

## **CORT – connected and providing support to tenants**

Stephen Hart, Operations Manager at CORT, says his organisation swung into action as soon as it knew the lockdown was coming.

As well as paring its maintenance work back to the minimum so that only urgent work was undertaken, it identified tenants likely to be more vulnerable than others, either physically or because they might find it difficult to communicate or to understand, or because they had few other supports.

CORT then focused on making sure its 360 tenants spread across Auckland understood what was going to happen under Covid-19 lockdown. It wrote to all tenants beforehand and followed up with phone calls and text messages to make sure they had received the information and knew what support would be available.

“We called everyone in the first week of lockdown and then we’ve just been starting again from the top of the list,” says Stephen Hart. “Where we’ve got tenants who are vulnerable, we make a point of calling every couple of days to see how they’re going.”

CORT also checked in with various support agencies to confirm if their services were continuing during the lockdown and how tenants could access these. Any rent arrears have been put to one side during the crisis.

“We understand the situation people are in. It’s hugely stressful so we’re just focusing on providing as much support as we can.”

Stephen Hart says CORT has also arranged food deliveries for people unable to get to the supermarket, and has created a fund to support tenants.

“We knew that government agencies were being overloaded with calls from people needing assistance and there are a lot of people who don’t have a community landlord who are now in a position where they need to draw on public services. We didn’t want our tenants to be short of food because they couldn’t get a food grant so the fund we’ve set up means we’ve been able to make a payment to them overnight when needed. Just a small percentage of tenants have taken it up but it’s one of the ways we’ve been able to support people.”

CORT has a network of volunteers who can phone for a weekly chat with tenants, just to see how they are going without their usual routines. It also sends out a newsletter and a poetry competition.

“The social side is important. Many of our tenants don’t have email, so mail and texting is still the best way to reach them.

Around 90% of CORT’s tenants are in one-bedroom units, although CORT also provides some homes for young families. Stephen Hart says the organisation had just finished building 19 homes prior to lockdown, and it is slowly filling them in very urgent situations, including a family who were living in their car.

CORT has 10 staff, with one person working from the office to look after administration and the others working from home. Stephen Hart says staff are using Microsoft Teams to stay connected. There is a catch-up each morning, where staff members will present on something close to them, perhaps share their whakapapa, share recipes or a joke, or offer a virtual tour of their home.

“We’ve been doing some of the things that might happen in the office,” he says. “For instance, encouraging people to take some time out during the day to go for a walk, or to video chat with their colleagues on things that aren’t related to work. We’ve also called in some external support, someone that each of us can bounce ideas off, discuss things and reflect on what’s happening.”

He says all of the organisation’s systems were in the cloud by last year, which has made responding to the pandemic easier. CORT also had an emergency response policy in place well before the pandemic, which laid out the actions CORT has since undertaken.

More information about CORT is available here (<https://www.cort.org.nz>).