisory Group, 2010 pages 56 -57

⁴ *Home and Housed: A vision for Social Housing in New Zealand*; Housing Shareholders Advisory Group, 2010 page 91