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Using information to improve social housing services



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Overview

Having a safe and secure home in good condition is essential for people's well-being and quality of life. Providing houses for people who are struggling to secure appropriate accommodation is an important public service.

In New Zealand, social housing includes state houses owned by Housing New Zealand Corporation (Housing New Zealand), houses leased by Housing New Zealand, and housing provided by local authorities and non-governmental organisations. Most social housing is provided by Housing New Zealand.

People who need social housing can be some of the most vulnerable in our society. A significant proportion require social services, including for medical, mental health, and addiction conditions. It is important for Housing New Zealand to have a good understanding of tenants' needs and its role in supporting them.

We looked at how well Housing New Zealand uses information to:

- manage tenancies;
- maintain houses; and
- manage and invest in new and existing social housing.

Since 2014, there have been significant changes in the social housing sector. Previously, Housing New Zealand was solely responsible for allocating people to houses. Currently, the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) assesses people's eligibility for social housing and manages the social housing register (a record of people assessed as eligible for and awaiting social housing).

The new Government has indicated that the way social housing is delivered is likely to change further. This report was written before the detail of these changes was known.

Housing New Zealand has an important and challenging role. It uses a lot of information when placing people in houses and managing their tenancies. For many tenants, this information supports a successful tenancy. However, there are opportunities for Housing New Zealand to use information better to improve services for its tenants.

Using information better would also allow Housing New Zealand to be more responsive to its tenants' needs. This includes informing them about the quality of housing they can expect, progress on maintenance jobs, and who to contact when issues arise. It needs to be easy for people to contact Housing New Zealand and to be informed about progress on any issues affecting their tenancy.

Housing New Zealand could improve its planning and management of house maintenance by having a more detailed understanding of the condition of its houses. Housing New Zealand could also further analyse existing information and use it to improve the co-ordination of maintenance work.

We also looked at information the Ministry provides to Housing New Zealand to help with decision-making. In my view, although Housing New Zealand and the Ministry have strengthened their approaches to sharing information in the last three years, they need to work more closely together.

For example, a person with mobility problems was offered a two-storey house because the Ministry and Housing New Zealand did not collect and share the right information. Such instances might be rare, but when they occur they are unnecessary and stressful for the tenant.

Stronger leadership on information sharing is needed from both organisations to allow Housing New Zealand to place people in the right homes and meet their needs during their tenancies more effectively.

Housing New Zealand's ability to prepare a longer-term investment plan is adversely affected by the absence of a coherent long-term social housing strategy. This social housing strategy should also include how future demand for social housing can be met.

A longer-term asset investment plan, which is currently under development, will help Housing New Zealand make investment decisions that strengthen the well-being of people in social housing and help to create well-functioning communities.

Regardless of what changes are made to the delivery of social housing, effective use of information is vital for the best delivery of services and meeting tenants' needs.

We have made several recommendations to improve the way Housing New Zealand uses information to deliver better services for its tenants.

I thank the staff of Housing New Zealand, the Ministry, people in other organisations my staff talked to, and the social service organisations and advocacy groups that took part in our survey for their time and co-operation.



Greg Schollum
Deputy Controller and Auditor-General

14 December 2017

Our recommendations

1. We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation give its staff clearer guidance and better processes to support getting the information they need to effectively place people in social housing and for ongoing tenancy management.
2. We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation and the Ministry of Social Development:
 - improve the way information about people applying for social housing and who subsequently move into a Housing New Zealand house is shared; and
 - strengthen the relationships between their staff, particularly frontline staff, ensuring that they have a clear understanding of each organisation's role and functions.
3. We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation continue to improve communication with its tenants so they can easily contact someone to deal with any issues.
4. We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation better inform its tenants about the likely timing and progress of maintenance work and what they can expect in terms of housing quality.
5. We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation expand on the extent of its information on the condition of its houses, further analyse the maintenance information, and better co-ordinate planned and as-required maintenance work.
6. We recommend that:
 - Housing New Zealand Corporation develop a longer-term asset investment plan;
 - government organisations involved in the housing sector (Housing New Zealand Corporation, the Ministry of Social Development, the Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment) prepare a long-term strategy for social housing, including how demand will be met; and
 - the Ministry of Social Development set longer-term purchasing intentions and clearer expectations of quality, quantity, and availability of social housing.

1

Introduction

- 1.1 In this Part, we discuss:
- why we did our audit;
 - who and what we audited;
 - what we did not audit;
 - how we carried out our audit; and
 - the structure of this report.

Why we did our audit

- 1.2 Housing New Zealand Corporation (Housing New Zealand) manages about 63,000 properties. Its housing portfolio, valued at \$25.2 billion at 30 June 2017, is one of the Crown's largest asset portfolios. Housing New Zealand provides homes to about 180,000 people.¹
- 1.3 Increasing numbers of tenants in social housing have needs requiring social support, including financial hardship, mental illness, disability, and addiction issues. It is important that people who are eligible for social housing are placed in the right house, in the right location, and at the right time for as long as they need it.
- 1.4 We decided to do this audit to assess whether Housing New Zealand was using information effectively to meet the needs of its tenants. It is Housing New Zealand's responsibility to provide houses that are well maintained, that are suitably located, and that meet the needs of people living in them.

Who and what we audited

- 1.5 In 2014, the then Government introduced the Social Housing Reform Programme, which implemented substantial changes to the way social housing is managed. The programme allowed community housing providers to also provide social housing.
- 1.6 Community housing providers include organisations such as Māori organisations, not-for-profit companies, charitable trusts, and incorporated societies. In June 2017, registered community housing providers provided 4720 social housing places. The intention of the Social Housing Reform Programme was that, over time, Housing New Zealand would have a smaller role in providing social housing.
- 1.7 Housing New Zealand provides about 95% of social housing. However, the Social Housing Reform Programme has significantly changed its role. The Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) now assesses people's eligibility for social housing. The Ministry also manages the social housing register.

¹ Housing New Zealand also manages several other activities, such as the Kiwisaver HomeStart grant, Welcome Home Loans, and the First Home Ownership Scheme.

1.8 Figure 1 shows the responsibilities of Housing New Zealand and the Ministry in providing social housing.

Figure 1
Responsibilities of the Ministry of Social Development and Housing New Zealand for social housing

The Ministry's responsibilities	Housing New Zealand's responsibilities
Setting purchasing intentions and purchasing social housing places.	Preparing vacant houses for people to live in.
Assessing people applying for social housing.	Getting a list of people who might be suitable for the property from the Ministry.
Managing the social housing register.	Selecting a suitable person from the list provided by the Ministry and arranging for them to sign a tenancy agreement.
Updating Housing New Zealand if a tenant's circumstances change because it might affect eligibility for social housing.	Updating the Ministry if a tenant's circumstances change because it might affect eligibility for social housing.
Providing Housing New Zealand with a list from the social housing register of people applying for social housing when a house becomes available.	Collecting the rent.
Assessing how much rent people in social housing pay.	Regularly inspecting the property, including identifying health and safety issues.
Doing tenancy reviews.	Responding to maintenance requests from people in social housing.
	Managing tenancy issues and connecting with support agencies as appropriate.
	Managing the portfolio of assets, including programmed maintenance, redeveloping existing houses, building new houses, and selling houses.

1.9 Other organisations have important roles to play in social housing. The Community Housing Regulatory Authority, which approves, registers, and monitors community housing providers, is part of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. The Treasury has oversight of Housing New Zealand and provides advice and guidance to the Government on the Social Housing Reform Programme and its initiatives. The Treasury's Transactions Unit managed the transfer of some social housing to community housing providers.

1.10 Our performance audit assessed how well Housing New Zealand is using information to make decisions about tenancy management, asset maintenance, and investment in its houses. We expected Housing New Zealand to use

information to make well-informed decisions to support the current and future needs of its tenants.

- 1.11 Specifically, our audit looked at whether Housing New Zealand is:
- using information to effectively meet the needs of people when placing them in a house;
 - meeting people’s ongoing needs once they are housed;
 - using information effectively to maintain social housing;
 - using information effectively to support social housing management and investment decisions; and
 - effectively sharing information about its tenants and their needs with the Ministry.

What we did not audit

- 1.12 We did not audit:
- the effectiveness of the information systems Housing New Zealand has to manage its information because we wanted to focus on how it uses information to support decision-making;
 - policy decisions, including the Social Housing Reform Programme; and
 - the performance of other social housing providers, including community housing providers.

How we carried out our audit

- 1.13 To carry out our audit, we:
- reviewed more than 150 documents;
 - interviewed about 100 people from Housing New Zealand, the Ministry, the Treasury, and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, including frontline staff and national office staff from Housing New Zealand and the Ministry – tenancy managers, placement staff, operational managers, general managers, and case managers housing – and staff from the inter-agency teams from both organisations;
 - did fieldwork in Dunedin, Auckland, Wellington, and Porirua;
 - observed systems and processes used by staff from both Housing New Zealand and the Ministry; and
 - sent out a survey to social service organisations and advocacy groups who work with Housing New Zealand’s tenants in Dunedin, Auckland, and Porirua. They included a wide range of groups, including those that work with people with

mental health issues, with older people, and with families, including those that work specifically with Pasifika and Māori families. We sent the survey to 21 groups and received 18 responses.

Structure of this report

- 1.14 In Part 2, we provide an overview of social housing.
- 1.15 In Part 3, we consider how Housing New Zealand uses information for placing people in houses and the information needed for ongoing tenancy management.
- 1.16 In Part 4, we look at how Housing New Zealand could improve its services to its tenants by using its own information better, sharing information, and collaborating better with the Ministry.
- 1.17 In Part 5, we look at how well Housing New Zealand understands the condition of its houses and how it uses information to make decisions on the maintenance of its houses.
- 1.18 In Part 6, we consider how effectively Housing New Zealand uses information to make investment decisions, such as buying and selling houses, and redeveloping and refurbishing its existing houses.

2

About social housing

- 2.1 In this Part, we outline:
- Housing New Zealand's role in providing social housing; and
 - the demand for social housing.

Housing New Zealand's role in providing social housing

- 2.2 Housing New Zealand provides social housing throughout New Zealand. As at 30 April 2017, Housing New Zealand managed about 63,000 state houses. Building, acquiring, and redeveloping new houses is a major part of Housing New Zealand's role. Housing New Zealand also disposes of houses that are unsuitable or surplus to demand in a particular area.

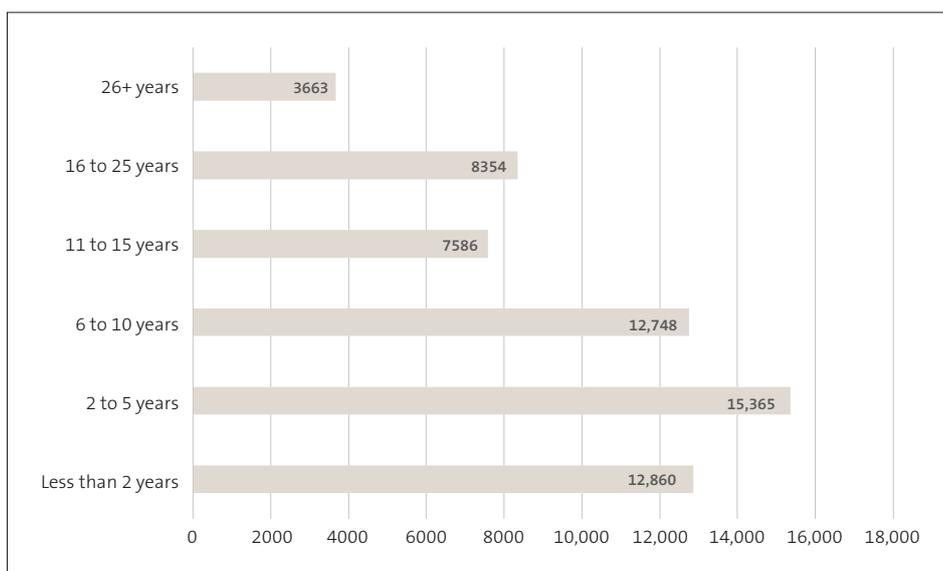
- 2.3 Housing New Zealand's role is to provide homes that are in good condition to people most in need. Housing New Zealand acts as a property manager and collects rent, helps people maintain their houses, and ensures that houses are maintained to a good standard.

People in social housing

- 2.4 About 180,000 people live in Housing New Zealand homes, many of which are located in areas of high social deprivation.²
- 2.5 Housing New Zealand's main tenants are diverse. In 2016/17, about 35% identified as Māori, 27% as Pacific peoples, and 36% as European. Housing New Zealand also provides houses to refugees.
- 2.6 Although about 27% of the New Zealand population is 55 years old and over, about 41% of Housing New Zealand's main tenants are in this age group.
- 2.7 Figure 2 shows how long tenants have been living in Housing New Zealand's houses.

² Areas of high social deprivation are associated with poorer outcomes for people, including financial hardship, lower educational achievement, overcrowding, and higher crime rates.

Figure 2
Current length of stay of the main tenant in a Housing New Zealand house, 2017



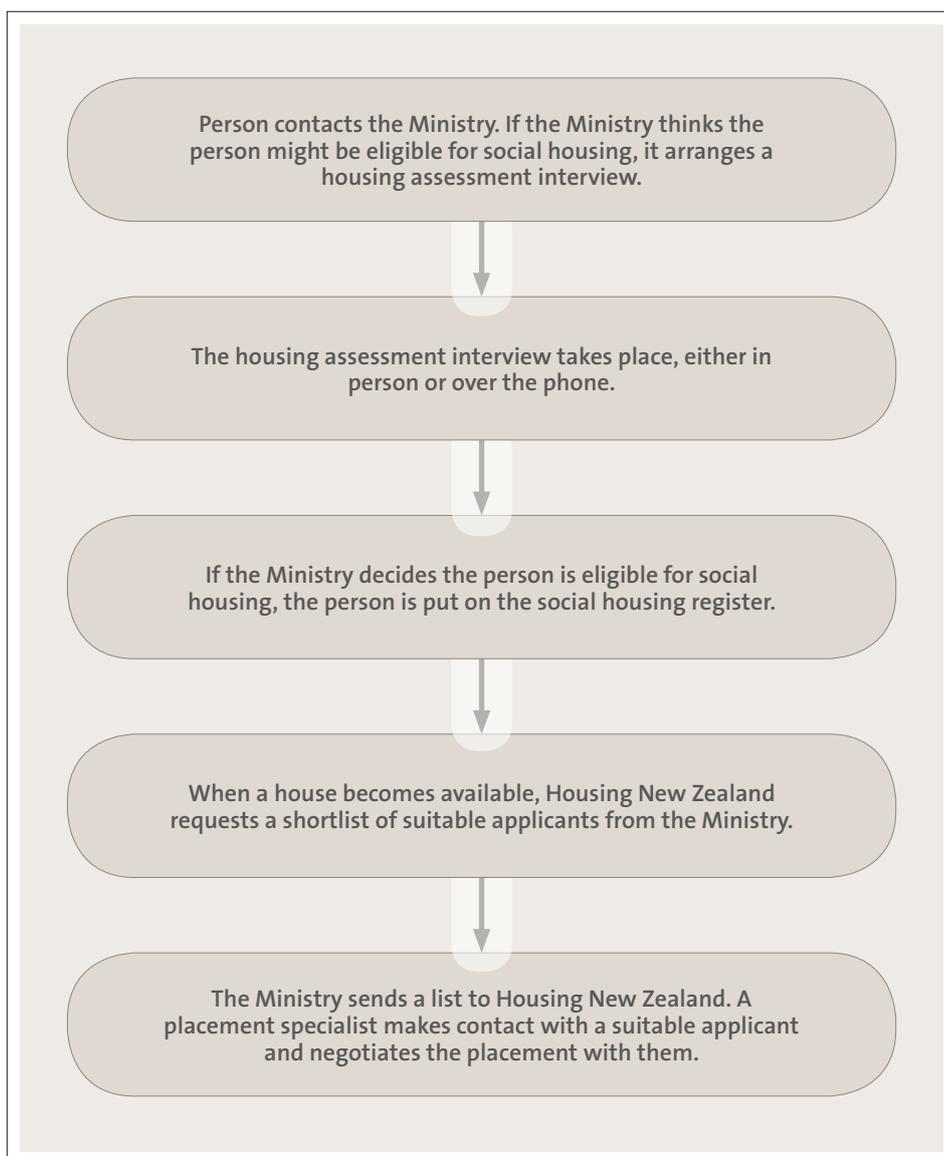
Source: Based on Housing New Zealand Corporation's data.

- 2.8 The rent that most tenants pay is based on their level of income rather than what the market would charge. The Ministry pays the difference. This is called “income-related rent”. In June 2017, 97.4% of Housing New Zealand’s tenants were paying income-related rent, and the other 2.6% were paying full market rent.

Applying for social housing

- 2.9 Figure 3 summarises the process people go through when applying for social housing.

Figure 3
The process a person goes through to get a Housing New Zealand house



Demand for social housing

- 2.10 The number of people on the social housing register has increased from 3877 in June 2016 to 5844 (with an A and B priority – see paragraph 2.12) in September 2017, plus an additional 1483 on the transfer register.³ The high cost of rent and limited number of houses in some areas are the main factors contributing to the increased number of people waiting for a house.
- 2.11 People on a low income or with complex needs are likely to miss out on private rentals when landlords have other people to choose from. This also increases the demand for social housing.

Increase in numbers of people with high needs

- 2.12 People on the social housing register are given a “need score” out of 20 (20 being the highest need) and a priority category (A for high priority and B for lower priority). This is intended to ensure that people with the greatest need are housed as quickly as possible.
- 2.13 In some instances, people are placed at the top of the register for the next available suitable house, even if there are people with a higher rating than them. This is called fast track. The fast track policy currently applies to households at risk of rheumatic fever in some North Island district health board areas.
- 2.14 At the time of our audit, more than 90% of applicants being housed had a priority A rating. As at September 2017, there was a median time of 50 days to house people on the social housing register.
- 2.15 The number of people housed with complex needs is also increasing. These needs include:
- limited life skills;
 - poor credit and/or private rental market history;
 - inability to manage the responsibilities of a tenancy;
 - financial issues;
 - mental and physical health problems;
 - social isolation;
 - drug and alcohol abuse;
 - anti-social behaviour; and
 - incidents of threatening behaviour.

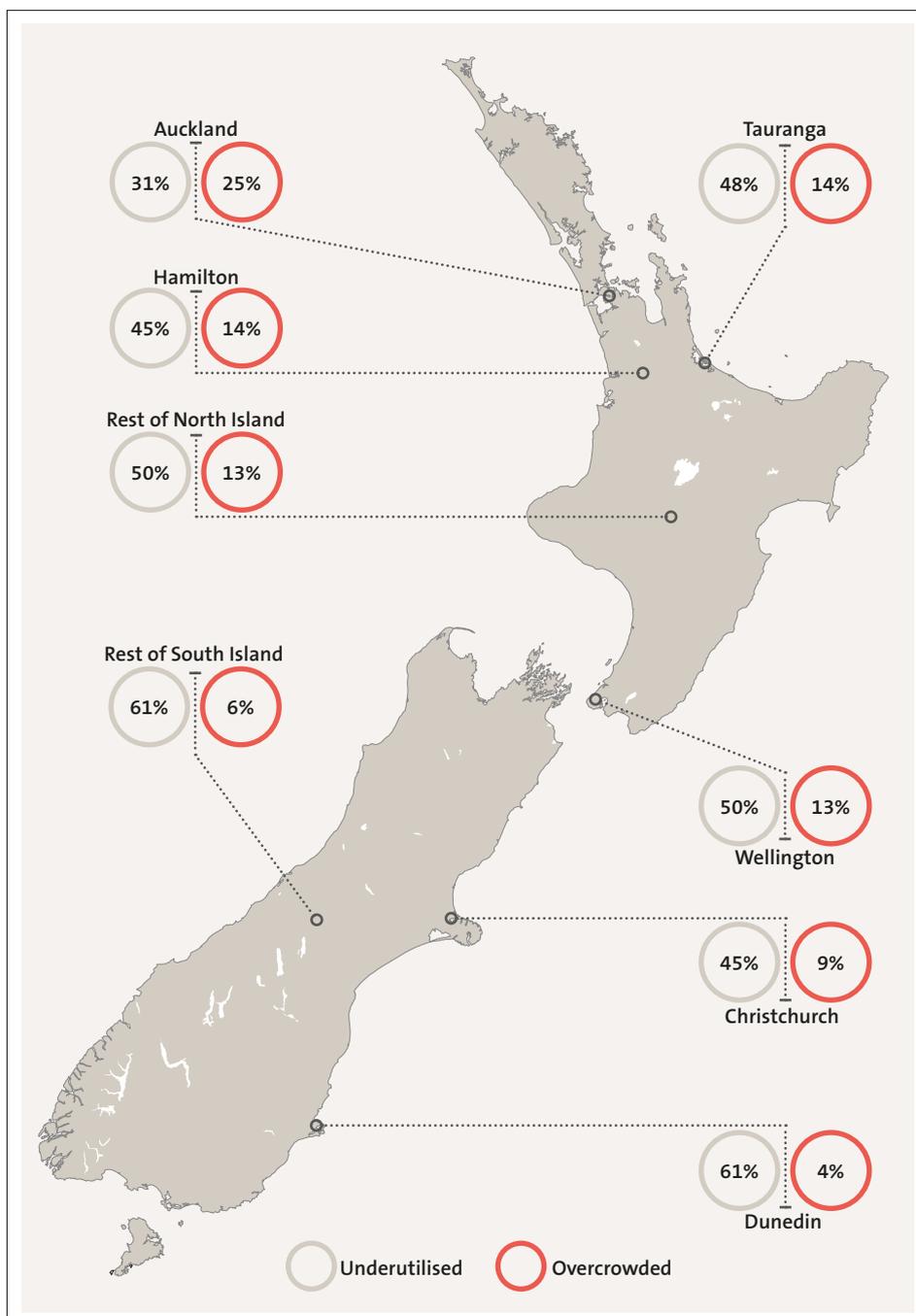
³ People on the transfer register are already in social housing but need to be moved to a more suitable house.

Having the right houses available

- 2.16 Providing houses of the right size creates several challenges for Housing New Zealand.
- 2.17 The extent and location of housing demand has changed more quickly than the configuration of Housing New Zealand's portfolio of social housing. Throughout the country, many of Housing New Zealand's houses are located in areas of lower demand, and there is a significant under-supply of houses in other areas. Auckland, in particular, has high demand for social housing because of the high cost of rent and a shortage of private rental accommodation.
- 2.18 In 2016, 58% of people in social housing were not in a house well suited to them. This means that they were living in houses that were either overcrowded or too big (see Figure 4).⁴ There has been an increase in demand for houses for single people and single parents with children in particular and, to a lesser extent, for larger families. There has been a decrease in demand for houses for two parents with children.
- 2.19 This means that Housing New Zealand has, relative to the family composition of those in need of housing, too many three-bedroom houses and too few one-bedroom houses. Housing New Zealand has been aware of this mismatch for some years and is looking to address it through its asset management strategy.
- 2.20 Housing New Zealand also has a significant maintenance and investment challenge because of the large number of older houses it has. Housing New Zealand estimates that it will need to replace or renew 60% of its houses in the next 20 years.

4 Housing New Zealand uses a measure of more than one bedroom difference between what a household needs and the number of bedrooms a property has.

Figure 4
A regional view of the under-use and overcrowding of Housing New Zealand houses, 2016



Source: Housing New Zealand Asset Management Strategy 2016-2026.

3

Placing people in social housing and understanding their needs

- 3.1 In this Part, we discuss how effectively Housing New Zealand uses information:
- to put people in the right house; and
 - to meet people's ongoing needs.

Summary of our findings

- 3.2 Housing New Zealand uses information from the Ministry and other organisations when making decisions about placing people in the right house. However, Housing New Zealand's operational staff do not feel that they always have enough information to make placements that meet people's needs, particularly when these needs are complex.
- 3.3 Housing New Zealand staff need clearer guidance and better processes to support getting the information they need to place people in social housing. Housing New Zealand is trialling pre-placement interviews with people applying for social housing as a way to get more detailed information and help make better placements.
- 3.4 Housing New Zealand now intends to do this for more tenants. This information will support better placements and also provide better information to help Housing New Zealand meet the ongoing needs of its tenants.

Better understanding people's needs to make more effective placements

- 3.5 Unsuitable placements can create serious issues. For example, a person receiving help from a mental health provider was placed in a house that was unsuitable, given their particular mental health issues. The mental health provider had to spend a lot of time working with Housing New Zealand to get the person moved. This created a lot of stress for the tenant. In another example, someone with behavioural issues was placed in a group of flats, which caused issues for the neighbours.
- 3.6 Housing New Zealand needs to have the right information so it can place people in the most suitable house for their needs. Operational staff gave us numerous examples of unsuitable suggested placements because of a lack of information. For example, Housing New Zealand offered a person a two-storey house and found out about the person's mobility issues only when the person met the tenancy manager to sign the tenancy documents.
- 3.7 In our survey of social service and advocacy groups, 60% of respondents felt that Housing New Zealand took people's needs into account when placing them in a house.

Housing New Zealand and the Ministry share information about people applying for social housing

- 3.8 The Ministry and Housing New Zealand have an official agreement about exchanging information between the two organisations. This provides a basis for the sharing of information.
- 3.9 When a house becomes available, the Ministry provides Housing New Zealand with a list of applicants and information about them, including contact details, how many bedrooms are needed, and health and disability information. Before the Social Housing Reform Programme, Housing New Zealand staff collected the information, and it was all available in-house. Now Housing New Zealand staff receive this information from the Ministry.
- 3.10 In general, the Ministry considers that the information it gives Housing New Zealand is sufficient for an effective placement. The Ministry is mindful of privacy issues and shares only what it considers relevant. It also relies on prospective tenants sharing all relevant information during the application process. The Ministry is also mindful of the risk of providing any information that could negatively affect the person's chances of being placed in a house.
- 3.11 However, Housing New Zealand's operational staff feel that the information they get from the Ministry about some people does not provide enough detail for the staff to find the most suitable house for that person that also meets their wider social needs.
- 3.12 For example, the Ministry might tell Housing New Zealand that a person applying for social housing has mental health issues but will not provide any details of what these issues might be. Another example involved Housing New Zealand not knowing someone was a recovering drug addict. This person was placed in a neighbourhood surrounded by drug activity, which made their continued recovery difficult.
- 3.13 Housing New Zealand staff also had concerns about potential health and safety risks from not knowing a person's background and circumstances. For example, some Housing New Zealand staff feel that, if a person has just been released from prison, they should know the release conditions. This could affect how Housing New Zealand staff interact with that person.
- 3.14 Some staff in both Housing New Zealand and the Ministry felt that the Ministry is too risk averse in how it decides what information about a tenant's circumstances and social needs to share. In our view, both organisations need to work more closely together to understand what information should be shared.

Information from other organisations

- 3.15 Housing New Zealand also has official agreements for sharing information with the New Zealand Police and the Department of Corrections. However, not all staff we talked to knew about these.
- 3.16 Housing New Zealand staff have also had situations where staff in other organisations, such as the Accident Compensation Corporation or mental health providers, were not clear about what information they could share. It would be helpful for Housing New Zealand to make clear what information its staff should expect from other organisations.
- 3.17 Overall, many Housing New Zealand staff have a strong commitment to putting people in the right houses for an ongoing tenancy. At a local level, staff gather information about people from a variety of sources to do this. Staff also develop their own relationships with other organisations and social service providers. Although this can work well in some areas, it is not always effective.
- 3.18 Housing New Zealand has started trialling pre-placement interviews for some people applying for social housing to improve the information it gets. This supplements the information it gets from the Ministry. Although this initiative is still in its early stages, Housing New Zealand has been positive about the results and is now intending to do pre-placement interviews for more of its tenants.
- 3.19 The interviews have allowed Housing New Zealand to collect detailed information to make a placement that suits the person's needs and also to have information about the person to help support their ongoing tenancy.
- 3.20 Housing New Zealand needs to provide more guidance to its staff, and establish better processes, so they have the right information for placing people in houses. The guidance should include which organisations to collect information from and how it should be collected, and what staff can expect from other organisations, including the Ministry.

More information needed to manage ongoing needs of people in social housing

- 3.21 Housing New Zealand needs to continue to improve its understanding of the ongoing needs of its tenants to enable it to manage its tenancies more effectively. In our survey of social service providers and advocacy groups, 33% of respondents thought that Housing New Zealand understood the needs of people in social housing.
- 3.22 Housing New Zealand's latest survey of 500 tenants in June 2017 showed that 59% agreed that their tenancy manager took their individual needs into account and that 70% agreed that, overall, they were satisfied with services from Housing New Zealand.
- 3.23 Respondents to our survey of social service providers and advocacy groups suggested that Housing New Zealand's could be more responsive to people's needs. They felt there were opportunities for Housing New Zealand to develop better ways of working with particular groups of tenants, such as people leaving mental health services.
- 3.24 Much of Housing New Zealand's information about its tenants currently comes from the Ministry. Housing New Zealand staff do not routinely collect information from other organisations.
- 3.25 Although Housing New Zealand staff we spoke to identified the need for this information to help tenants, they were unclear about what information should be consistently collected or where it should be recorded. Currently, this information might be kept in manual spreadsheets at a local level or not be formally documented. Because this data is not recorded in a single location, accessing it is difficult.
- 3.26 Housing New Zealand staff are also not clear on how best to manage their role in getting tenants the social support services they need. When they visit tenants, they become aware of any needs that are not being met.
- 3.27 Although staff are not responsible for solving the issue, they do need to support the person to get the help they need to sustain the tenancy if possible. Housing New Zealand staff feel that they do not have the training, expertise, or time to deal with some of the situations they encounter.
- 3.28 However, Housing New Zealand is starting to work on better ways to support the broader needs of people in social housing. A recent initiative involves Housing New Zealand helping people connect with any social service they might need. This

and the pre-placement interview trials can make a difference in knowing what support is required.

Information sharing between organisations

- 3.29 In our view, Housing New Zealand needs to have an understanding with the Ministry on the information that can be shared under the current privacy agreements to ensure that its tenants are supported. For example, there were different views in both organisations on the need for disclosure forms when Housing New Zealand staff discuss a person's details with Ministry staff.
- 3.30 Housing New Zealand staff also held differing views on what information about people in their houses could be shared in discussions with other social service organisations when accessing support or advice. Housing New Zealand needs to provide its staff with more clarity about what information they can share with other organisations to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of ongoing tenancy management.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation give its staff clearer guidance and better processes to support getting the information they need to effectively place people in social housing and for ongoing tenancy management.

Improving services to tenants

- 4.1 In this Part, we discuss how Housing New Zealand could improve services to its tenants by using its own information better and by better sharing information and collaborating with the Ministry.

Summary of our findings

- 4.2 Housing New Zealand and the Ministry need to improve how they share information about tenants. More clarity on each organisation's roles and responsibilities in meeting the needs of tenants, particularly after they are placed in a house, would also improve information sharing. Processes need to be set up between the two organisations to ensure that information sharing is efficient for both tenants and staff.
- 4.3 There are opportunities for Housing New Zealand to improve its responsiveness to, and ongoing communication with, its tenants by providing them with better information on their tenancy and making access to services easier. Housing New Zealand could also bring together the regular customer satisfaction information it collects with complaints data more effectively to improve its services.
- 4.4 Housing New Zealand has several initiatives that are focused on improving the quality of its services for its tenants. Housing New Zealand needs to build on the success of these initiatives and the lessons from them.

Housing New Zealand and the Ministry need to share information more effectively

- 4.5 Since the 2014 changes under the Social Housing Reform Programme, Housing New Zealand and the Ministry have had to learn how to work together in their new roles. Housing New Zealand and the Ministry are willing to work together, and both organisations consider that information sharing has improved over time.
- 4.6 However, in our view, more could be done. In particular, there is a need to continue to improve and put into effect stronger leadership and collaboration for information sharing.
- 4.7 There were several areas where better use of information, better sharing of information, and the two organisations working together more closely would improve services for tenants.

Understanding tenants' social housing needs over time

- 4.8 At the moment, a complete picture of a person's experiences of social housing over time is not available. Information needs to be put together from a tenant's perspective that would allow a better understanding of who is in social housing,

how long they have been in social housing, and their changing use of social housing over time. This would help the Ministry and Housing New Zealand understand who benefits most from social housing.

Roles and responsibilities of each organisation

- 4.9 After a person is placed in a house, there is a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of each organisation when working with a person with complex needs or who is in a situation that is negatively affecting their tenancy. This lack of clarity also negatively affects the consistency and level of information sharing between the two organisations.
- 4.10 Many of Housing New Zealand's tenants are unsure about which organisation to approach about their housing issues. They are also frustrated because they feel that they give the same information to both organisations.
- 4.11 Of the social service and advocacy groups surveyed, 39% thought that people in social housing were clear about Housing New Zealand's role. Only 30% thought that the Ministry and Housing New Zealand shared information effectively to meet the needs of tenants.
- 4.12 Information sharing between the organisations was more effective where there were strong local relationships.

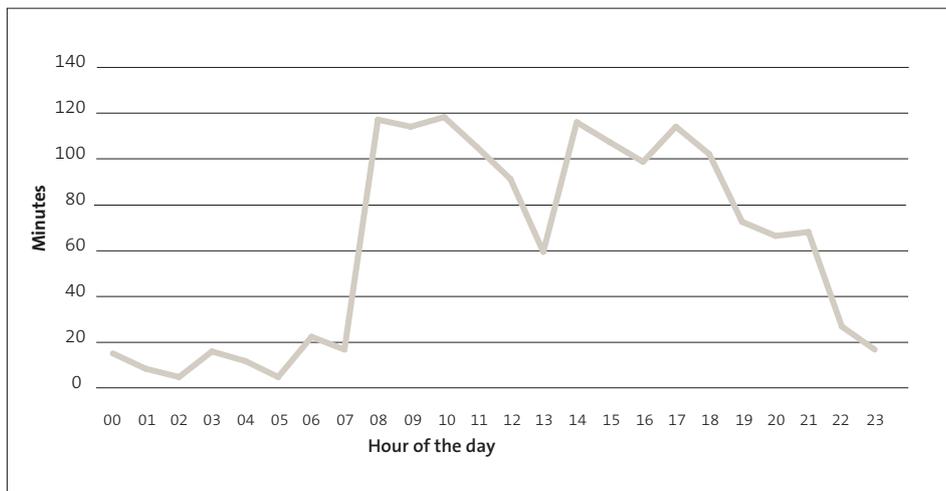
Setting up processes for information sharing

- 4.13 Housing New Zealand and the Ministry need to develop stronger processes for sharing information to resolve issues effectively and efficiently for tenants.
- 4.14 Tenants and Housing New Zealand staff were frustrated by the time it takes to resolve some issues, including:
- getting the documentation and information needed for income-related rent reviews, which takes a lot of Housing New Zealand staff time despite being a Ministry function;
 - collecting and monitoring issues through the email inbox system (which was set up by the two organisations to work through issues experienced by tenants);
 - the accuracy of information received from the Ministry about people applying for social housing; and
 - the Ministry giving updated information to Housing New Zealand.

Improving communication with tenants

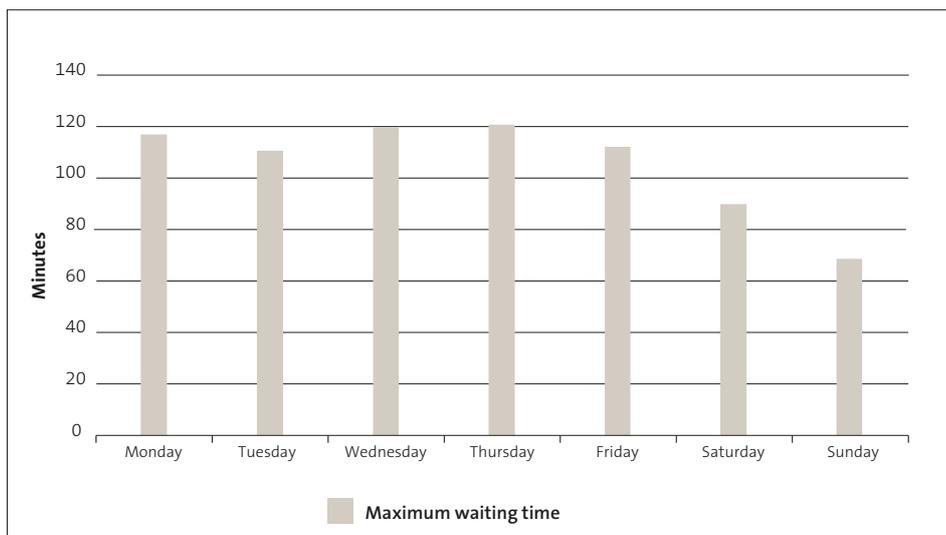
- 4.15 The social service and advocacy groups we surveyed said that Housing New Zealand could improve its responsiveness and communication with tenants. Of the social service and advocacy groups surveyed, 61% indicated that it was difficult or very difficult for tenants to easily access help from Housing New Zealand to resolve issues. Respondents commented that managers can be slow to follow up on issues and that they sometimes have to wait a long time when calling the contact centre.
- 4.16 In the June 2017 survey Housing New Zealand carried out of 500 tenants, 58% of respondents were satisfied that their tenancy manager helped to resolve issues.
- 4.17 The contact centre is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Although Housing New Zealand recently reported that 84% of calls were answered within four minutes (when the target was 80%), waiting times at certain hours were much longer.
- 4.18 Figures 5 and 6 show the maximum waiting times when calling about a maintenance issue. The percentage of calls that are abandoned is also higher at the times when there is more likely to be a longer wait. Tenancy managers report that people are frequently frustrated when calling the contact centre because of long waiting times.
- 4.19 Housing New Zealand is looking to improve its responsiveness, including making it easier for tenants to make contact. It is looking to bring in a phone app for tenants that will initially allow tenants to respond to text messages. Housing New Zealand has also initiated a call-back option for contact centre calls, which is increasingly being taken up.

Figure 5
Maximum contact centre waiting times for maintenance issue calls, by hour of the day, 2016/17



Source: Based on Housing New Zealand Corporation's data.

Figure 6
Maximum contact centre waiting times for maintenance issue calls, by day of the week, 2016/17



Source: Based on Housing New Zealand Corporation's data.

Using customer feedback information more effectively

- 4.20 Housing New Zealand has a complaints process, which includes a process for escalating issues. It also runs regular surveys of customer satisfaction and of call centre and tenancy relocation satisfaction.
- 4.21 However, there are issues with how this information is collected. For example:
- Not all complaints data is recorded.
 - There is no consistent process for how complaints should be managed.
 - Customer satisfaction data is limited in its ability to show trends over time, apart from at the highest levels.
 - The contact centre survey data cannot be currently tracked back to individuals to follow up on issues and is based on small sample sizes with a low response rate.
- 4.22 Housing New Zealand could improve how it uses its complaints, satisfaction, and survey information. For example, Housing New Zealand could collate customer satisfaction information from throughout the organisation to make improvements and focus satisfaction measures on outcomes for tenants. If Housing New Zealand used this information well, it would improve its services.

Initiatives to improve the quality of services for social housing tenants

- 4.23 Housing New Zealand has started looking at whether it can categorise people into different groups based on how much time and help they need from its staff. Understanding these groups and their needs should help Housing New Zealand identify those who need the most support.
- 4.24 Housing New Zealand is also looking at how it can use information to reduce the time it takes to have a house ready for a person to move in. A pilot in Auckland started in 2017 (with a person focused on co-ordinating all the work and steps required to prepare the house and find the right tenant), and results look positive. Housing New Zealand's most recent data from the pilot indicates that it takes 20 days to place a person in a vacated property (the average for 2016/17 was 34 days).
- 4.25 At a local level, tenancy managers and other local staff are involved in several initiatives aimed at building stronger communities. For example, Housing New Zealand introduced buildings with swipe-card access and regular security patrols. Housing New Zealand can see who is accessing these buildings and use this information to check regularly on vulnerable people.

- 4.26 Housing New Zealand has also set up a community café in one of its apartment blocks for people to socialise with each other. There has been a reduction in police calls to this apartment block and positive feedback from residents.
- 4.27 In our view, Housing New Zealand needs to build on the success of these initiatives, and the lessons from them, to improve the quality of its services for its tenants.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation and the Ministry of Social Development:

- improve the way information about people applying for social housing and who subsequently move into a Housing New Zealand house is shared; and
- strengthen the relationships between their staff, particularly frontline staff, ensuring that they have a clear understanding of each organisation's role and functions.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation continue to improve communication with its tenants so they can easily contact someone to deal with any issues.

Maintaining social housing

- 5.1 In this Part, we discuss how effectively Housing New Zealand uses information to:
- understand the condition of its houses;
 - make better decisions on the maintenance of its houses; and
 - improve customer service.

Summary of our findings

- 5.2 Housing New Zealand collects and uses information to manage repairs and plan maintenance of all its houses. It is building its capability and capacity to analyse information about its houses so it can plan for future maintenance needs. Housing New Zealand has improved its approach to managing maintenance contractors and their performance over time.
- 5.3 However, Housing New Zealand could improve its understanding of the future maintenance needs of its houses with more detailed and up-to-date information about their condition. This affects Housing New Zealand's ability to effectively and efficiently plan the maintenance of its houses. At a local level, tenancy managers, maintenance contractors, and maintenance staff fill gaps in information about the condition of houses.
- 5.4 There are several opportunities for Housing New Zealand to use information more effectively to capture maintenance needs. Housing New Zealand's regular and as-required visits to its houses provide an opportunity to update information on their condition. It could also analyse maintenance data in more detail to better plan and carry out maintenance of its houses.
- 5.5 Housing New Zealand could develop its ability to inform its tenants about the progress and status of maintenance jobs. This requires better communication between tenants, tenancy managers, maintenance teams, and maintenance contractors.

Housing New Zealand operates a large maintenance programme

- 5.6 In 2016/17, Housing New Zealand invested about \$480 million into maintaining and upgrading its properties. This is about \$8,000 for each property and about 2.4 million maintenance jobs.
- 5.7 Housing New Zealand has a maintenance and renewal investment programme that sets out its plan for maintenance, upgrades, and retrofitting of properties in the next 10 years. Responsive maintenance is also done when something in the house breaks down or is not working. Maintenance costs increase as Housing New Zealand's houses age.

- 5.8 Housing New Zealand's planned maintenance programmes each year are co-ordinated at a national level. One of the most significant programmes is its Warm and Dry programme, which ensures that there is a fixed heating source in the living area, thermal curtains, carpet where appropriate, and mechanical ventilation for the bathroom.
- 5.9 Currently, Housing New Zealand spends 60% of its maintenance budget on planned maintenance programmes and 40% on as-required repairs. Housing New Zealand's aim is to increase its spending on planned maintenance programmes to 69% of its maintenance budget in 2017/18.
- 5.10 Other planned maintenance programmes include external painting and reroofing. Housing New Zealand tells regional offices how many houses each programme will cover, and the local asset manager identifies which houses should be selected for the programme.

Housing New Zealand's maintenance planning could be improved by a more detailed understanding of the condition of its houses

- 5.11 Housing New Zealand uses a model-based assessment to know the condition of each of its houses. This includes information about the main components of the house (for example, roof or type of cladding and its age) and physical surveys of a sample of houses.
- 5.12 In 2015, Housing New Zealand surveyed 400 properties (1% of its houses). In 2016/17, Housing New Zealand surveyed 1600 properties (3% of its houses). Another survey of 1600 houses is planned for 2017/18.
- 5.13 There does not seem to be an overall plan for Housing New Zealand to survey all of its houses, although work to improve the assessment model is continuing.
- 5.14 Because Housing New Zealand used different methods to assess the condition of its houses before 2015, it has been difficult to look at trends in the condition of its houses.
- 5.15 Housing New Zealand uses the information it has from its property condition assessments to prepare plans for its planned programmes of maintenance for the following year.
- 5.16 Having more detailed knowledge of the actual condition of its houses provides an opportunity to more effectively plan its maintenance for the short term as well as the longer term. Planned maintenance programmes could be more effectively targeted and there would be a stronger longer-term view if condition information

about its houses was more detailed, accurate, and up to date. For example, Housing New Zealand might know a roof is 25 years old but not know when it needs to be replaced.

- 5.17 Housing New Zealand relies on maintenance contractors to provide it with information about what maintenance work a house needs. Maintenance staff told us that knowing more detailed information about the condition of houses would give them more confidence in agreeing to work specified by maintenance contractors.
- 5.18 At a local level, tenancy managers, maintenance contractors, and maintenance staff fill gaps in information about the condition of specific houses. Some of this information is kept in manual spreadsheets or not formally documented. This presents an ongoing risk to the effectiveness and efficiency of Housing New Zealand's maintenance planning.

Opportunities to use information better to maintain houses

- 5.19 There are several opportunities for Housing New Zealand to use information better so it could more efficiently maintain its houses.

Regular inspections to record information on housing condition

- 5.20 Each year, there is a minimum of two inspections of each Housing New Zealand house. Annual house inspections by tenancy managers provide an opportunity to identify any maintenance issues and for tenants to raise any concerns about the condition of the house they are living in.
- 5.21 Housing New Zealand also carries out annual health and safety checks of each of its houses. Qualified maintenance contractors carry out this work. If the maintenance contractors identify any issues, maintenance jobs are commissioned.
- 5.22 There are opportunities for Housing New Zealand to use the inspections, other as-required visits (including by maintenance contractors), and information from tenants to improve its information on the condition of its houses.

Analysis of maintenance information

- 5.23 Housing New Zealand collects and holds a large amount of information about the maintenance jobs on its houses. Housing New Zealand could use this information to better inform its house maintenance, monitoring, and planning, as well as improving its understanding of the overall condition of its houses.

5.24 Housing New Zealand could use maintenance information to compare actual with estimated maintenance costs or identify where a building contractor's performance might need to be reviewed. More detailed analysis of maintenance data would also allow Housing New Zealand to prepare a more planned and co-ordinated approach to maintaining each house.

5.25 Housing New Zealand has recognised the need to improve the way it uses and analyses its information about the condition of its houses and has improved its capability and capacity to do so.

5.26 Most calls from people to the contact centre are for maintenance issues. For example, in December 2016, 42% of calls were about maintenance issues, and a high proportion of these calls were for maintenance rework (23% of the maintenance calls in December 2016). There is an opportunity to analyse this information to improve contract management and maintenance planning.

Using information for efficient co-ordination of planned work

5.27 Housing New Zealand could use information more effectively to co-ordinate planned work.

5.28 Many of Housing New Zealand's planned programmes are organised by the type of maintenance job, such as roofing or external painting. However, there are opportunities for Housing New Zealand to reduce costs by co-ordinating the different types of planned programmes.

5.29 For example, if a house were reroofed and painted at the same time, only one set of scaffolding would be needed. There would also be less effect on the tenant living in the house. Housing New Zealand is starting to look at co-ordinating these planned programmes where possible.

5.30 Communicating and sharing information between Housing New Zealand asset management, asset maintenance staff, and maintenance contractors about the type and scale of planned programmes in a geographical area is crucial. This would improve decision-making for responsive maintenance, and allow better co-ordination of planned maintenance work.

5.31 This would also enable local Housing New Zealand staff to work with maintenance contractors to plan maintenance work. It would also prevent examples we were told of where planned maintenance work on houses was started shortly after responsive maintenance work had been done. Housing New Zealand is looking to continually improve the use and sharing of this sort of information.

Use of information for quality assurance of maintenance work

- 5.32 We identified opportunities for better quality assurance information on the maintenance work on Housing New Zealand's houses.
- 5.33 Housing New Zealand has improved its approach to managing maintenance contractors by using regional performance-based contracts for maintenance work. These have been in place since July 2014. In our view, the quality assurance of the work carried out under these contracts could be strengthened further.
- 5.34 Housing New Zealand has a quality assurance process that involves maintenance contractors checking a proportion of their own work and a quality assessment team from Housing New Zealand checking a proportion of the completed maintenance jobs. Housing New Zealand does limited quality assurance work on the 2.4 million maintenance jobs done each year.
- 5.35 Housing New Zealand strongly relies on the maintenance contractors' own quality assurance processes. For example, in December 2016, maintenance contractors checked about 18% of the maintenance jobs and Housing New Zealand quality assessors checked about 5%. There is some overlap of Housing New Zealand quality assessors checking some of the jobs that maintenance contractors checked.
- 5.36 In December 2016, there was a difference in issues identified, with Housing New Zealand quality assessors identifying a higher proportion of jobs with issues than contractors. We consider that Housing New Zealand could usefully review the reasons for these differences.
- 5.37 There is an opportunity to use the quality assurance information and maintenance information together to help monitor contractor performance as well as help ensure that the quality assurance process is targeted effectively.

Using information better to improve customer service

Social housing standard

- 5.38 Neither the Ministry nor Housing New Zealand provides a "social housing standard" to inform people in social housing about the condition and quality they can expect from a house.
- 5.39 There is an opportunity for the Ministry to work with Housing New Zealand to set quality standards for its houses and to communicate these to its tenants. A lack of clarity about what people can expect from a Housing New Zealand house can lead to them feeling unsure about what maintenance to expect.

Using information about tenants to inform housing maintenance and asset management decisions

- 5.40 Housing New Zealand currently uses some information about its tenants in decisions about maintenance and the management of its houses. For example, Housing New Zealand replaced gas heating with electric heating because information from tenants showed it was more cost-effective.
- 5.41 Housing New Zealand also told us that it has maintenance programmes based on information about tenants and their needs, such as the Warm and Dry programme, a smoke alarm programme, and a driveway safety programme.
- 5.42 In our view, Housing New Zealand could do more, such as systematically using information about different cohorts of tenants or the characteristics of tenants to inform and prioritise decision-making for maintenance work or to support asset management decisions. This is an opportunity for Housing New Zealand, particularly with the large number of tenants and houses it has.

Improving responsiveness to maintenance matters

- 5.43 Housing New Zealand needs to improve its responsiveness to maintenance matters. Only 40% of social service organisations and advocacy groups surveyed said that Housing New Zealand used information from people living in social housing to make effective decisions about the maintenance of its houses.
- 5.44 Survey respondents and frontline staff told us that tenants find it hard to get in contact with Housing New Zealand about maintenance issues because of waiting times. Housing New Zealand can also be slow to respond to changing needs and requests.
- 5.45 Respondents also raised issues about the timely completion of jobs and the poor condition of houses for some tenants. Tenants can feel that their houses will not get any maintenance upgrades, such as interior painting, unless they move out or something needs to be repaired. Tenancy managers also raised this issue with us.
- 5.46 In our view, Housing New Zealand could keep tenants better informed about the progress and status of planned maintenance and when they might expect the work. Tenants do not always know the status of the maintenance job or whether it has been deferred. It can take a lot of effort to get up-to-date information.
- 5.47 Effective and efficient communication between Housing New Zealand and maintenance contractors can improve the timeliness of maintenance jobs. It is also essential for keeping Housing New Zealand informed of progress once work has started. Although we were told that communication from maintenance

contractors is getting better, feedback from Housing New Zealand staff suggests that this could be improved further.

- 5.48 Stronger project management of the more complex maintenance jobs would improve their overall timeliness and help ensure that better information about the status of the job is available. Providing the right level of information to maintenance contractors that accurately describes the work needed would also help Housing New Zealand to improve.

Timeliness of completion of jobs

- 5.49 In our survey of advocacy groups and organisations that work with Housing New Zealand tenants, respondents raised issues about how long it takes to complete maintenance jobs.
- 5.50 There was some opportunity for Housing New Zealand to reduce the time it takes for maintenance jobs to be finalised. It could review the fixed time frames for the different stages of commissioning and carrying out maintenance. There is also an opportunity to review the process for smaller jobs to reduce the time taken to complete them.
- 5.51 Housing New Zealand staff also told us about the need for maintenance requests to be recorded accurately so that maintenance contractors can do the work effectively and efficiently. It is unclear whether issues with information quality are monitored and used to improve the effectiveness of maintenance work.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation better inform its tenants about the likely timing and progress of maintenance work and what they can expect in terms of housing quality.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that Housing New Zealand Corporation expand on the extent of its information on the condition of its houses, further analyse the maintenance information, and better co-ordinate planned and as-required maintenance work.

6

Investing in social housing

- 6.1 In this Part, we discuss how effectively Housing New Zealand uses information to make asset management and investment decisions, such as buying and selling houses, and redeveloping and refurbishing existing properties.

Summary of our findings

- 6.2 Housing New Zealand uses a broad range of information to prepare a view of future housing demand. It has prepared a 10-year asset management strategy that serves as a framework for decision-making. Housing New Zealand is also documenting a view of the results it wants to achieve and how it will achieve them in its strategic plan for 2017-21.
- 6.3 To support the development of a longer-term asset investment plan, Housing New Zealand needs to continually improve its understanding of the condition of its houses. It also needs to develop a better understanding of its tenants' future needs and how its investments will contribute to sustainable and well-functioning communities.
- 6.4 Housing New Zealand's ability to prepare a longer-term investment plan is adversely affected by the absence of a coherent long-term social housing strategy.
- 6.5 The government organisations with responsibilities in the social housing sector (the Ministry, the Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment) need to work together on a long-term social housing strategy, including how demand over the long term can be met.
- 6.6 To also support Housing New Zealand's longer-term asset investment planning, the Ministry needs to become a stronger purchaser. Forecasting future demand is complex, but the Ministry needs to provide a longer-term view of the number and location of housing places it wants to purchase.
- 6.7 In our view, the Ministry should also use its role as a purchaser of places in social housing to improve outcomes for people in social housing. The Ministry's approach to longer-term planning is evolving.

Housing New Zealand's asset management strategy

- 6.8 Housing New Zealand has a 10-year asset management strategy that sets out how it will manage its housing portfolio to ensure that it has enough social houses where they are needed. To do this, Housing New Zealand has to make decisions about redeveloping current properties, purchasing new properties, selling properties that are not needed, and building new properties.

- 6.9 In 2015/16, Housing New Zealand provided 871 replacement and new houses. Many of these were in Christchurch because of the earthquakes there. During 2016/17, Housing New Zealand provided 1524 new houses and is looking to increase this in future years.
- 6.10 In 2017, the Treasury gave Housing New Zealand's asset management strategy an "A" investor confidence rating. Housing New Zealand is also working on a stronger strategic view of its social housing role by developing a strategic plan for 2017-21. Housing New Zealand also told us that it is currently preparing a longer-term financial plan.

The Ministry's purchasing intentions

- 6.11 The number and type of houses Housing New Zealand is looking to provide in a location are guided by the Ministry's 2016 Social Housing Purchasing Strategy, previously published in April 2015 as the Ministry's Social Housing Purchasing Intentions.
- 6.12 The purchasing intentions provided information on the Ministry's expectation of the demand for social housing. The Ministry updated the purchasing intentions document in December 2016 to provide a three-year view of the social housing places it intends to purchase.
- 6.13 Because the Ministry provides purchasing intentions for the next three years only, Housing New Zealand has continued to do its own demand forecasting so it can have a 10-year view for asset investment decisions. Housing New Zealand uses information such as social housing register information and the number of applications over time to predict demand in more detail than the Ministry's three-year purchasing strategy.

Responding to the challenges of older houses

- 6.14 An important focus of the asset management strategy is how Housing New Zealand will deal with the different requirements of its older houses (about 40% were constructed before 1966). Housing New Zealand has set a target to reduce the average age of its housing stock from 45 to 37 years in the next 10 years. This means that it needs to "replace or renew" 60% of its houses over the next 20 years.
- 6.15 Housing New Zealand has stated that, since 2011, about one-third of its houses are increasingly too expensive to maintain, located in low-demand areas, or not the right size for tenants' needs. These challenges reinforce the need for a long-term and co-ordinated view about social housing.

Information needed to support better asset management and investment

- 6.16 In our view, Housing New Zealand needs to develop a longer-term asset investment plan. This would support longer-term planning and a longer-term view of Housing New Zealand's role in meeting the future demand for social housing.
- 6.17 Housing New Zealand could improve its use of information to support the development of a longer-term asset investment plan in several ways.
- 6.18 In particular, a more detailed understanding of the condition of its houses would help Housing New Zealand make better decisions about how to manage them for the future (whether to rebuild, retrofit, or sell). Also, a better knowledge of people in social housing, and their housing needs over time, would allow Housing New Zealand to prepare a more effective longer-term forecast of social housing demand.
- 6.19 There is also a need for Housing New Zealand to understand how its investments will support building sustainable and well-functioning communities. This is important to ensuring that people have positive outcomes from social housing, particularly because many Housing New Zealand homes are in areas of high social deprivation.

A coherent long-term social housing strategy is needed

- 6.20 The government organisations with responsibilities in the social housing sector (the Ministry, the Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment) need to work collaboratively to provide a coherent long-term social housing strategy. In our view, this stronger leadership would support social housing investment decisions and create a better quality of life for people in social housing.
- 6.21 It would also provide the direction needed by Housing New Zealand and community housing providers for their longer-term asset investment plans.
- 6.22 We acknowledge that implementing longer-term plans will be affected by a number of factors. Not the least of these would be policies and priorities of the Government of the day.

The Ministry is continuing to become a stronger purchaser

- 6.23 The Ministry needs to continue to improve its capability and capacity to become a stronger purchaser of social housing.
- 6.24 The Ministry's purchasing strategy currently goes to June 2020. Although projecting demand for social housing is complex, social housing providers need more certainty beyond 2020 so they can prepare their asset investment plans accordingly.
- 6.25 The Ministry could use its role as a purchaser of social housing as an opportunity to improve the quality of life for people in social housing. For example, the quality of service for tenants could be specified in the contracts the Ministry has with social housing providers.
- 6.26 The Ministry needs to better understand who benefits the most from social housing and how to increase these benefits. Some work on this has been done by the Social Investment Unit and the Treasury, but more work is needed. This work would support both the Ministry and Housing New Zealand in their longer-term investment decisions.
- 6.27 The Ministry is aware of its need to be a strong purchaser and has started to work more collaboratively with Housing New Zealand. For example, the organisations are discussing a joint approach to forecasting demand and how they can work together to address the high demand for social housing in Auckland. The Ministry's approach to longer-term planning is also evolving.

Recommendation 6

We recommend that:

- Housing New Zealand Corporation develop a longer-term asset investment plan;
 - government organisations involved in the housing sector (Housing New Zealand Corporation, the Ministry of Social Development, the Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment) prepare a long-term strategy for social housing, including how demand will be met; and
 - the Ministry of Social Development set longer-term purchasing intentions and clearer expectations of quality, quantity, and availability of social housing.
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