



## Housing and Disability: Future Proofing New Zealand's Housing Stock for an Inclusive Society

Disabled people's housing needs are not being met by New Zealand's current housing stock. People of all ages with moderate to severe disability that affects their mobility have significant unmet housing needs. Their homes are often inaccessible and are neither safe nor warm. Expenditure on house modifications is often on very basic home alterations. If standard house designs were more accessible, customised house modifications tailored to an individual's needs would be more affordable and better targeted.

Based on research by the Centre for Research Evaluation and Social Assessment (CRESA) (Kay Saville-Smith and Ruth Fraser), Public Policy & Research (Dr Bev James) and Auckland Disability Resource Centre (Bernadette Ryan and Sarah Travaglia). The project was jointly funded by CHRANZ and the Office for Disability Issues, Ministry of Social Development.

New Zealand is not well placed to meet an increased demand for accessible housing. The housing market, disability sector and the public do not fully appreciate the market opportunities for accessible housing or the advantages of universal design.

The priorities for New Zealand are:

- 'future-proofing' its mainstream housing with universal and accessible design;
- improving policy and funding for home modifications customised for individual needs;
- building capacity in the housing and disability sectors to optimise accessibility in new and renovated houses and houses modified for a particular disabled person; and
- making more efficient use of housing stock that has already been modified.

Overseas, successful housing programmes for people with impaired mobility have systematically combined regulatory, incentive and capacity building strategies. Regulation on its own does not work.

## Key Points

- Disabled people's housing needs are not being met by New Zealand's current housing stock.
- There is considerable unmet need for accessible, safe, warm, comfortable housing that works well for young and old people with impaired mobility. Almost a quarter of survey respondents had difficulty keeping their homes warm in winter. Over two-fifths needed changes to safely enter and exit their homes. Half needed internal house modifications.
- Unmet need is likely to increase as disability and impaired mobility increases in the population.
- Disabled people and the government spend considerable amounts on housing modifications. Much of this expenditure is on very basic home alterations such as widening doorways and installing wet area showers – modifications that would be easier and more cost-effective if they were integrated into newly-built and renovated housing. These needs are very rudimentary. They are not discretionary lifestyle choices.
- If basic house designs were more accessible, specialised home alterations tailored to an individual would be more affordable and better targeted.
- There are very few 'universal design' features in new houses to ensure a basic level of accessibility.
- Modifications to existing housing stock for disabled people are mostly piecemeal. They do not deal with the changing needs of disabled people and their families, for example, when young disabled children grow up and as parents of disabled children grow older.
- Government funding for house modifications is aimed at the disabled individual's basic needs and often fails to recognise the needs of the overall welfare and working of the household, including the disabled person's ability to contribute to the household.
- Modified houses are frequently not retained in the market or made available to people wanting accessible housing. Many modifications are simply ripped out.
- There are no systematic mechanisms, such as accessible housing registers, for modified houses to be identified, retained and advertised.
- An accessible, well-performing housing stock that meets the changing needs of disabled people is a 'future-proofed' stock that will perform well for everyone. It would meet New Zealand's long-term goal of making our built environment resource efficient and sustainable, supporting liveable homes and communities.

## Research Methodology

This study is based on primary research into the housing experiences of mobility-impaired people to see how their demand for accessible and adequately performing housing is met.

Research included surveys of 121 disabled people, 31 parents with one or more disabled children, 125 agencies in the community housing sector, and 81 real estate agents in five main centres. The experiences and perspectives of disabled people and their families were also explored through focus groups with disabled

people, their families and with young people, Maori, Pacific people, and parents. Developers' perspectives were also sought, with in-depth interviews with a private developer and also with staff involved with Housing New Zealand Corporation's medium-density housing development at Lynfield in Auckland.

Early findings were tested and explored by a National Reference Group especially established for this project as well as interactive seminars with key government agencies.

## Findings

### **Unmet Need, Inaccessible and Inadequate Housing**

Disabled people are exposed to housing stock that is not only poorly adapted to their needs, but is simply poorly performing. Their homes are often inaccessible and neither safe nor warm. Some very personal and profound impacts emerged from the research.

- Some disabled parents are unable to care for their children because certain modifications, such as widening the doors to their children's rooms, were not seen as necessary.
- Disabled people have compromised or forgone educational, work and relationship opportunities because they cannot access adequate housing.
- The families and housemates of disabled people are expected to undertake all the cooking for a disabled person because the presence of other adults in the household is interpreted as making accessible kitchen modifications unnecessary.
- Disabled people fear for their safety if there is a fire because only one accessible exit is seen as necessary.

Some groups of disabled people are particularly vulnerable: young people in transition to adult life; people dependent on funding through the health sector; people who are renting; people on low incomes and those without family support.

### **House Modifications**

There are broadly two types of house modification to enable accessible housing:

- *Basic functionality modifications* that can be designed in all newly-built houses and added to any existing house, e.g. wider doorways, halls and circulation spaces, level access, lever handles, wet area showers and accessibly placed light switches and plugs.
- *Customised adaptations* for particular individuals.

Considerable expenditure is devoted to basic modifications. If dwellings were already built or retrofitted with basic functionality features, there would be two major benefits. Housing would be more sustainable and adaptable for the changing needs of its occupants.

Funding would be released for customised adaptations. This would reduce the overall cost of functional dwellings.

Government funding for house modifications is primarily aimed at the disabled individual's basic needs, not the overall welfare and working of the household (even if this includes their children, spouse, or parents).

Addressing the on-going needs of a person and their family is often foregone.

### **Mainstream Housing and Universal Design**

The research highlighted the widespread and long-term consequences of inaccessible housing.

- The vast majority of people with impaired mobility live in ordinary homes.
- The mobility-impaired population is increasing.
- The demand for accessible housing will also increase.
- The public is more receptive and understanding of disabled people's needs.
- Retrospective modification of homes will not satisfy expected demand.
- Solutions lie in adapting the standards and requirements for ordinary 'mainstream' housing and incorporating accessible and universal design principles.

### **Capacity to Meet Demand for Accessible Housing**

This research shows New Zealand is not well placed to meet the housing requirements of increased numbers of disabled people.

The housing market (developers and realtors) do not fully appreciate the market opportunities for accessible housing.

Community housing providers such as housing trusts and local authorities are mostly concerned with housing for older people. Their prime concern is affordability problems and not accessibility. A significant number of providers reported that the needs of disabled people were not relevant to their housing services.

Health and disability services, 'needs assessment' services, housing services and the building sector all lack sufficient capacity. Capacity building will take time.

# RESEARCH BULLETIN

## FINDINGS CONTINUED

The housing and disability sectors and the public generally do not perceive the advantages of universal housing design.

Overall, there is a wide perception that housing for disabled people is something apart from and marginal to the mainstream housing sector. The reality is that the majority of mobility-impaired people live in their own homes – not institutions or retirement villages. Having homes that can accommodate the needs of mobility-impaired people is a critical precondition for both ‘ageing in place’ and for empowering disabled people to make an on-going social and economic contribution. Disabled people do not find the market responsive to their needs.

## Lessons from International Trends

Accessible housing policies and programmes in Europe, North America, the United Kingdom, Japan and Australia were examined. Countries most successful in promoting a market response to the needs of disabled people have systematically combined regulatory, incentive and capacity building strategies using both collaborative and regulatory approaches.

The three most successful strategies to encourage accessible housing supply are:

- financial incentives;
- adoption of accessible or universal housing design principles in the regulatory requirements on new and renovated dwellings; and
- provision of design advice and assistance.

Regulation on its own does not work.

## Immediate Priorities for New Zealand

- Improving the accessibility of housing stock through the introduction of universal and accessible design.
- Improving the policy, funding and practice around providing customised accessibility features to meet individual needs.
- Capacity building in the housing and disability sectors to optimise accessibility in new stock, renovated stock and stock requiring modification for a particular disabled person.
- More efficient use of modified housing stock.

## Further Information

This bulletin is based on the report *Housing and Disability: Future Proofing New Zealand’s Housing Stock for an Inclusive Society*. A copy of the report and this bulletin can be found on the CHRANZ website under “Our Publications”.

Other useful reports include:

- *Housing Choices for Disabled New Zealanders* McDermott Miller (March 2005)
- *Accommodation Options for Older People in Aotearoa/New Zealand* New Zealand Institute for Research on Ageing / Business and Economic Research Limited (June 2004)

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