



Abbeyfield New Zealand — supported living for older people

Abbeyfield's uniqueness stems from their focus on housing for older people. While residents over 65 years are eligible, the majority of residents are in their 70s and 80s. Abbeyfield is a home and an answer to the needs of companionship, affordability and practical support to enable older tenants to live independently, with dignity.

Established in New Zealand in 1991 they are part of the international Abbeyfield movement. There are 13 houses around the country, one under construction, and more in the planning stages.

All residents are tenants of Abbeyfield homes and each residence is classified as a boarding house. Home to mainly single residents, Abbeyfield homes are conveniently located large houses with 10 to 14 studios. An Abbeyfield House aims to be 'a typical house in a typical street' offering companionship, independence and support in rental accommodation at a price affordable to the majority of older people.



Each house is staffed by a housekeeper/cook who usually lives on the premises and takes care of the shopping and preparation of the two main meals of the day, taken at the family dining table. Like any family home there is a communal lounge, dining room, kitchen and laundry and, in some houses, a guest room for visitors. Residents are involved in the management of their house and can comment on the selection of who may join their household.

The Abbeyfield housing model is a solution to the large numbers of low-income baby boomers now reaching their retirement years and the growing number of people who have been lifetime renters and can no longer afford to continue renting once they retire.

They are also an answer to addressing the social isolation experienced by many older people living on their own.

People coming to Abbeyfield are often at a low ebb, physically and mentally. But after just three months many are remarkably transformed.

Daphne's story

Daphne (not her real name) came to Abbeyfield's attention when her daughter contacted them. Daphne had been living successfully in a council pensioner unit for some years but had lost her license and her sense of independence because of age related infirmity. She was isolated and relied on the daughter for all her shopping and for company. Her daughter had a busy work and family life and was concerned about Daphne's physical and mental deterioration. The schedule was causing the daughter increasing stress and Daphne had become quiet, uncertain and unconfident.

Abbeyfield was able to offer her a place and she moved into a new Abbeyfield house on the same day as ten other flat mates. At Abbeyfield's suggestion the daughter held off visiting for a few days to let residents find their feet. At the official opening and open home a few weeks later, the daughter saw how well her mum was coping. The beaming daughter recounted that she now made only occasional visits as her mum was always so busy with the other residents. Daphne was even joining the happy hour with her glass of orange juice.



Access to Government's housing investment funds, now no longer available, assisted in the development of Abbeyfield houses in the Waikato, Auckland, Golden Bay, Nelson, Palmerston North and Christchurch.

Capital funding is one of the main issues Abbeyfield face in achieving the growth they believe is needed to meet the accommodation needs of older New Zealanders.

Succession planning for their wonderful and invaluable local volunteers is another issue they face in ensuring their continued sustainability.



Beth's story

Abbeyfield received an urgent enquiry from the geriatrician service at the local District Health Board. An elderly lady with a significant hip deterioration had previously been admitted to hospital with pneumonia and while she was now well the hospital felt they could not discharge her to the damp, cold, converted cowshed she had been living in. Fortunately, the call came while Abbeyfield had a vacancy and she was prioritised for housing. A few weeks later while staff were showing visitors around the gardens they came across 'Beth' sunning herself in her little courtyard. After introductions the staff member asked 'Beth' how she was finding Abbeyfield. Starting to cry she said Abbeyfield had saved her life and it was the best thing that had even happened to her.

Abbeyfield executive officer, Susan Jenkins, comments on how challenging it is to be a not-for-profit in the area of housing for older people:

"The current exodus of local body authorities out of pensioner housing shows that it is not a profitable area to be involved in. Abbeyfield's success so far is largely due to our particular housing model and, of course, our localised volunteer management structure."

Volunteers play a key role in Abbeyfield houses. They are crucial to Abbeyfield's ability to support and collaborate with their tenants. All houses are managed by a team of volunteers and it's the volunteer effort that plays a key part in keeping costs affordable for residents.

For more information on Abbeyfield go www.abbeyfield.org.nz