

# **Communication between Housing New Zealand, tenants and applicants**

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## **Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study**

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## 1.0 Executive Summary

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide insight into tenants and applicants' interactions with Housing New Zealand and their preferred communication channels for accessing what they need to sustain their tenancies or for applicants to stay on the waiting list.

### Patterns of contact

- 2 Many applicants reported periods of frequent communication associated with property offers, while others waited for Housing New Zealand to contact them. When property or tenancy issues arose new tenants described frequent communication with Housing New Zealand otherwise contact was infrequent. Some established tenants reported being 'frequent callers' calling for updates on issues about which they had called previously. Others preferred to "save issues up" to discuss at annual inspections.

### Reasons for contacting Housing New Zealand

- 3 Applicants contacted Housing New Zealand to get onto, and stay on, the waiting list; as well as for updates on the availability of properties. New tenants communicated with Housing New Zealand during the move into their new property. Once settled, new tenants often made contact about maintenance. Established tenants were also most likely to contact Housing New Zealand for maintenance-related issues, followed by requests for transfers.

### Quality of communication

- 4 Some applicants felt judged because they appeared not to meet the stereotype of someone in housing need. They were confused about what was required to stay on the waiting list and were unsure if they were still on it.
- 5 Applicants' satisfaction with communication tended to be related to whether they felt likely to get, a property. Applicants were confused about the process of offering properties, and sometimes felt they had to take unsuitable properties or miss out.
- 6 Many new tenants were happy with the service provided by the CSC. Other new tenants described frustration with trying to contact their Tenancy Manager and to get maintenance work done on their property at a suitable time.
- 7 Established tenants were split on the quality of communication with CSC, with the majority of complaints related to the time taken to answer their call. Established tenants were typically positive about the service once their calls were answered. Note that significant work has been done to improve time taken to answer calls since these interviews were conducted.
- 8 Many established tenants linked the quality of face-to-face communication to specific Tenancy Managers. Some established tenants noted frustration at the frequent changes in Tenancy Managers, noting the work required to develop a good relationship.
- 9 Many established tenants liked the standardised forms and letters used in Housing New Zealand postal communication but some tenants found this approach impersonal. Some tenants reported concern about lost forms. They wanted to drop forms in to the Housing New Zealand office to ensure they weren't lost in the mail.

### **Communication preferences**

- 10 Many applicants and tenants preferred to use the CSC for communicating with Housing New Zealand, and described it as convenient and easy to use. Other people wanted the option to discuss their issues face-to-face and cited problems getting resolution to their issues when using the CSC in the past, and/or described difficulty getting their message across over the phone. Note that face-to-face communication is now possible with the re-opening of offices.

### **Changes to communication between Waves One and Two**

- 11 Applicants' reports suggested that communication about the changes in eligibility for C and D priority applicants was poorly handled. Many applicants had become more uncertain about how the application process works. For example, some applicants thought that they had to take properties offered to them or they would go to the bottom of the waiting list.
- 12 Most established tenants felt that resolving issues takes longer since the new Service Delivery Model was introduced, primarily because messages are slowed down when they are passed around within Housing New Zealand.
- 13 The majority of established tenants reported reduced contact with Tenancy Managers, and an increase in the turnover of Tenancy Managers. They felt the tone of conversation had become business-like and less personal.

### **Suggestions for improved communication**

- 14 Provide more clarity about the application process, and the process for viewing and accepting properties so that applicants can make informed decisions.
- 15 In order to reduce the repeat calls to CSC, provide updates to applicants and tenants on the results of their requests, or any delays in resolving issues.
- 16 Address perceived gaps in internal communication resulting in staff lacking necessary information when visiting tenants.

### **Discussion**

- 17 Housing New Zealand is largely fulfilling its Customer Promise. Areas where improvement could be made are in providing better information about some processes, and making it easier for customers to contact Housing New Zealand.
- 18 Customers could be responded to in a timely manner if Tenancy Managers were able to contact tenants and applicants within 48 hours of their call to CSC. Housing New Zealand is exploring mobility options to make this happen.
- 19 Differences in the communication between applicants, new and established tenants warrant tailoring response to these groups. For example targeting established tenants with communications about housing options that could assist with their future planning that would enable them to transition out of properties.
- 20 Housing New Zealand's ability to maintain properties to an appropriate standard depends on good communication with tenants. Tenants are relied upon to contact the CSC if any maintenance is required. The majority of tenants were very impressed by Housing New Zealand's responses to health and safety maintenance requests.

## 2.0 Introduction

- 21 Communication is fundamental to Housing New Zealand's business providing properties to the people most in housing need for the duration of their need. This report is based on the views that tenants and applicants' shared with researchers in face-to-face interviews as part of the Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study. The interpretation draws on researchers' knowledge of Housing New Zealand processes and practices, and the advice of front-line staff.
- 22 Findings in this report are intended to provide insights into tenants and applicants' interactions with Housing New Zealand and their preferred communication channels for accessing what they need to sustain their tenancies or for applicants to stay on the waiting list.
- 23 The overarching themes evident in the findings are discussed to show how far the parties to Housing New Zealand's Customer Promise are meeting their agreed responsibilities and expectations. The contribution of the overarching themes to Housing New Zealand fulfilling specified outcomes, and tenants fulfilling their housing desires is also discussed.

### 2.1 New Service Delivery Model and Customer Services Centre Optimisation

- 24 During 2012, in the period between the Waves One and Two interviews, Housing New Zealand introduced a new Service Delivery Model including changes to the Social Allocation System, the system used to prioritise who gets a state house. The revised Social Allocation System was intended to ensure state housing was available only to those in the highest need who do not have alternative housing options; and, to be the mechanism for reviewable tenancies to assess the on-going need and continued eligibility for tenants who were housed from 1 July 2011.<sup>1</sup>
- 25 The Service Delivery Model also included significant changes in the options and opportunities that tenants and applicants had to communicate with Housing New Zealand. The impact of these initiatives was to place greater reliance on phone conversations via the national call centre renamed the Customer Services Centre (CSC), and to offer fewer opportunities for face-to-face interactions. Tenants could no longer contact their Tenancy Managers directly by phoning them or visiting the Neighbourhood Housing Units. The CSC became the front door for tenants and applicants' communication, and Housing New Zealand Offices were only visited with an appointment.
- 26 The CSC had been unable to meet customer demand within targeted accessibility and customer satisfaction standards since the new Service Delivery Model was implemented February 2012. In October 2012 the CSC Optimisation Project was established, as part of the Service Delivery Model Optimisation programme, to re-validate the customer demand and staffing supply model (Paper to the SDM Governance Group, 15 May 2013 refers).
- 27 The paper to the Service Delivery Model Governance Group identified six streams of work. The work stream to which the Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study will contribute focuses on identifying, analysing and recommending further process

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<sup>1</sup> Laing, P., Kennedy, A., Nunns, H., and M. Roorda (January 2012) *Implementation of the Social Allocation System 2011 Revisions: Qualitative Evaluation Report*. Prepared for Housing New Zealand Corporation.

improvement opportunities (Stream F, Paper to the SDM Governance Group, 14 June 2013 refers).

## 2.2 Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study

- 28 This report is based on data collected as part of the Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study. The Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study is a Housing New Zealand research programme that establishes an evidence base about how housing pathways and life circumstances influence outcomes for Housing New Zealand applicants and tenants. The research objectives are to identify and analyse:
- the relationships between housing tenure and life circumstances of Housing New Zealand tenants and applicants that lead to positive and negative outcomes
  - resources and interventions that assist or prevent Housing New Zealand tenants and applicants achieving their housing aspirations.
- 29 In 2008 tenants were interviewed in a pilot study to gather their perspectives on their housing pathways,<sup>2</sup> and in 2009 a longitudinal study was initiated.<sup>3</sup> Data is collected in three waves of interviews, over the course of six years. A sample of tenants and applicants is drawn from three locations (Porirua, South Auckland, and Christchurch). Waves One and Two interviews have now been completed (Table 1).

**Table 1** Schedule of Wave One and Two interviewing by location

Location	Wave One	Wave Two
Porirua	May 2009 – 102 interviewees	Jun 2012 – 104 interviewees
South Auckland	Nov 2009 – 95 interviewees	Apr 2013 – 79 interviewees
Christchurch	Mar 2010 – 72 interviewees	Nov 2012 – 80 interviewees

- 30 Each wave of interviewing has specific foci, and one focus of Wave Two was tenants and applicants' preferred channels for communicating with Housing New Zealand. The results presented in this report could be used to inform an evaluation, but are not evaluative of CSCs communication with tenants and applicants.
- 31 For more information on the Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study refer to *Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study: The story so far* for an overview of the methodology and findings produced to date.

<sup>2</sup> Mackay, J., Laing, P., Pfitzner, F., and Onyando, M. (2009) Results for the pilot for the longitudinal study. Prepared for Housing New Zealand Corporation. April 2009

<sup>3</sup> Laing, P., MacKay, J., Pfitzner, F., Porima, L., Smiler, K., Vailini, R., and Fairbairn-Dunlop, P. (2010) Longitudinal Study of Corporation Tenants and Applicants: initial findings from wave one research undertaken in Porirua. Prepared for Housing New Zealand Corporation.

## 3.0 Findings

32 This section presents a summary of findings from the Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study related to communication between Housing New Zealand, tenants and applicants. Findings in this chapter are presented under the following headings:

- patterns of contact
- reasons for contacting Housing New Zealand
- quality of communication
- communication preferences
- changes to communication between Waves One and Two
- suggestions for improved communication.

33 The groupings for this analysis – applicant, new tenant and established tenant – were based on analyses that indicated that the groups were in different positions on their housing pathways and therefore might have communication requirements specific to them. In terms of the Housing Pathway model, applicants were expecting to ‘make the move’ into social housing, new tenants were ‘settling into their tenancies’ and established tenants were ‘sustaining their tenancies’. Some established tenants were ‘motivated to consider other options’ than social housing. Where relevant, findings are presented under each of these headings for the following three groups of participants:<sup>4</sup>

- Applicants – individuals who had been confirmed on the Housing New Zealand waiting list at the time of the interview.
- New tenants – tenants with a tenure of less than 18 months at the time of the interview.
- Established tenants – tenants with a tenure of greater than 18 months at the time of the interview.

### 3.1 Pattern of contact

- While many applicants described waiting for Housing New Zealand to contact them, others reported calling frequently out of their desire to be offered a house.
- Applicants often reported periods of frequent communication with Housing New Zealand associated with property offers.
- New tenants reported relatively low levels of contact with Housing New Zealand. However, when property or tenancy issues arose new tenants described considerable communication to and from Housing New Zealand.
- Many established tenants appear to be either:
  - ‘frequent callers’ who will call the 0800 number frequently, often calling for

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<sup>4</sup> Note that participants could move between these groups in the three years between Wave One and Wave Two data collection periods. For example, an applicant interviewed at Wave One could remain an applicant at Wave Two, or be a tenant.



updates on issues they have called about previously. Some of these tenants self-identified as 'difficult customers'.

- 'infrequent callers' who will seldom if ever use the 0800 number, many preferring to "save issues up" to discuss with Tenancy Managers at annual inspections. Some of these tenants had "given up" on the CSC.

## Applicants

- 34 Once confirmed on the waiting list many applicants tended to wait for Housing New Zealand to contact them and ask if they still needed a house, or to check that their details were correct. However, some applicants reported contacting Housing New Zealand frequently, out of their desire to be offered a house. One applicant said:

*Well you've just got to keep on ringing and ringing... for I don't know how long, 'cause they take you off the list if you don't keep on ringing them. About every week, or every second week I normally ring, and just see if anything's changed, no it's still the same, and nothing's changed, and they say to me there is a long waiting list. Very, very long waiting list. (Single, European, 51 - 64 years, B Priority)*

- 35 Applicants had periods when they were frequently in contact with Housing New Zealand, particularly when they were offered houses and were deciding whether or not to accept one of the offers.

## New tenants

- 36 New tenants reported relatively low rates of contact, across all age groups. However, younger new tenants appear to be more likely to contact Housing New Zealand 'frequently' than older new tenants. Frequent and infrequent contact was evenly distributed across Māori, New Zealand European/Pākehā, and Pacific people.

- 37 Many new tenants said that the frequency with which they contacted housing New Zealand varied with periods of high frequency typically associated with property or tenancy issues interspersed with periods of infrequent contact. One tenant described a period of frequent contact relating to the property as follows:

*When I first moved in, because the lawn was this high when we first moved in and I was in here for three weeks before they come around to mow the lawns. And I kept ringing them up about it and then when they did, there were fish heads and all that in the backyard, and then it grew and then we mowed the lawns again and then we discovered that in the corner over there, there was rubbish bags buried. And a lot more rubbish buried, and so I called them, and it wasn't until about a month later. No one had, I had two people come round, the first lot said, "Oh, we'll come back," and then the second lot, I rung up and they sent a second lot, and they said, "Oh, we have to get some equipment to dig." And then I didn't see them again, and then I rung up a month later and said I hadn't heard from anyone, and then they were around the next day, and they had taken it all out. So I mean, it did take a bit of persistence but it's like trying to, yeah, you have to keep ringing before someone does something. (W2: MultiAwC, Māori, 18-30 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

## Established tenants

- 38 While there was considerable variation, and established tenants reported a wide range of contact patterns, many established tenants appear to either:
- *call the 0800 number frequently*: These 'frequent callers' often called to get updates on activity or to request assistance for the same issue multiple times, some self-identified as 'difficult customers'. A small number noted that when there was no progress on requests they escalated issues to Housing New Zealand managers and/or local Members of Parliament.
  - *very rarely call the 0800 number*: including tenants who a) waited for their annual inspection to bring up issues, handle things themselves if they could, or "don't like to moan"; or b) had given up after repeated requests and were sick of waiting, noting there's "no point asking".
- 39 The following quote provides an example of a tenant who very rarely calls the 0800 number:
- I usually don't ring them, usually I don't contact them at all because I have inspections twice a year and if there are any issues come up like broken latches or anything I tell them that at the inspection. (W2: Sole, European/Pakeha, 31-40 Years, about 5 years tenure duration)*

## 3.2 Reasons for contacting Housing New Zealand

- Applicants described contacting Housing New Zealand in order to get onto and remain on the waiting list, find and accept the right property, and when turning down properties.
- There was some confusion regarding how the waiting list worked, in particular what is required to stay on the waiting list. At the time of the interviews, some applicants were unsure if they were still on the waiting list.
- New tenants tended to be more positive about communicating with Housing New Zealand during the move into their new property.
- After settling into the property, new tenants were much more likely to contact Housing New Zealand for maintenance-related reasons than for any other reason.
- Established tenants were also most likely to contact Housing New Zealand for maintenance-related issues, followed by requests for transfers. Established tenants were also more likely to be frustrated with these requests not being acted on by Housing New Zealand.
- Some established tenants noted that the 0800 number is a useful resource for advice about a wide range of property and tenancy-related issues – such as assistance filling in forms or advice about changing a fuse.

## Applicants

- 40 Applicants identified a wide range of reasons for communicating with Housing New Zealand related to the various steps involved in finding an appropriate tenancy:
- getting on the waiting list
  - staying on the waiting list
  - finding the right property.

### *Getting on to the waiting list*

- 41 Applicants described initial discussions with Housing New Zealand related to getting on the waiting list. The timing of communication from Housing New Zealand surprised some applicants. Some applicants reported being unaware that their application had not resulted in them being confirmed on the waiting list. Some applicants were told that their applications were not processed because they had not provided the required documentation, or that it had been lost. In most cases people only found out what had happened to their application when they enquired some months after the needs assessment interview.
- 42 Many applicants did not know how the waiting list worked or their priority rating. Some applicants assumed that:
- the waiting list works on a 'time served' basis (i.e. when an applicant is housed, everybody else on the waiting list moves up a slot)
  - Tenancy Managers were physically looking for a property for each applicant
  - Tenancy Managers could give applicants unoccupied properties that applicants noticed in their neighbourhoods.
- 43 During Wave Two interviews more people proposed reasons to explain why they were still waiting for a property, or had been removed from the waiting list. Many of the explanations related to participants feeling as if they didn't fit 'Housing New Zealand's criteria'. For example one applicant described herself as not fitting Housing New Zealand's criteria because she was "*a white New Zealand female on my own with one child*" rather than a large Pacific family or a gang member (W2: Sole parent, European/Pākehā, 40-50 years, B priority).
- 44 A small number of applicants reported difficulty in getting on the waiting list due to Housing New Zealand staff members having insufficient local knowledge about the private rental market. This happened particularly when staff outside of Christchurch, who with the best of intentions, were seeking to support staff in Christchurch after the earthquakes. A previous applicant from Wave One had called Housing New Zealand to attempt to get back on the waiting list, only to be told that they would have to go to five private rental properties and get letters from the landlords saying she had been turned down. The applicant was aware from her own experience that there were often around 70 people competing for these rental properties, and getting a letter from a landlord was unrealistic.

### *Staying on the waiting list*

- 45 Many applicants described repeated communication with Housing New Zealand related to staying on the waiting list. During Wave One interviews applicants communicated using multiple channels with Housing New Zealand in their attempts to stay on the waiting list. These channels included letters, phone calls, and visits to the office. Some applicants visited the Neighbourhood Housing Unit repeatedly to enquire about their status on the waiting list.
- 46 Housing New Zealand regularly sent people letters to check whether they still needed houses. Applicants were uncertain about the appropriate response to a review letter asking them to confirm their housing need. Several applicants had responded to these letters by calling the 0800 number, to which there was no reply and so they had left messages.

47 As part of the changes introduced during 2012 applicants assessed as having a lower level of housing need (described as C or D priority) were no longer eligible to be on the waiting list. Many of these applicants felt that they still had a need for assistance and were confused as to why they had been taken off the waiting list. One applicant (SolewC, Māori, 31-40 years, D priority) noted that Housing New Zealand called and told her she didn't "*need to be on a waiting list*". However the private rental property they were living in was still too small for their growing family and they couldn't afford to rent a larger property.

48 Some applicants described giving up on the waiting list as they had grown frustrated with having to repeat themselves. As one applicant said:

*No I bailed out when they kept asking me the same questions about a year and a half ago I thought, why are they sending this, I've already done all this with you. ... I thought, well we covered all that, you've got all my information, nothing's changed. By the time I came down here no one was playing the game, I feel as though, it's throwing me curve balls, ask me stupid questions time and time again, the same question.* (MultiA, European/Pakeha, 41-50 years, B priority)

#### *Finding the right house*

49 In the process of finding the right house some applicants had turned down one or more offers of properties. For applicants interviewed at both Waves One and Two the communication around turning down properties was fraught. Applicants said they had not accepted properties because they were untidy and dirty, too small, too close to known gang houses, and not close to amenities and family.

50 At the time of their needs assessments, applicants were asked questions to help Housing New Zealand match their household to a house. One of these questions asked them to identify areas where they would like to live. In some instances, applicants interviewed at Wave One were then confused when Housing New Zealand offered them houses that did not match their requirements. One applicant who had been offered two houses said: *Yeah, so they actually were trying to find a house in the east side area, but she actually came back with Mangere and Otarā which was totally off the mark.* (SolewC, Pacific, 18 - 30 years, A Priority)

51 Some applicants thought that if they refused the offer of three houses, they would go to the back of the waiting list or would have to reapply. They were so concerned about getting any kind of housing for themselves and their children that they accepted offers of houses even though they were unsuitable.

52 In Wave One being offered properties in areas other than those chosen at the needs assessment was an issue for applicants. The communication issue at Wave Two was about offers of properties not eventuating. A small number of applicants described being told about houses, and in some cases viewing them with a Tenancy Manager, only to be told they had gone to someone else. Two applicants described this issue, noting:

*I was like, "Yay... This is gonna be our whare." ... Well my manager at the time... she was sick for the day and when she came back the house was gone, it was given away just like that. And I was really heartbroken about that.* (SolewC, Māori, 31-40 years, B priority)

*I was on their waiting list, I signed up at the Otarā branch, they offered me three houses, as they do. I picked one, I went in to tell them and they said, "Oh no you*

*can't have that house." I was like, "But you offered it to me." "Oh well the lady didn't know but it's being wheelchair renovated." I was, "But I want it." And they're like, "No you can't have it because we're renovating it." So they gave me another few houses to look at which were total dumps, they were really dumps of houses and I said no, so they kicked me off and put me back at the bottom of the list ... So I ended up just pulling out and yeah I pulled out and found this house. (SolewEwC, Māori, 18-30 years, B priority)*

- 53 Many applicants were aware of some gang houses and sought to avoid being placed close to them. Information sharing between Housing New Zealand and applicants about gang houses was an unspoken undercurrent in communication related to matching and placement.

### **New tenants**

- 54 New tenants tended to be relatively more positive about communication with Housing New Zealand, particularly when discussing moving into their property. After settling into their new property, new tenants were most likely to contact Housing New Zealand for maintenance-related issues.

#### *Success in getting a property*

- 55 Getting a property is a time when new tenants communicate with Housing New Zealand frequently. Most new tenants were very positive about communication at this time. One new tenant described being excited on receiving news from Housing New Zealand about the new property.

*I had a baby and ... I was living here, there and everywhere. Like one night I'd stay at my sister in-law's and then one night I'd stay at my mum's and stay at my auntie's so and when I rung up I said that I'd like somewhere near my sister in-law 'cause she's my baby sitter. 'Cause I work four days a week so and then I came home sick one day and then Housing New Zealand rings up going, "We've got a house for you to have a look at." And I said, "Oh okay where is it?" 'Cause there's not many two bedrooms around here and they said, "Oh its number 12." It was like, "Oh my God, okay." So yeah I was quite excited and yeah so my family was down shopping and I was like, "Hurry up and come home so you can have a look before I have to take the key back." (laughter). (W1: CoupwC, European/Pakeha, 18-30 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 56 Both Waves One and Two new tenants thought their success in getting a property had depended on knowing the right people. As one new tenant said: *'Cause if you don't have the right people, you're not gonna get that help...[y]ou weren't allowed to pick the house that you want to be in. You tell them what area you want to go to, they choose the houses for you* (W1: CoupwCwGC, Māori and European, 31-40 years, less than two years tenure duration).

#### *Reasons for communication once new tenants are settled*

- 57 Once new tenants had settled into their properties they were expected to report to Housing New Zealand via the 0800 number which operates 24 hours a day seven days a week. Housing New Zealand expected new tenants to report any issues with the property. It relies on tenants to ensure that the quality of workmanship is appropriate when contractors undertake maintenance work on properties. New tenants were also expected to keep Housing New Zealand informed of any

changes in their circumstances that might change the rent they paid or the size of the house they required.

58 Table 2 summarises the reasons that new tenants gave for contacting Housing New Zealand.

**Table 2** New tenants' reasons for contacting Housing New Zealand

Reason for contact	Wave One		Wave Two	
	Number of tenants	Percent of tenants	Number of tenants	Percent of tenants
<b>The property including: maintenance, requests for improvements in house condition, and pests</b>	39	60%	83	95%
<b>The tenancy including: rent, and transfer requests</b>	15	23%	16	18%
<b>Neighbours</b>	7	11%	4	5%
<b>Health of tenant's household</b>	7	11%	2	2%

Note: Figures in this table are based on interviews with 65 new tenants in Wave One and 87 new tenants in Wave Two. Due to the low number of respondents figures in this table should be considered indicative of wider trends rather than robust estimates for the wider population of Housing New Zealand tenants.

The numbers sum to more than 65 tenants in Wave One and 87 tenants in Wave Two because many tenants contacted Housing New Zealand for more than one reason.

59 Across both Wave One and Wave Two, maintenance-related issues were the most common reasons new tenants gave for contacting Housing New Zealand. The Wave Two increase in reporting of property-related issues could be attributed to more new tenants being conscientious about keeping Housing New Zealand up to date with the condition of their property, and/or to the availability of the 0800 number which supports them to do this.

### Established tenants

60 The primary reasons established tenants initiated contact was determined by analysing their discussions about their communication with Housing New Zealand. The following hierarchy appears to be relatively uniform over established tenants interviewed in Porirua, Christchurch and South Auckland - from most common to least common reasons for contact:

- maintenance requests
- tenancy-related issues including request or enquiry about a transfer, issues with anti-social behaviour, rent arrears and/or debt
- miscellaneous requests including for general information, help with completing forms / letter, complaints.

#### *Maintenance*

61 The most common reason established tenants contacted Housing New Zealand was for maintenance-related issues. This reason was cited considerably more often than any other reason, and appears for many tenants to be considered the

primary or sole purpose of the 0800 call centre. Most tenants were very happy with the response to requests for maintenance noting that the maintenance response was usually very prompt.

- 62 Some tenants found it frustrating when told that “there’s no budget for that” when they raised a maintenance issue with their Tenancy Manager. One tenant felt that no matter what issue she raised with Housing New Zealand she knew this would be the response.

#### *Tenancy-related issues*

- 63 Many established tenants reported enquiring about the possibility of a transfer. However, these tenants often reported that they had been discouraged from applying for a transfer, and some noted that they were told that the wait was so long that realistically it wasn't going to happen so not to bother. A small number of these tenants reported that they were told that they couldn't apply for a transfer. Others had been told by friends that it's not worth applying for a transfer to another Housing New Zealand property as they would just end up “sitting there for years.” As one tenant said:

*Well actually we didn't even apply, he just rang up and they said, "Oh you can put in an application but you probably won't get it." You know it's that type of, it just puts you off talking to anyone. It's like talking to WINZ you know ... but you know the, so the talk you get on the phone is, "Oh we've got such a waiting list, you're going to be waiting for such a long time, you ... down the waiting list." (W1: Couple with children, Māori, 18-30 years, more than 10 years tenure duration)*

- 64 Some tenants called the 0800 number to complain, most often about anti-social behaviour in their neighbourhood. Other subjects of complaints were the quality of maintenance work or delays in responding to previous requests.
- 65 A number of tenants contacted Housing New Zealand either to explain why they would be unable to make their rent payment, or to check whether they were behind on rent. A small number of these tenants commented that, despite calling to inform of likely delays in rent, Housing New Zealand would still contact them when they missed their rent payment and not acknowledge the previous communication. These tenants felt that they were wasting their time keeping Housing New Zealand informed.

#### *Miscellaneous requests*

- 66 While the majority of communication with Housing New Zealand is for one of the reasons outlined above, tenants provided examples of a wide range of other reasons for contacting Housing New Zealand. A small number of tenants noted that the contact centre was useful when they were filling in forms, or for clarifying letters they had received from Housing New Zealand.
- 67 Established tenants commented on the flexibility of the 0800 number staff in dealing with a range of issues. For example, one established tenant (single older woman) contacted the 0800 number after the power went out in her property. This tenant appreciated the CSC staff patiently talking her through locating and fixing the fuse - noting that the staff were very reassuring.

### 3.3 Quality of communication

- Applicants' satisfaction with communication tended to be related to whether they got a property, or felt that they were likely to. Some applicants felt judged when told they were 'not needy enough' to get a property. These tenants often felt that this assessment was because they didn't meet the stereotype of someone in need, rather than being a reflection of their actual need for housing assistance.
- Some applicants appeared confused about how the offering process worked, with some noting that they felt they had to take the first property offered to them.
- While many new tenants were happy with the service provided by the CSC, others were frustrated as they wanted to talk to their Tenancy Manager directly. Many new tenants also described frustration with trying to get maintenance work done on their property, highlighting problems communicating with their Tenancy Manager and with contractors about appropriate times to undertake the work.
- New tenants appear to be more positive about tenancy-related issues, and where they weren't this was because of long delays in Tenancy Managers getting back to them often after repeated messages left with the CSC.
- Established tenants were split on the quality of communication with CSC, with the majority of complaints related to the time taken to answer their call. Established tenants were typically positive about the service once their calls were answered. Note that significant work has been done to improve time taken to answer calls since these interviews were conducted.
- Many established tenants noted that the quality of face-to-face communication 'depends on who you get' for a Tenancy Manager. These tenants described highly variable quality of communication across different Tenancy Managers who had been assigned to them.
- Some established tenants noted frustration at frequent changes in Tenancy Managers, noting that it was important that they have a good relationship and that changes required work getting used to each other. These tenants were clear that they wanted consistency in their relationship with Housing New Zealand.
- Many established tenants liked the standardised forms and letters used in Housing New Zealand postal communication as they could recognise what was required without having to read them. However, some tenants found this approach impersonal.
- Some established tenants reported concern at Housing New Zealand losing forms, with a small number of people noting that this had happened more than once and as a result they wanted the ability to drop forms in at the office to ensure they weren't lost in the mail.

- 68 Most tenants and applicants were happy with the 0800 number as a channel for contacting Housing New Zealand. Tenants and applicants varied in their reports of the quality of communication they received when they called CSC. Some people thought the communication very good, respectful and helpful, other people felt that they had not been treated politely. When tenants described good Tenancy Managers they did so in terms of their communication. A good Tenancy Manager calls them within 48 hours of their call to CSC, and if required sets up email or texting contact while an issue is resolved.



## Applicants

- 69 For many applicants, lack of contact with, and information from, Housing New Zealand was the most significant problem related to staying on the waiting list. Some applicants complained about leaving phone messages on staff members' phones but not having their calls returned. Others felt "stressed" about not knowing what was happening. Applicants wanted more frequent communication from Housing New Zealand about their status on the waiting list.
- 70 At each point of contact with Housing New Zealand the quality of the communication contributed to how people felt about being an applicant and becoming a tenant. Repeated contact built up a history of communication that was either positive or negative and this was carried over into expectations of communication once applicants became tenants. Success in staying on the waiting list, and/or in becoming a tenant was a positive influence on people's perceptions of the quality of service and communication they received.

### *Needs assessment*

- 71 The quality of needs assessors' communication was a significant point of contact that shaped applicants' perception of Housing New Zealand. Some applicants came away, as they should from their interview, feeling positive and optimistic. One applicant said: *Yeah the first person that I dealt with he was awesome, he was very cool and then he put me on the database basically.* (SolewC, European, age 31-40 years, B priority, had just moved into a Housing New Zealand property when interviewed). Other applicants reported being open and honest during the needs assessment process, but left feeling judged. For example, one applicant said: *[Y]ou do have to be quite open and honest, to have someone make you feel like, you're not good enough, but not desperate enough, not needy enough...* (SolewC, European, 18-30 years, B priority).
- 72 Some applicants felt let down after sharing very personal information during the needs assessment process, and that their situation had been pre-judged by the needs assessor. One applicant described this feeling:

*I feel that I didn't get a Housing Corp house because I was a white single woman with no mental health problems, I haven't just got off a boat, I don't do crack, I'm not in a gang, I've not got a partner that's in a gang, I'm not an Islander with ten kids, and I'm really quite gutted by it all... I felt judged, I said, 'What am I meant to do? You know?' (SolewC, European, 41-50 years, B priority)*

### *Communication with tenants regarding homelessness*

- 73 Housing New Zealand's definition of homelessness appears to be different to that of some applicants. Communication with applicants relating to this was identified as problematic, and left these applicants frustrated and feeling unheard.
- 74 Applicants recognised 'being overcrowded' or living temporarily with friends and family as a characteristic of being homeless.<sup>5</sup> However, several applicants noted that from Housing New Zealand's perspective, being overcrowded seemed to contribute less to a high priority housing need than being in a half way house or refuge. One applicant described how they had opted to move into an overcrowded

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<sup>5</sup> Amore K., Viggers H., Baker M.G., and Howden-Chapman, P. (2013) Severe housing deprivation: The problem and its measurement, Official Statistics Research Series, 6,. Available from [www.statisphere.govt.nz](http://www.statisphere.govt.nz).

situation with a friend to be near her children's school rather than into a Women's Refuge that was further away from the school:

*Well I don't know, I thought it got worse... there was a home invasion at my house they still couldn't give me a house... they told me to go live at a halfway house with my children. Yeah, like a refuge centre ... I was like that's further away from my kids' schools. Yeah that's what I said and he said, "Well that's all we can tell you for now." So yeah I was mad as hell. Yeah, I'm like so anti Housing New Zealand at the moment. ...We were homeless, like how homeless does a homeless person need to be? (SolewEwC, Māori, 18-30 years, D priority)*

#### *Offers of properties*

- 75 As noted above, many applicants were unsure how the waiting list and process of offering properties functioned. Communication between Housing New Zealand and applicants could become muddled when households were being matched to properties. Lack of clarity for tenants about these issues resulted in some tenants taking properties that weren't ideal, for example:

*I know this place is good for me but I wouldn't have minded having a choice. I felt like if I turned this place down they'd say, okay we get three choices, but the way Housing Corp were treating me at the time, I felt like if I even dared say no to this place that would be it. But on saying that it's still a home, it's a roof. (SolewC, Māori, 41-50 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

#### **New tenants**

- 76 Many new tenants were positive about general communication with Housing New Zealand. For example, one tenant noted *"it has been good - when we report anything from the house they respond fast."* (W1: SolewAC, Pacific, 75+ years, less than two years tenure duration).
- 77 The most common complaint from new tenants related to Tenancy Managers not returning calls, despite repeated attempts from the new tenant to contact Housing New Zealand.

#### *Customer Services Centre*

- 78 New tenants' opinion appeared to be split over how well the CSC served as their sole point of contact with Housing New Zealand. Many tenants were happy with the service they received from the CSC, for example one person contrasted the service provided by the CSC with that of private landlords:

*They're awesome, they're friendly, they're nice, they listen to you, they explain stuff to you in layman's terms which is really good (laughter). Yeah, it's great. It's good that... it doesn't matter if it's a cell phone or a landline. You can ring them and it can be sorted over the phone pretty much. It's great...That does it, yeah 'cause being in private rental, you'd have to ring the landlord or, you can't really text your landlord. But yeah not having credit on your phone, the fault would sit there for a while until you actually get to a phone and go, "Oh, can I ring my..." you know? And yeah which yeah, not having a landline, I'm not a landline person so yeah free phone number works. Yeah it's awesome. (W2: SolewC, European/Pakeha, 18-30 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 79 Other new tenants were frustrated that there was only one channel that people could use to contact Housing New Zealand. As one new tenant said:

*We are not allowed to go to the office anymore....but I prefer going into the office just like before, not like nowadays that we only have to ring up and when I fed up of waiting then I just hang up. They hardly answer the phone. (W2: Sole, Pacific, 41-50 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 80 A new tenant who is deaf described how they found the CSC difficult to use:

*It was a bit confusing at first, but yeah it's not bad. It's a good service. I still prefer the personal, 'cause my dad's deaf, I'm, I was born a little bit deaf, plus industrial deafness, I can't hear very well over the phone as well. Like I understand a lot of people by lip reading and that, and just not being able to see that person face-to-face it's quite disorientating. You know what I mean? (W2:SolewC, European/Pakeha, 18-30 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 81 Since these interviews were undertaken Housing New Zealand has reopened offices.

#### *Maintenance-related contact*

- 82 New tenants were also split on the quality of communication with Housing New Zealand regarding maintenance-related issues. Many new tenants described positive experiences when they contacted the CSC to request maintenance work. As one new tenant said:

*It's good... [W]hen I've rung the 0800 number, what was the last one I rang for? It was the kitchen tap was leaking and the light, the security light outside wasn't working and I mean they said that they'd be, someone will contact you within ten days. And they did and I've had no issues (W2: SolewC, European/Pakeha, 31-40 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 83 Equally as many new tenants were frustrated with maintenance-related communication, particularly when they had worked with their Tenancy Manager to ensure their new house had no outstanding maintenance issues prior to moving in. One new tenant summarised this experience saying:

*I just don't like it, like I want to talk to my tenancy manager and then I get someone that doesn't know, or says that it's been fixed before ... Yeah 'cause when I had moved in, me and my tenancy manager had made a list of what needed to be done and we both agreed on it, both signed it, or however you do it. And she took it back and then we were fixing it, I moved in and they weren't fixed, so I had trouble with the 0800 number they're saying that it was fixed, it's got here fixed. And I said, "Well no it's not, I've just moved in three days ago, you can't tell me that I've broken it within three days." Yeah so I had a lot of trouble then and I don't know, like the second time when I had rung them, I didn't really want to ring them. (W2: MultiAwC, Māori and European, 18-30 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 84 Other new tenants said they rang about maintenance-related issues and were told that someone would come but no one came. Some tenants described how when they followed this up with a second call they were told that there was no record of the agreement. As one new tenant said:

*[T]he last time I rung them up I wanted them to come and look at my water 'cause it kept on dripping in the bath and they reckoned it would take like four hours and they never came at all. ... And I keep on ringing them up all the time and they keep on going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." But no one comes. So I don't think they're a good service eh. When you get them over to have a look they reckon, they always go, yep they'll send someone but they never. (W2: CoupwC, Pacific, 41-50 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 85 Other new tenants described instances of contractors turning up when nobody was home, necessitating another call to Housing New Zealand. Some new tenants had tried to arrange for the contractor to ring to make sure a visit would not be wasted, but found contacting contractors difficult.
- 86 A common theme in new tenants' comments was calling the 0800 number and not receiving any follow-up to their calls. One new tenant reported a faulty toilet using the 0800 number to inform the Tenancy Manager and said *'But she hasn't got back to us about that so we're not too sure what's going to happen.'* (SolewC, Māori, 31-40 years, less than two years tenure duration)

#### *Tenancy-related contact*

- 87 New tenants contacted Housing New Zealand to discuss a wide range of tenancy-related issues, including communication about rent, transfers, neighbours and housing-related health issues. Like maintenance-related contact, tenants felt both appreciative and aggrieved as a result of their communication about tenancy-related topics.
- 88 Positive responses to communication about tenancy-related issues were often reported by new tenants who were able to have their issue addressed over the phone. While negative responses were often associated with long delays in response when the issue was unable to be addressed by the CSC staff.
- 89 A new tenant reported struggling to resolve having overpaid rent, despite repeated calls to the CSC:
- I've actually gone almost two weeks over, like paying back my overdue amount and everything and they're still taking money out of my account and I'm not happy about it and that's to put it bluntly. ... Yeah and that's the way I feel because I'm still waiting for my tenancy manager to ring me back and she hasn't, and that's been almost a month, so I think that really sucks ... I've tried about four or five times, I've given in now. I'm not happy about it because you know as soon as you get behind with your rent they're on your case and when you're not they still take your bloody money (laughter) (W1: SolewC, European/Pakeha, 41-50 years, less than two years tenure duration)*
- 90 Several tenants reported communicating with Housing New Zealand about anti-social behaviour in their neighbourhood. While some tenants were happy with action taken to follow-up these complaints, many were dissatisfied with the response and were not given any updates by their Tenancy Manager.
- 91 Some new tenants were unsettled when Tenancy Managers changed frequently. One new tenant said: *"They use the whole, "Oh, your last Tenancy Manager didn't tell me that, I'm sorry." They use that. "I'm your new one, so I don't know none of this."* (W1: SolewC, Māori and Pacific, 18-30 years, less than two years tenure duration).

## Established tenants

- 92 Established tenants talked extensively about the quality of their communication with Housing New Zealand. This section presents a summary of this information, first covering general comments on communication, before looking at assessments of the quality of different communication channels.

### *General communication*

- 93 Assessments of the quality of communication varied considerably, with some tenants praising Housing New Zealand's communication, while others were highly critical. Tenants who were positive about their communication described Housing New Zealand staff as:

- approachable, easy to talk to, friendly, and polite
- good at listening to problems, and patient
- helpful, and prompt at responding to messages.

- 94 One established tenant described how the various staff in their local office had made them feel confident that they could contact Housing New Zealand when they needed to:

*[L]ike I said I only deal with the [local office] team anyway and they're all pretty approachable even the, what do you call them? Housing Managers or yeah I mean not that I've had to ring them but I know that wouldn't be a problem yeah. Just being able to ring up and have a chat about something. (W1: SolewC, Māori, 41-50 years, Less than 1.5 years tenure duration)*

- 95 The two main areas established tenants were critical of were:

- the attitudes of staff (patronising, condescending, non-constructive, unapproachable, or dismissive)
- confusing information provided by Housing New Zealand.

### *0800 number*

- 96 Established tenants were divided in terms of their assessment of the 0800 number. Many valued the convenience of the phone and found the call-centre staff friendly and helpful; while others criticised the long wait for calls to be answered, and felt that their messages weren't getting through to Tenancy Managers.

- 97 Established tenants who were positive about the 0800 number valued the staff; noting they were friendly, easy to talk to, helpful, and patient. A number of tenants also noted that the staff were clear about what they can and can't help with, and appeared to value this clarity. For example:

*Well they keep me informed and most of them are fairly, give you the information you want and you're not left wondering at the end of the conversation. (W2: SolewC, European/Pakeha, 65-74 years, 10+ years tenure duration.)*

- 98 Tenants who were dissatisfied with the 0800 number were most often critical about waiting times for calls to be answered. Many tenants noted long waiting times, and others noted that waiting times are highly variable, sometimes there's no wait at all while other times 30 minutes will pass before the call is answered. One established

tenant thought that the increased reliance on the 0800 number following the closure of offices had resulted in an overloading of the system:

*... answer their phones quicker. I mean it's all good talking to a machine but you still have to wait for ages. If they're going to close an office and make everyone go through the 0800 number, they should hire more people so you can get your call seen to. (W2: SolewC, Māori, 41-50 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

- 99 For many established tenants the time taken to answer their call was the only complaint they had about the CSC, often noting that once their call was answered the service was of a high quality. For example:

*Well when I do find that I talk to someone on the other end they're really good. They're really helpful and that and they try their best to give you whatever information they can get. It's just hard to get through to them. (W2: SolewC, Māori, 41-50 years, about 5 years tenure duration)*

- 100 Other established tenants felt that this issue had largely been addressed, noting that in the past there had been very long waiting times for calls to be answered, which they had found frustrating, but that calls were now answered promptly. One tenant commented that the 0800 number worked better than calling the local office, as staff in the office would just forward their calls around different phones and nobody would help them.

- 101 Established tenants complaining about long waiting times often noted that this acts as a deterrent to contact Housing New Zealand. Some tenants noted that they find it difficult to sit and wait for long periods of time and sometimes give up before their call is answered.

- 102 A small number of established tenants noted that their frustration at waiting for their call to be answered is compounded by the fact that they will have to wait again, for their Tenancy Manager to respond to the email from the CSC staff:

*When you're picking up the phone you're just asking, like they put you through to all different things, so you're just pushing buttons and then you finally get an operator and then they go, "oh okay, we'll log that job through and we'll have someone come and see, contact you within the next ten days," and that's as much as you get out of Housing New Zealand. It's like "oh cheers, see you later" (laughter) (W2: SolewC, Māori and European, 31-40 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

- 103 A small number of established tenants reported that CSC staff can be rude and condescending, although the majority of the comments about CSC staff were complimentary.

#### *Face-to-face communication*

- 104 Discussions about face-to-face communication with Housing New Zealand were much more prevalent during Wave One interviews. This is to be expected as between interview waves many offices were closed to the public, and communication was directed through the 0800 number rather than directly to regional staff. Across both Waves One and Two interviews a number of established tenants commented on the significant difference in quality of communication between individual staff members, "it depends who you get".

105 As with new tenants, established tenants were frustrated at the frequency with which their Tenancy Managers changed. These tenants noted how with each new Tenancy Manager they were required to build rapport, and that both parties would have to learn about and 'get used to' each other. Some of these tenants complained that as a result of changing Tenancy Managers they would often have to repeat stories multiple times as there was no historical knowledge.

106 Most established tenants appear to value consistency and a shared understanding in their relationship with their Tenancy Managers. Frequent changes in Tenancy Manager or very little direct communication with tenants can make this difficult.

*For me it would be like previously they always used to change the tenancy manager if they had, like I'm not sure why they do that, but maybe if they just had like the same person then they would know what your issues were ... because I know there was a stage where they were changing them every six months or something, they'd send out a letter and say that you've got a new tenancy manager. (W2: SolewACwC, Pacific, 31-40 years, 1.5 years tenure duration)*

107 Some established tenants complained that their Tenancy Manager was rude or patronising, that they "look down their nose at you". However, the most prevalent assessment of Tenancy Managers was that tenants no longer have much to do with them, some noting that they didn't know who their Tenancy Manager was. As one tenant said:

*Well at first you know a lot of tenancy managers used to come around and do lots of visits and that but that sort of seemed to stop. Yeah slow down. And they just changed frequently so I never, there isn't one tenancy manager that I knew for very long because they just keep changing ... I mean yeah like when I, like managers that I did have, I mean they just used to pop around or you know send a letter to say I'm your tenancy, but I never, I've never had one probably in the last I don't know ... I couldn't tell you who my tenancy manager was (laughter). (W2: SolewCwGC, Pacific, 31-40 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

108 Many established tenants noted that the only face-to-face communication they have with Housing New Zealand is through annual inspections. Established tenants were largely satisfied with the inspections, many appreciating that they were regular and 'expected'.

109 A small number of established tenants noted that they dislike going into the Community Link offices due to confusion over who to talk to, and behaviour of some staff.

#### *Postal communication*

110 Established tenants were mixed on the quality of Housing New Zealand postal correspondence. Some tenants appreciated the standard format of the letters as it was familiar, while others felt that this approach was impersonal.

111 Some established tenants appreciated that the letters were 'standard', noting that this enabled them to know what the letter was about without really engaging with the content. For example, being able to recognise a letter was informing them of an impending inspection without having to read the entire thing. Tenants appreciated letters as a reminder of things such as inspections as it gave them sufficient time to ensure someone could be at the property.

- 112 A small number of established tenants complained about the “mass mailing” approach, where standardised “impersonal” letters were mailed out to everyone. Some of these established tenants said this was unacceptable, and wanted letters to acknowledge them as individuals. Other established tenants commented that these standardised letters don’t acknowledge issues they had raised on the phone or in person with Housing New Zealand. For example, tenants received a standardised letter about rent arrears despite having previously called to explain why their rent would be late the following week.
- 113 A small number of established tenants noted that they felt the letters they received when behind on rent had a ‘threatening’ tone that was inappropriate.
- 114 Some established tenants wanted the ability to hand completed forms/evidence to Housing New Zealand staff, rather than post it in. These tenants often cited situations where they had posted in paperwork and Housing New Zealand reported never having received it. It was clear some tenants were sceptical of the letters becoming lost in the post, and felt that Housing New Zealand had lost their paperwork.

*I like doing the, you know the phone thing, but when I've got paperwork, you know how you do your yearly thing, it's actually nice to actually hand it in. Because a lot of times, a couple times when I've done it they've lost it in the mail. They reckon they've lost it. So it's nice to hand it straight to them so they know that they've actually, so I know that they've got it. But you see you can't do that now, now it's all closed down. (W2: CoupwC, European/Pakeha, 18-30 years, about 5 years tenure duration)*

*And forms and that, they tend to lose if you post them. So I usually, well I used to physically take it up and get them to, you know, so sign that they've received it. Where you can't do that where, now you can't. (W2: MultiAwGC, European/Pakeha, 51-64 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

- 115 Some established tenants identified barriers to engaging with written communication from Housing New Zealand. The most prevalent reasons identified were for non-English speakers, people with low-vision (particularly older tenants), and those with literacy barriers. Many of these tenants waited for family to visit and read the letters for them.

### 3.4 Communication preferences

- Participants were enrolled in the Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study by phone and therefore all of them had the ability to use the CSC for communicating with Housing New Zealand
- While many applicants and tenants (new and established) prefer to use the CSC for communicating with Housing New Zealand, others want the option to discuss their issues face-to-face.
- Applicants and tenants who prefer using the CSC to contact Housing New Zealand describe it as convenient and easy to use. Noting that they don’t have to leave their house and can call when it suits them.
- Those who prefer to discuss things with Housing New Zealand face-to-face typically cited issues with getting resolution to their issues when using the CSC in the past, and/or describe difficulty getting their message across over the phone.



- Often established tenants who had been tenants prior to the new Service Delivery Model being introduced were frustrated that the option to 'drop in' and discuss issues in the Housing New Zealand offices had been removed.

## Applicants

- 116 Most of the applicants said they used the 0800 number to communicate with Housing New Zealand to respond to both phone calls and letters. Some applicants had mobile phones which had no credit on them and were happy about the 0800 number because it meant that they could still contact Housing New Zealand.
- 117 While the CSC was their main point of contact, many applicants used other channels to communicate with Housing New Zealand, including face-to-face contact, email, texting and letters. Face-to-face contact was the most common channel after the 0800 number. The quality of their face-to-face needs assessment appeared to affect their preference for ongoing face-to-face communication with Housing New Zealand. Some applicants found it hard to approach Housing New Zealand in the first place, as one of them said:

*Oh it was quite hard to swallow my pride and come in. It was quite hard to even to WINZ and ask for money. I mean I just had a baby and my partner had just taken off. So I was in a situation where if I didn't, I was gonna go under very quickly. (SolewC, European, 18-30 years, B priority)*

- 118 Applicants were asked at Waves One and Two whether or not they owned or had easy access to a car or a computer and the internet. The car can be used to visit a Housing New Zealand office for a face-to-face meeting. The computer and internet can be used to contact Housing New Zealand by email. In Wave One about 70 percent of applicants had access to cars and about two thirds of applicants had access to computers. Younger applicants were more likely to have access to cars than applicants over 50 years of age. About three quarters of Māori and European/Pakeha applicants had access to computers and the internet but only half of Pacific applicants had this access. The small number of applicants interviewed in Wave two precludes further analysis of access to cars and computers for applicants.

## New tenants

- 119 The 0800 number was the most common channel of communication for new tenants, and less than a third contacted their Tenancy Manager directly by phone, letter or email. Slightly more than a third of the new tenants did not identify how they contacted Housing New Zealand (see Table 3).

**Table 3** New tenants' channels for communicating with Housing New Zealand

Communication channel reported by new tenants	Wave One		Wave Two	
	Number of tenants	Percent of new tenants	Number of tenants	Percent of new tenants
Called the 0800 number	27	42%	81	93%
Reported direct to Tenancy Manager by phone, letter or email	18	28%	3	4%
Face-to-face with Tenancy Manager at inspection	4	6%	26	30%
Nil	24	37%	4	5%

Note: the numbers sum to more than 65 in Wave One and 87 in Wave Two because tenants indicated that they used more than one channel to communicate with Housing New Zealand.

- 120 Table 3 shows the considerable change in communication patterns for new tenants following the introduction of the new Service Development Model, particularly the move towards having the CSC as the sole point of contact for tenants.

#### Customer Service Centre

- 121 Many new tenants' preference for contacting Housing New Zealand appears to be related to how responsive their Tenancy Manager is to messages left with the CSC. New tenants who preferred using the 0800 number to contact Housing New Zealand often noted that their Tenancy Managers responded to their calls quickly. For example:

*[H]e doesn't leave me waiting one week, two weeks, or he doesn't tell me that I have to go up and see him. If I make a call through the Call Centre then he'll get back to me either that day or the next day but he won't leave it until I have to go up there...and he's considerate really because basically he knows you can't just drop everything and get up there?*

- 122 While those who didn't like using the CSC as their sole contact often referenced long waits before their Tenancy Manager responded, often requiring multiple calls before receiving a response.

*I have made numerous phone calls and complaints to Housing New Zealand and on the 0800 number and get told, "We will email your property manager, she will be in touch with you within forty-eight hours and I never hear from them." ...Never hear until I ring up again and complain again and then I still don't hear and then I ring again and complain again. (W1: SolewC, European/Pakeha, 41-50 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

#### Face-to-face communication

- 123 Table 3 indicates that in addition to ringing the 0800 number, new tenants use a variety of channels to communicate directly with Tenancy Managers including texting, phone calls, email, and letter writing. Speaking about texting her Tenancy Manager one Wave Two new tenant said:

*Yes when I talk to her she's a very good one, she's a Māori, when I need talk to her I give her a text, for the first time I give her a text I feel shy to text to her because I don't understand she accept, you know my text, or she feel happy*

*when she saw I text her to ring me. But I'm very glad and appreciate it when she ring me back. All the times I want to talk to her she always ring me back. (W2: Sole, Pacific, 41-50 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 124 One new tenant said about a written request to have a door fixed: “[I]t would be nice that at least they acknowledge it, that they've received the letter, like we've sent it twice through and still have no acknowledgement (W1: SolewC, European/Pakeha, 31-40 years, less than two years tenure duration). At the time of the Wave One interviews face-to-face meetings with Tenancy Managers happened by appointment at the Neighbourhood Housing Unit, or at the time of the house inspection. One Wave One new tenant said:

*[I]t always goes to answering machine. Well, I wrote it out on the income related form, I've written out all my issues that I had with the house, and she came here to pick it up, because I couldn't 'cause I wasn't driving at the time, and she came here and she just told me, “Oh we can't help you with any of that 'cause there's just so many people that we have to help and you're just on the list.” (W1: SolewC, Māori and Pacific, 18-30 years, less than two years tenure duration)*

- 125 New tenants were asked at Waves One and Two whether or not they owned or had easy access to a car or a computer and the internet. In Wave One new tenants had the same level of access to cars as applicants, about 70 percent and this did not change from Wave One to Wave Two. However, a younger group of new tenants had access to cars than applicants. Younger new tenants also had more access to computers and the internet than people over 40 years of age. Pacific new tenants had even less access to computers and the internet than applicants (44 percent and 56 percent respectively). Access to computers and the internet remained about the same between Waves One and Two.

### **Established tenants**

- 126 Most of the conversations with established tenants about their preferences for communication involved comparing phone and face-to-face communication. The majority of established tenants interviewed preferred communicating with Housing New Zealand face-to-face. However, a considerable group preferred the convenience of the 0800 number. Most tenants appear to view other channels such as postal and text-based communication as supplementary.

#### *Customer Service Centre*

- 127 Tenants whose preferred method of communication was the 0800 number often cited the convenience of being able to contact Housing New Zealand from their home. These tenants often noted that the alternative would involve going “all the way into the office”.
- 128 Some tenants found it easier to talk over the phone than face-to-face with Housing New Zealand staff, often citing that talking over the phone was less confrontational and they felt more confident to raise issues. One tenant found interacting with people difficult, and the phone-based service was significantly easier for them to manage than speaking to someone in-person.

#### *Face-to-face communication*

- 129 The majority of established tenants indicated a preference for interacting with Housing New Zealand via face-to-face conversations with staff. Some tenants

missed the convenience of being able to 'pop in' and talk to staff about an issue when out running errands. However, the majority cited dissatisfaction with aspects of the 0800 number as the reason why they preferred face-to-face communication.

- 130 Typically established tenants felt that it took too long to get what they wanted when calling the 0800 number, and there was the additional step of waiting for Tenancy Managers to get back to them. Other tenants noted that commitments were made on the phone which were never followed through, typically that Tenancy Managers would return their calls. Established tenants often contrasted the 0800 number with the 'old system' where they could go into the offices and discuss issues with their Tenancy Manager:

*I won't contact them [Housing New Zealand] unless I have to really urgently. They should put our Porirua office back, at least you could walk in there and see somebody and if they can help you straightaway they will and if they can't you just sit there. They should give our office back, the phone thing doesn't work, it sucks. (W2: SolewC, Māori, 41-50 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

*Yeah but that's the thing, you ring up that 0800 number, they say what they say they're gonna do, but they don't. That's the whole muck around about that 0800 number, that's why I'd rather go into the office, see them face-to-face. (W2: SolewACwC, Māori, 31-40 years, about 5 years tenure duration)*

- 131 Many established tenants found it difficult to “get their message across” when talking on the phone. They could ensure people understood what they were saying when they were talking to them face-to-face. For example, one tenant said:

*It was better when you could go and talk to them and you could explain things better, but on the phone you're sort of, you're not doing it face-to-face, you don't know what's going on, whether your message is going to get across properly ... it's more, you can explain better [face-to-face], but if you're talking on the phone you're sort of, you've got to try and get your point across. If you don't, you know, things can go wrong. (W2: MultiA, European/Pakeha, 51-64 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

- 132 A small number of established tenants identified cultural reasons for preferring face-to-face communication, for example as one tenant said: *I don't know whether it's just me as a Māori, but I like the face-to-face contact. To, so I can let them know and they can see what I'm going on about, rather than, on the phone. (W2: Sole, Māori, 51-64 years, 5-10 years tenure duration)*

#### *Other forms of communication*

- 133 A small number of established tenants would prefer to use texting rather than call the 0800 number to communicate with Housing New Zealand. One tenant would rather receive texts than letters from Housing New Zealand. A number of tenants saw the Tenancy Tribunal as a form of punishment for being a bad tenant rather than an acceptable channel for communication from Housing New Zealand.
- 134 Established tenants had slightly less access to cars than applicants and new tenants in both Waves One and Two. Established tenants access to computers and the internet was higher than for new tenants but not as high as for applicants in both Waves One and Two.

### 3.5 Changes to communication between Waves One and Two

- A number of previous applicants reported that communication from Housing New Zealand about the changes in eligibility for C and D priority applicants was poorly handled.
- A small number of respondents who were applicants at both Wave One and Two reported that it was more difficult to get on the waiting list following the changes to Social Allocation System criteria.
- There appears to be increased uncertainty about how the application process works, with many applicants unsure of the 'rules'. For example, some applicants thought that they had to take properties offered to them or they would go to the bottom of the waiting list.
- Most established tenants felt that closure of offices negatively affected their communication with and the service they receive from Housing New Zealand. This includes many established tenants whose preferred mode of communication is the CSC, as they want to retain the *option* to discuss issues face-to-face.
- Most established tenants felt that resolving issues takes longer following the changes introduced as part of the new Service Delivery Model, primarily because it slows down communication as messages are passed around within Housing New Zealand.
- The majority of established tenants commented on reduced contact with their Tenancy Manager, and some commented on an increase in the turnover of Tenancy Managers. As a result, many of these tenants felt like they no longer had a Tenancy Manager, and some didn't know who their Tenancy Manager was. They contrasted the current practice where they "just talk to anybody" with the previous system where they had an effective working relationship with a single Tenancy Manager.
- Many established tenants felt that the tone of conversation had become more business-like and less personal.

135 This section draws mostly on comments from established tenants, as they are the group most likely to have communicated with Housing New Zealand before and after the introduction of the new Service Delivery Model. However, changes to the application process were discussed by some applicants.

#### Applicants

##### *Changes in the application process*

136 For applicants, the biggest change in communication was related to changes in how the application process functioned. At the time of Wave One interviews the application process involved applicants filling out forms over the counter in Neighbourhood Housing Units so their eligibility for a Housing New Zealand property could be assessed. An eligible person was invited to an interview with a needs assessor to determine the nature and extent of their housing need. The information from this interview was used to identify a preliminary priority segment on the waiting list for the person (i.e. A, B, C or D). Following the interview the person was required to provide documentation to validate his or her housing needs. Once this information had been provided by mail or by handing it in over the counter at a Neighbourhood Housing Unit, the person was confirmed on the waiting list and became an applicant. If the person failed to provide the information

within a specified period or was unable to validate their housing need, the application was terminated. The termination of the application was notified by mail.

- 137 By the time the Wave Two interviews were undertaken the application process had changed considerably. People interested in becoming an applicant were required to call the CSC to inquire about their eligibility to become an applicant. A preliminary assessment of people's eligibility was undertaken over the phone to determine whether an appointment should be made for them to receive a full needs assessment. The full needs assessment was usually done in a face-to-face interview at a Housing New Zealand office. Only people whose preliminary priority segment was 'A' or 'B' were confirmed on the waiting list. All validating documentation was provided by mail only. People wishing to check on their status on the waiting list did so by ringing CSC.
- 138 One applicant in Wave One left the waiting list, and had unsuccessfully reapplied to rejoin the waiting list just prior to her interview at Wave Two. This applicant felt that it was now far more difficult to get on the waiting list than previously. When asked "If you found yourself in housing need again, would you contact them [Housing New Zealand] again?" the applicant replied: "*Probably not because I know the situation with Housing New Zealand and things are a lot more tougher, things are done differently now, have assessments over the phone now.*" (MultiAwEwC, Māori, 31-40 years, D priority).

#### *Increased uncertainty about the application process*

- 139 Housing New Zealand's communication with applicants in Wave One left them with a sense of hope relative to the sense of uncertainty and hopelessness that was evident in Wave Two interviews. Applicants at Wave Two reported that the lack of clarity in communication with Housing New Zealand had created uncertainty about:
- whether or not they were still on the waiting list
  - what life circumstances made a person eligible for a state house
  - how having a roof over your head made a person ineligible for a state house
  - how the process worked for matching households to properties
  - how the process worked for giving and accepting offers of houses.
- 140 The significant confusion around these aspects of the application process led some to accept properties offered to them by Housing New Zealand that didn't match their needs, and others to take unaffordable or substandard private rental properties as they gave up hope of getting a Housing New Zealand property. Some applicants at Wave Two were waiting on an offer from Housing New Zealand despite being unsure if they were still on the waiting list.
- 141 Following the introduction of the new Service Delivery Model applicants who were assessed as lower priority ('C' and 'D' priorities) when they were interviewed in Wave One were told that they were no longer on the waiting list or eligible for a state house. Applicants perceived this communication as negative. When added to their uncertainty and hopelessness it contributed to them, and people close to them, developing negative opinions of Housing New Zealand.
- 142 The changes in the tenor of communication may have happened as a natural consequence of being on the waiting list for three more years than when they were interviewed in Wave One. But the analysis of the interviews suggests that the

communications resulting from the changes to Social Allocation System and the introduction of the new Service Delivery Model worsened the situation.

### Established tenants

- 143 Most established tenants discussed changes in how they communicated with Housing New Zealand between interview waves. The vast majority of these comments were negative, noting that communicating with Housing New Zealand was more difficult than it had been in the past, and the tone of communication was less personal and more transactional.

#### *Change in channel of communication*

- 144 The most obvious change between waves was the closure of Housing New Zealand offices, and redirection of enquiries to the 0800 number. The majority of tenants were critical of this change. This includes tenants who preferred using the 0800 number, many of whom valued the option to 'pop in' to the Housing New Zealand office when out running errands.
- 145 The main criticism regarding the change to using the 0800 number exclusively was that getting assistance or resolving issues takes much longer than when they had the option of going into the office. Established tenants often identified messages being passed around within Housing New Zealand as the major cause of these delays, for example:

*If I had an issue I could ring the neighbourhood unit and within a couple of hours, tops, if it was urgent my tenancy manager was back on the phone to me. If I had a real urgent issue, I could go into the neighbourhood unit and they were there, right then and there, come out. "Hi hey what's going on?" Now, you make a phone call and maybe if you're lucky fourteen days later you might get a reply, only if you're lucky. ... like we used to have, "Okay yep, this does need done, I'll put that job in" ... At the moment we've got, "Oh well it went to the call centre and it went through this person and then it went through that person and then it went through this computer and that computer, and we're not sure if it actually got done at all and we'll get back to you 'cause we have to go through the twelve people that ... Where's the logic in that, there isn't any. (W2: CoupwC, European/Pakeha, 31-40 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

- 146 Other established tenants noted how resolving issues can sometimes require a series of conversations with Tenancy Managers, but that being unable to directly contact their Tenancy Manager makes this difficult. One established tenant described how during a situation like this they were responding to a message that their Tenancy Manager had left on their phone:

*Like I got my tenancy manager he's ringing me saying "Oh I'm still trying to get in touch with [tenant's name]". And I'm ringing the call centre trying to get in touch with him and they're going "Oh we don't actually put you through to your tenancy manager" I said "well what's the point in him telling me that he's trying to get in touch with me when I can't get in touch with him?" Like, "Oh we emailed him" and I says "but I'm not getting in touch with him still, you're getting in touch with him for me". I was like "Oh this is dumb and it took you half an hour to answer the phone" (laughter). (W2: SolewC, Māori and European, 18-30 years, about 5 years tenure duration)*

- 147 A small number of established tenants expressed frustration at no longer being able to communicate with ‘a real person’ (by this they meant face-to-face). These tenants found the stream of letters and dealing with the contact centre frustrating, noting that they want to be able to sit and have a conversation to resolve issues. One tenant concluded: *Bring our bloody tenancy managers back! (laughter)*. (W2: SolewC, European/Pakeha, 18-30 years, about 5 years tenure duration)

*Reduced communication and/or change in the tone of communication*

- 148 Established tenants typically felt that they had less communication with Housing New Zealand than prior to the closure of local offices. Many described how in the past they would have regular contact with staff at the office, and now they only see Housing New Zealand once each year at their inspection. These tenants often missed the relationship they used to have with their Tenancy Manager. In particular, established tenants described how the relationship they had with their Tenancy Manager had changed considerably.
- 149 For many respondents Tenancy Managers went from being someone they knew and regularly engaged with, to a stranger that that visits their house once each year for an inspection. A number of tenants no longer knew their Tenancy Manager’s name, and some hadn’t met their Tenancy Manager. One tenant said: *I liked it beforehand, because we had [tenancy manger’s name], but they’ve changed it all now. I’ve got a new tenancy manager, I think she’s been on board, I don’t how long, never met her, never heard from her*. (W2: SolewACwC, European/Pakeha, 31-40 years, 10+ years tenure duration)
- 150 Established tenants often noted that they “*don’t really have a tenancy manager anymore*”, that when they engage with Housing New Zealand (via phone or in person) you just deal with “anybody”. For example:
- Yeah, pretty much like you think you’ve got one thing, you know, one case office, whatever, but then you get anyone and everyone, whoever’s available type thing. Like we used to have [tenancy manager’s name] ... but whenever we rung her we got somebody else, and it was just like we don’t want to talk to you, we want to talk to her, ‘cause she knows everything, but no*. (W2: CoupwC, Māori, 31-40 years, 10+ years tenure duration)
- 151 Often these established tenants described frustration at having to deal with people who didn’t know their history requiring them to tell the same stories multiple times.
- I don’t like it when you have to ring up and then you give that person on the, that’s on the other side of the phone your address, your details and they go “oh what’s it about?” and you want to talk to your manager ... ‘cause you know that with your tenancy manager she knows all your details, knows everything*. (W2:SolewAC, Māori, 51-64 years, 10+ years tenure duration)
- 152 Many established tenants noted that communication with Housing New Zealand used to be more conversational and friendly, but had become more ‘business-like’ over time. These tenants noted how Tenancy Managers have “no time” to engage with them, and that while very efficient the new approach wasn’t treating them like people anymore. They felt that communicating with Housing New Zealand had become very transactional instead of based on relationships between tenants and Tenancy Managers. As one tenant said:



*Yeah, yeah you'd get a personable approach, a one on one approach, today you don't get any approach at all. You get everything by mail and you never see anyone and when you do see them they just sort of "ah were do you stay, what's your thing number," you punch that in and oh yeah and they're just checking to see if you're behind on rent (laughter)... They sort of, everything's on the book to them you know. You know when [name] the old Housing group you know like the one's who gave us the house and that now ... today it's just hello and goodbye and get out. (W2: CoupwC, Māori, 51-64 years, 10+ years tenure duration)*

- 153 A small number of established tenants described how they had enquiries rejected as it's "not my job", rather than passed on to the relevant staff. Established tenants noted that in the past when they raised any issue with Housing New Zealand staff it would be pass on to the right people. Typically this issue occurred during an annual inspection, when a tenant attempted to raise a maintenance issue with their Tenancy Manager and was told they had to call the 0800 number. Tenants found this frustrating. In another example, a tenant took their forms into the local Housing New Zealand office where it wasn't accepted. They were told they had to be posted in.

### **3.6 Suggestions for improved communication**

- There appears to be considerable confusion about how the application process and property offers function. Provide more clarity to applicants on the application process and viewing properties, to ensure applicants make informed decisions.
- Many applicants and tenants (including those whose preferred channel of communication is through the CSC) want the option to discuss issues with Housing New Zealand face-to-face. Provide opportunities for applicants and tenants to meet face-to-face to discuss some issues.
- Many tenants were frustrated that messages left with the CSC were never acted on, requiring multiple follow-up phone-calls. Ensure enquiries to the 0800 number are followed up on.
- Applicants and tenants described being left in the dark after having made requests to Housing New Zealand. Provide updates to applicants and tenants on the status of their requests, whether to notify them on the outcome of requests or to inform them of any delays in resolving issues.
- Tenants reported having to describe issues multiple times as details provided to the CSC weren't passed on to their Tenancy Manager / contractors. Address perceived gaps in internal communication resulting in staff lacking necessary information when visiting tenants.
- Applicants and tenants noted that they "don't know what they don't know", and are unsure how Housing New Zealand can help them. Increase pro-active communication with applicants and tenants, rather than waiting for people to ask for help.

- 154 This section presents an overview of suggestions for improved communication raised by applicants and tenants. There was significant overlap between the issues raised by respondents, and as a result this section is not divided into 'applicant', 'new tenant', and 'established tenant' sections.

## **Clarify the application process**

- 155 Communication with customers contributes to the general public's image of Housing New Zealand. Improvements in communication with customers applying for a property would help to improve Housing New Zealand's image.
- 156 Applicants and some tenants suggested changes to the application process, mainly focused on clarifying processes for applicants. These suggestions included the following:
- Communicate with applicants respectfully, including taking the time to listen to what they have to say and clearly explain policy, ensuring they understand. Avoid simply quoting policy at them.
  - Provide more information about why they are not eligible / no longer eligible to be on the waiting list, and ensure that they understand that not being on the waiting list will mean they will not be offered a property.
  - Where relevant, explain why they have to seek accommodation in the private rental market and re-approach Housing New Zealand with evidence of having done this and failed.
- 157 There appears to be significant confusion over many aspects of the application process. For example, many applicants were concerned that they were being offered properties outside the area that they indicated they would like to live in, and that didn't meet other requirements such as a fenced section. Some of these applicants felt obligated to accept the first offer they received for fear of being bumped from the waiting list, or moved to the bottom of it. Some applicants were given the impression that they could ask for properties that they saw vacant. Two applicants were offered properties which were subsequently withdrawn without any other properties or other assistance being offered.
- 158 How Housing New Zealand understands "homelessness" needs to be clarified. The applicants' stories suggest on the one hand, that if a person is in a Women's Refuge then they were classified as homeless. If they were "couch-surfing" or living in overcrowded circumstances with a "roof over their heads", on the other hand, then they were not necessarily "homeless". Yet in the work that Housing New Zealand has been involved in with Statistics New Zealand and the Wellington School of Medicine both couch-surfing and overcrowding are classified as "homelessness".<sup>6</sup>

## **Provide opportunity for face-to-face communication**

- 159 While some tenants prefer using the CSC to communicate with Housing New Zealand, others prefer to discuss issues in person. Many of the tenants who prefer using the CSC would also like the option to discuss some issues face-to-face, particularly for personal issues related to their tenancy, neighbours, or their families' health.
- 160 Some tenants reported waiting for their Tenancy Manager to do an annual inspection before sharing both maintenance- and tenancy-related issues. This

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<sup>6</sup> Amore K., Viggers H., Baker M.G., and Howden-Chapman, P. (2013) Severe housing deprivation: The problem and its measurement, Official Statistics Research Series, 6,. Available from [www.statisphere.govt.nz](http://www.statisphere.govt.nz).

clearly indicates that some issues are going unreported for a considerable length of time as a result of changes to communication channels. For Wave One tenants annual inspections were a channel through which issues unrelated to the inspection could be raised with Tenancy Managers. However, when many Wave Two tenants tried to use this channel they were advised by their Tenancy Managers to call the Customer Service Centre.

### **Follow up on calls to 0800 number**

- 161 Many tenants described situations where they had been told by CSC staff that they would get a response about their enquiry, but they were never contacted. These tenants noted that they are usually promised a response within 48 hours. Most of these tenants described how frustrating this is, particularly when they're waiting for the resolution to a problem, and that there's no other way to make contact. The following comments are typical of these complaints:

*[T]he people that answer the phone go, "Okay we'll send an email through." And I said, "Can you just transfer me through to the income related department?" They're like, "No everything has to, we have to send it, and it takes about two to three days for them to get back to you. If you don't hear back from them in two to three days, please give us a call." I do three/four days later and the same thing happens, honestly I tell you ... it is, it's gone worse ever since they've closed the offices. It's so hard getting a hold of people, tenancy manager, debt department, income related rent, it's so hard. (W2: CoupwC, Pacific, 18-30 years, about 5 years tenure duration)*

- 162 Applicants and tenants were split on who was at fault in these situations, many blamed the call centre noting that the message must not have been passed on, while others felt that they were being ignored by their Tenancy Manager. It's unclear where the breakdown in communication is occurring, but tenants were clear that if a commitment to respond to a tenant is made that action should be taken. A small number of tenants noted that the lack of follow through on commitments to return calls had led them to give up on contacting Housing New Zealand. As one tenant said:

*Right, and the fact that you ring the 0800 number and you can no longer talk to your tenancy manager. You've got to go through the 0800 number and all you get from them is, you give them all the info and everything and tell them everything and it's "your property manager will ring you within forty-eight hours". "But they haven't rung back from the last forty-eight hours." "Oh well give them forty-eight hours and if they don't then ring back." And you just keep playing, so I give up in the end. (W2: Sole, European/Pakeha, 41-50 years, about 5 years tenure duration)*

### **Provide updates on requests**

- 163 The majority of tenants complained about the complete lack of any communication back to tenants about progress on addressing their issues. Tenants noted that after they contact Housing New Zealand about an issue they're effectively in the dark as to what (if anything) is happening. Tenants want to be updated on the progress of their requests, to have an ongoing dialogue with Housing New Zealand so that they know their issue is still being addressed.
- 164 Some tenants described this issue as being about "one-way communication" with Housing New Zealand, where there's never any communication back out to

tenants. Some tenants noted that it would even be good to be told that there would be continued delays in addressing their issue, as this would let them know that it hadn't been forgotten.

- 165 The range of issues this related to included maintenance, requests for transfers, and very frequently anti-social behaviour complaints. A specific example of this related to issues identified at annual inspections, where tenants described how inspectors would note all of the maintenance issues in the house and then nothing would be done. Some tenants noted that they initially thought that by noting these issues they could expect action on them, but that over repeated inspections where the same issues were noted they realised that wasn't the case. One tenant said: ... *every time an inspector come up I tell him these things, he writes them all down, he goes away and that's the end of that.* (W2: CoupwC, European/Pakeha, 41-50 years, 10+ years tenure duration).
- 166 A related issue is that tenants want Housing New Zealand to acknowledge receipt of forms and letters so they are reassured that they arrived. Tenants described sending off forms and never hearing back as to whether they had been received. One tenant had sent in letters and documents from the local health provider as evidence for their need to transfer and receipt of this was never acknowledged.

### **Improve internal communication**

- 167 A wide range of comments called into question the effectiveness of communication within Housing New Zealand about applicants and tenants, and their requests. A number of tenants described Tenancy Managers or contractors arriving at their house with no context for why they were there despite the tenant providing this information to the call centre. Tenants hypothesised that their information wasn't being recorded and/or passed on. For example, the following tenant described outlining a mould problem to the CSC, but then the contractor who arrived had none of this information:

*Yeah because of the mould it had gone right through the drawers, my kid's clothes. It was really bad. Yeah she actually came in and took photos and she was like, "Oh, how long has this problem been going on for?" Like, I had to retell the whole story over and over again and I said, "Why don't you just ring the call centre and tell them to look it up?" ... should be on there (laughter) you know, on the computer.* (W2: CoupwC, Māori, 31-40 years, about 5 years tenure duration)

- 168 The following quote involves a tenant who is seasonally employed, and has periods each year during which they are unable to cover their rent. The tenant stressed that each year they are chased up and they have to explain their situation, and that each year there's nothing on record about the issue:

*So I've explained to whoever and they bring up all my details, everything about me they bring it up and it's like the message never gets passed on. I mean it's like I waste my time even talking ... and I'd try and get hold of them because when I have, my rent has got behind I've had reasons, work reasons. They've know it for the last, well like I say I've been here about five, six years and it happens every year. It's a yearly thing it's just part of my job and I've explained to them. But I still have to get hold of them and they just keep sending me letters, all the messages I leave and that and the explanations I give, it's like they're just ignored.* (W2: SoleACwC, Māori, 41-50 years, about 5 years tenure duration)

## **Be more understanding of tenants' situations**

- 169 As noted above, some tenants commented on the variable quality of communication with Tenancy Managers, depending largely on the individual Tenancy Managers themselves. A common complaint about the quality of Tenancy Managers was that some Tenancy Managers lack the necessary understanding and sensitivity to deal with the difficult situations some tenants were in – particularly when it came to rent arrears. These Tenancy Managers were described as rude and threatening, which tenants noted doesn't help in these situations.

## **Communicate pro-actively**

- 170 Respondents wanted more pro-active communication from Housing New Zealand. Some tenants thought that Housing New Zealand should offer assistance if they identify a need, instead of waiting to be asked for help or information. At present tenants communicate with Housing New Zealand when something goes wrong. They would prefer a situation where Housing New Zealand pro-actively ensured households were meeting their housing needs. One tenant said: *Well it doesn't take two minutes to have a phone call in the afternoon, does it? And just say, "Oh how you going or do you need anything done around your home?"* (W2: SolewACwC, European/Pakeha, 41-50 years, 10+ years tenure duration).
- 171 Several tenants complained that their family members and partners who were living with them couldn't speak with Housing New Zealand as they weren't on the tenancy agreement. This happened, for example, when the primary tenant was working full time or where a partner spoke better English. Tenants thought that Housing New Zealand was quite within its rights to bring this to the household's attention but it shouldn't have stopped there. Housing New Zealand should have assisted the family by explaining how people could be added to the tenancy agreement.
- 172 Tenants required more specific timeframes for maintenance. Many tenants were frustrated when they took a day off work which was low paid to wait for a maintenance worker. Sole parents also found they had to make arrangements for children to be taken to or picked up from pre-school and school. Few people can set aside a whole day or two to wait. If Tenancy Managers and maintenance contractors are unable to make a scheduled visit tenants thought it would be respectful to call and let them know they weren't coming rather than leave them sitting there waiting.
- 173 Most tenants have little knowledge about their housing options, and they didn't know what Housing New Zealand could do to assist them. Many tenants were interested in learning about steps that they needed to go through to move towards home ownership including some for whom it was a realistic option. Most of these tenants were surprised to learn that Housing New Zealand could provide information about this and assist them to achieve this housing goal.

# 4.0 Discussion

174 The analysis of applicants, new tenants and established tenants comments indicated that generally they want to communicate well with Housing New Zealand. Equally, Housing New Zealand wants good communication with customers. This section discusses some of the overarching themes from the research in relationship to: Housing New Zealand’s Customer Promise, organisational outcome framework, and an outcome framework specifying tenants and applicants’ housing desires.

## Communication and the Customer Promise

175 In recognition of the vulnerability of the people who contact Housing New Zealand a ‘customer promise’ was agreed to which specified responsibilities and expectations of both parties to the promise (see figure 1). The Customer Promise sets out what each party to communication can expect from the other.

Figure 1 Our Customer Promise

**OUR CUSTOMER PROMISE**

By treating each other with courtesy and respect, and working together in the following ways, we can achieve the best possible outcomes for you.

<p><b>YOU CAN EXPECT US TO</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Be honest, fair and objective</li><li>Have the right skills and knowledge</li><li>Do what we say we will do</li><li>Listen to you to understand your individual circumstances</li><li>Provide you with the right information and advice, at the right time</li><li>Make it easy for you to communicate with us</li></ul>	<p><b>WE NEED YOU TO</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provide us with the right information at the right time</li><li>Keep any agreements you make with us</li><li>Tell us if your situation changes</li><li>Treat us as you like to be treated</li></ul> <p><b>WE VALUE YOUR FEEDBACK</b></p> <p>Your feedback helps us do our job better. If we have not kept our promise or you have other feedback please call us any time on 0800 801 601 or visit our website <a href="http://www.hnzc.co.nz">www.hnzc.co.nz</a></p>
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**Housing New Zealand**  
Housing New Zealand Corporation

*Some aspects of the Customer Promise Housing New Zealand could do better*

- 176 This analysis has demonstrated that Housing New Zealand is largely fulfilling its promise to customers. However, there are some areas of the Customer Promise where it could do more. In particular, providing the right information about some processes, and making it easier for customers to contact Housing New Zealand.
- 177 Customers judged that communication within Housing New Zealand was often ineffective because when customers rang the CSC and asked to speak to their Tenancy Manager, they were promised a return call within 48 hours, and often this did not eventuate. In terms of the Customer Promise, Housing New Zealand often did not do what we said we would do, or make it easy for customers to communicate with the organisation.
- 178 Both applicants and established tenants found they often had to repeat their stories when their calls to CSC were answered by different Housing Advisors. If their call was followed up by a Tenancy Manager it may not be one that knew them or their story and therefore they had to repeat it again. They felt this requirement to repeatedly tell their story was disrespectful. They wondered why it was not possible for their story to be recorded the first time they told it and why Housing Advisors and Tenancy Managers couldn't then refer to this record. Having to repeat themselves was made worse because the questions they were asked made them feel that Housing New Zealand had little knowledge of the circumstances that applicants and tenants were facing.
- 179 When customers replied to requests for documentation they did not get a receipt and therefore were worried that Housing New Zealand had not received them. Following successful communication with Housing New Zealand customers were not kept up to date with their status on the waiting list if they were applicants, or progress on the maintenance issues if they were tenants. Maintenance contractors arrived at tenants' homes without warning, or tenants were informed but were expected to wait all day for visits that sometimes did not eventuate.
- 180 Inconsistency in applicants and new tenants reports of being offered properties also created uncertainty. Customers were uncertain about the processes that Housing New Zealand used to match people with their choices of location because often these were not evident in the properties that people were offered for viewing. People wondered why they had been asked where they wanted to live if this was not going to be taken into serious consideration.
- 181 New and established tenants found having one predominant channel of communication frustrating because while it was good for addressing some issues it was not good for addressing more complex or personal issues. Mostly they were happy to use the 0800 number particularly for reporting urgent maintenance and tenancy issues. They found it frustrating that they could not save up non-urgent tenancy and maintenance issues to report at the annual property inspection.

*The extent to which we meet our commitments under the Customer Promise affects tenants' willingness and ability to meet theirs*

- 182 The main concern was that as a consequence of finding it hard to communicate, customers were giving up on keeping their part of the Customer Promise: keeping Housing New Zealand informed about their circumstances.
- 183 Section 3.6 outlines commonly suggested improvements from applicants and tenants. These suggestions largely align with the areas of the Customer Promise where there appears to be room for improvement. For instance, applicants, reporting on communication about the changes that made them ineligible for state houses, wanted people who answered their calls to listen to them respectfully rather than "quote policy at them". Customers found it difficult to provide information to Housing New Zealand when they were in processes that required calls back and forth with their Tenancy Manager. Going through CSC at these times slowed down the process and caused customers to become frustrated and sometimes to give up.
- 184 Many customers had tried to comply with their part of the Customer Promise but when repeated attempts to communicate with Housing New Zealand failed they gave up. They gave up because the waiting times were too long, or they found it difficult to communicate over the phone. It seems that repeat calls by customers were not recorded and therefore there is no way of validating the customers' perspective on this issue. Certainly repeat calling did not result in Housing New Zealand taking the initiative to call customers.

## **Communication and the Outcome Framework**

185 The Housing New Zealand Statement of Intent<sup>7</sup> includes an outcome framework showing how Housing New Zealand will contribute to Crown objectives and the overall housing sector outcome. While communication is relevant to many of the Housing New Zealand's outcomes it is particularly relevant to the following outcomes:

- customers' needs are responded to in a timely manner
- tenants are transitioned out of Housing New Zealand properties once they are no longer in high need
- Housing New Zealand properties meet the needs of applicants and tenants
- Housing New Zealand properties are maintained to an appropriate standard.

### **Customers' needs are responded to in a timely manner**

186 Housing New Zealand is committed to the continuous improvement of services to customers. The differences in positive and negative comments about CSC waiting times, for instance, may have resulted from the dates when people were interviewed. Waiting times have improved since CSC became the main avenue for contacting Housing New Zealand. The calls are limited in length because call lengths impact on call volumes. Applicants and established tenants' comments about wanting to be treated more respectfully as people were usually associated with short, transactional calls. Applicants and established tenants rely on CSC for

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<sup>7</sup> Housing New Zealand (2013) Statement of Intent 2013-2016.



most of their contact with Housing New Zealand which works well when the issue is house maintenance but not so well when they need to discuss personal issues.

- 187 New tenants had just been through a period of frequent contact with Housing New Zealand and experienced both face-to-face and phone contact. Their success in getting a Housing New Zealand property meant that in most cases they felt heard and respected.
- 188 The issue both new and established tenants identified about Tenancy Managers not getting in contact with them within 48 hours may be related to the pressure under which Tenancy Managers work. Housing New Zealand has recognised this and is investigating Tenancy Managers' workloads and supports that would enable them to work remotely and be more mobile. The consequence of this investigation is to increase the time Tenancy Managers can work with customers.

### **Tenants are transitioned out of Housing New Zealand properties once they are no longer in high need**

- 189 The analysis suggested that there were enough differences in the communication between applicants, new and established tenants to warrant tailoring response to these groups. Applicants need to know how the waiting list works, be kept updated about their status on it, and what they should expect to happen next. New tenants need to learn how to work with Housing New Zealand to keep the property in the condition that they received it. New tenants also need to know what constitutes being a good tenant. Established tenants need support and knowledge about options to plan for their housing futures so that they can move along housing pathways and eventually to transition out of their Housing New Zealand property once they are no longer in high need, or move to an appropriately sized Housing New Zealand property should their circumstances change.
- 190 Good communication with Housing New Zealand assists tenants to feel safe, settled and secure, and therefore able to start planning for their future housing independence. When tenants seek transfers it is in the context of their housing desires, and their efforts to gain housing independence.
- 191 A second outcome framework was developed by the research team based on relevant New Zealand and international literature, and the analysis of interviews with tenants and applicants<sup>8</sup>. This outcomes framework identifies what tenants desire from their housing, namely:
- the ability to make choices, using freed up money
  - time freed up for non-housing related activities
  - household members feel safe, settled and secure
  - able to plan for a future from a stable, secure base, and under reduced stress
  - children access and sustain education and development opportunities
  - social, health, employment and educational support accessed.

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<sup>8</sup> Knox, Andrea, Laing, Patricia and Smith, Luke. 2013, *An outcomes framework for Housing New Zealand tenants and applicants: The Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study of tenants and applicants*. Paper prepared for Housing New Zealand Corporation, November.

192 Once the housing outcomes listed in this framework begin to be established for tenants then their housing need is reduced, and some are then in a position to transition out of Housing New Zealand properties. The key point from the analysis was that their communication with Housing New Zealand was directed towards fulfilling these housing desires.

### **Housing New Zealand properties meet the needs of applicants and tenants**

193 This outcome can be interpreted in two ways:

- Is the property suitable? Does it have enough bedrooms for the people living there? Is it safe and secure?
- Will it enable tenants' housing desires to be met so they can plan for their housing independence?

194 In most instances communication between Housing New Zealand and applicants led to them being provided with a property that had enough bedrooms and was safe and secure. Some new tenants had frequent communication with Housing New Zealand to ensure that work to make properties safe and secure was completed. A few people were so desperate for a house they accepted properties that were too small but then they could not sustain the tenancy. They moved into private rental accommodation and could not sustain the rent, then moved in with family which resulted in overcrowding. Situations of this kind illustrate how important it is that Housing New Zealand communicates to people the thinking behind placement.

195 Some established tenants had outgrown the properties they were living in but when they contacted Housing New Zealand seeking a transfer so that there were enough bedrooms for everyone they were told they were not eligible because they had a roof over their heads.

196 Communicating with tenants so that their housing desires are met is relatively complex and some housing desires are not the responsibility of Housing New Zealand to meet. Good communication that results in people being placed in suitable, safe and secure properties is a large part of it. However, if Housing New Zealand wishes to fulfil its outcome to transition people out of Housing New Zealand once they are no longer in high housing need this requires supporting tenants to meet their housing desires. For example, at the needs assessment people were asked where they wanted to live. They gave careful thought, in particular, to children accessing and sustaining education, getting social support from family and friends, and being close to work. When Tenancy Managers then offered properties that were away from the areas they requested they found the communication confusing. If they accepted these offers of properties they would not have the support they needed to sustain the tenancy and in the future to plan for their housing independence.

### **Housing New Zealand properties are maintained to an appropriate standard.**

197 Housing New Zealand's ability to maintain properties to an appropriate standard depends on good communication with tenants. Tenants are relied upon to contact the CSC if any maintenance is required because of health or safety issues. The majority of tenants were very impressed by Housing New Zealand's responses to health and safety maintenance requests. Tenants also thought that the 0800

number was the best way for communicating with Housing New Zealand about urgent and non-urgent maintenance.

- 198 Many tenants saved up non-urgent maintenance issues to tell their Tenancy Managers at the annual inspection. They were frustrated that the message they received when they told the Tenancy Manager about the issues was that they had to ring CSC. Tenants are expected to keep Housing New Zealand informed of maintenance done poorly or not completed. Tenants are less likely to do this now because it is too hard to get in touch with the right person by ringing CSC.
- 199 The extent to which Housing New Zealand complies with the Customer Promise is the extent that enables tenants and applicants to achieve their desired outcomes. Tenants and applicants' desires for housing are more likely to be met if they can communicate with Housing New Zealand more easily. The more tenants and applicants' housing desires are met the greater the likelihood that the organisation will be able to fulfil its outcomes.

## Appendix A: Description of participants

200 This section presents an overview of the demographic characteristics of participants in Waves One (May 2009 to March 2010) and Two (June 2012 and April 2013) of the Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study.

### Age

201 Table 4 shows the age distribution for applicants, new tenants and established tenants at Waves One and Two. The age distribution for applicants changed very little, with a slight decrease in the proportion of younger applicants (18-30 years). Comparing the cohort of 87 'new tenants' at Wave Two with tenants who had a similar tenure duration at Wave One indicates that new tenants at Wave Two appear to be older.

202 The age profile of established tenants at Wave One is older than that of the wider cohort of interviewed tenants. Only nine percent of established tenants were in the '18-30 years' age group, while 21 percent of all tenants interviewed during Wave One were in this age group. The age profile of established tenants at Wave Two is almost identical to that of the wider group of tenants who were interviewed at this time.

**Table 4** Age of applicants by interview wave

Age	Applicants				New tenants				Established tenants			
	Wave One		Wave Two		Wave One		Wave Two		Wave One		Wave Two	
<b>18-30</b>	37	42%	18	36%	28	43%	14	16%	10	9%	22	18%
<b>31-40</b>	19	22%	10	20%	16	24%	21	24%	37	32%	32	26%
<b>41-50</b>	19	22%	10	20%	9	14%	27	31%	18	16%	21	17%
<b>51-64</b>	11	13%	10	20%	9	14%	12	14%	28	24%	32	26%
<b>65-74</b>	2	2%	2	4%	0	0%	7	8%	17	15%	15	12%
<b>75+</b>	0	0%	0	0%	3	5%	6	7%	6	5%	3	2%
<b>Total</b>	88		50		65		87		116		125	

## Ethnicity

203 Table 5 shows the ethnicity of applicants and tenants at Waves One and Two. Despite significant attrition between waves, the ethnicity of the HPLS sample changed very little.

**Table 5** Ethnicity of applicants by interview wave

Ethnicity	Applicants				New tenants				Established tenants			
	Wave One		Wave Two		Wave One		Wave Two		Wave One		Wave Two	
<b>Māori</b>	30	35%	18	36%	17	25%	26	29%	40	34%	36	29%
<b>European / NZ Pākehā</b>	29	34%	19	38%	17	23%	14	16%	42	36%	49	39%
<b>Pacific peoples</b>	26	31%	12	24%	27	49%	39	45%	31	27%	37	30%
<b>Māori and European / NZ Pākehā</b>	0	0%	0	0%	2	2%	2	3%	3	3%	2	2%
<b>Māori and Pacific peoples</b>	0	0%	1	2%	1	2%	6	7%	0	0%	1	1%
<b>European / NZ Pākehā and Pacific peoples</b>	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	85*		50		65		87		116		125	

\* The ethnicity of two applicants was not provided.

## Changes in the applicant sample

204 In the three years between Waves One and Two the proportions of people participating in the study as applicants on the waiting list reduced from 98 to ten percent (see table 6). Table 6 shows that 59 percent of people were no longer applicants on the waiting list nor had they become tenants – previous applicants. An additional 28 percent of applicants had become tenants while a further four percent had become tenants and vacated their tenancy – previous tenants.

**Table 6** Applicants' changes in status from Wave One to Wave Two

	Wave One Status and Interviewed		Wave Two			
			Status		Interviewed	
<b>Applicants</b>	86	98%	9	10%	4	8%
<b>Previous applicants</b>	0	0%	51	59%	28	56%
<b>Tenants</b>	2	3%	24	28%	17	34%
<b>Previous tenants</b>	0	0%	3	4%	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	88		87*		50	

\* One applicant was deceased at Wave Two

205 In Wave Two 50 people were interviewed who had been applicants on the waiting list in Wave One. Applicants who had become tenants were slightly over-represented and previous applicants were slightly under-represented in this group. The reasons why people who were not interviewed in Wave Two are set out in table 7.

**Table 7** Reasons why people were not interviewed in Wave Two

	Moved out of the area*	Lost to the study	Opted out	Total
<b>Applicants</b>	0	2	0	2
<b>Previous applicants</b>	7	12	7	26
<b>Tenants</b>	2	0	1	3
<b>Previous tenants</b>	4	2	0	6
<b>Total</b>	13	16	8	37

\* The intention is to offer this group a phone interview in October 2013.