

The Shift Aotearoa conference 2021 | a project of Community Housing Aotearoa and partners

WORKSTREAM: NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION

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Why ‘narrative transformation’ at a housing conference? How will this approach help elevate, express or reinforce the Treaty of Waitangi? ‘Narrative Transformation’: what do we mean? What are we hoping to achieve through the conference, in relation to Narrative Transformation?

Why ‘narrative transformation’ at a housing conference?

After a bit of a post-election respite, in December 2020 our media was once again flush with housing coverage, expounding on problems and so-called solutions but led in the most part by simple narratives: the highly prevalent *supply* narrative that says ‘we just need more supply’ has many flaws: it is harmful to those who cannot enter into new supply and have no stake in it, while living in poverty and poor quality housing. It has self-evident capitalist and colonial over-tones. That is not to say new supply is not important, but there is much else to think and to worry about.

Other narratives reinforce common but false binary conflicts, dramatizing the news coverage: landlords v renters, first-home buyers v investors, rich v poor. And these are tied up in a deeper and bigger narrative: *the market*: narrative which consistently plays on the ambiguity between the housing market and the system, and ambiguity around whether government should take responsibility for the market, for market failures, and of course how government *should* do so... or not do so as the case may be.

Whether we can in fact influence media and other commentators, or influence government by influencing the commentary, we will certainly be best situated to do so if we have meaningful conversations about both harmful and productive narratives, and how we can shift that balance or introduce new narratives.

It is also important to discuss why our sector narratives remain obscured – but treating that as more than a ‘comms’ question and perhaps as a question of values and culture. This proposed approach implies that we could make a greater impact through a collective agenda – this is not a new idea for the sector, but the 2021 conference offers a new opportunity.

How will this approach help elevate, express or reinforce the Treaty of Waitangi?

Narrative transformation is an undeniable part of Māori activism and progressive academic thinking. Groups like the Māori Data Sovereignty Network Te Mana Raraunga, for example, are actively capitalizing on prior movements toward self-determination and re-visioning data as a structure through which Māori and iwi self-determination can be promoted, in particular by reversing the pervasive deficit-modeling entrenched in much non-indigenous data generation and use.

Through these and other efforts, the narrative has changed from data as a government tool enabling government to tell New Zealanders about New Zealanders, to data as a resource owned by those whose personal stories are told by the data. The narrative around Māori and data has also been transforming over the years at the hands of data activists who have made a paradigm-shifting call for data which describes and responds to the Māori world, rather than data forming and reinforcing

deficits for Māori by constantly comparing Māori experience against non-Māori or government expectations and understandings.

One of the challenging narrative constructs in the housing area is understanding a breadth and diversity of Māori experience in the housing system. Current dominant narratives about Māori housing experience focus – because criticism is the mode of the media – on declining home ownership rates for Māori.

There is extremely limited space among dominant housing narratives for issues relating to housing on ancestral land, or for the lived experience of Māori in Public Housing. These examples are not introduced to suggest that they represent the most important issues for Māori in relation to housing; but because ignorance of them in dominant narrative serves to obscure any historic significance to the systemic failings of our housing system – failings which when identified strike at the core of Pakeha social and legal dominance, colonialism itself, and the colonial alienation of land from Māori and of Māori from *their* ancestral land.

The Shift Aotearoa conference will shed new light on our housing system through a proposed system vision: this vision places Māori housing outcomes on ancestral land at the core of that system. This system vision will in turn support a proposed *change system* [an imagined system that operates to create change] in which our approach to the system must include a *systemic place for Te Tiriti o Waitangi*.

Our hope is to support others to produce and present a new paradigm for the system, revolving around the need to ensure that in our housing system Māori outcomes are prioritized. These paradigms are supported by existing narratives which are obscured from public view, and need to be drawn out and complimented by new narratives.

Together these can support a system transformation in terms of Māori outcomes.

One researcher has offered the challenge to see our advocacy through one relatively simple lens: looking through the eyes of a 20 year old Māori woman, imagining how she perceives the housing system and her opportunities and engagement in the system today; and imagining what it would mean – what would need to change – for this person to feel confident and assured that her future revolved around full participation in the housing system, including secure tenure, adequate and affordable housing, in her own country.

This represents a great challenge to anyone working in the housing system.

‘Narrative Transformation’: what do we mean?

Considering and concerning ourselves with *narrative* is something that immediately demarks a broad system oriented perspective. Whereas policy debate often begins with problem definition and a narrowing of views to find the issues, taking a systems level view makes it very hard not to identify narrative level issues like *how does the constant conflict narrative in the media influence the public and decision makers? How does uncertainty about the meaning of a housing system operate to obscure meaningful system-wide solutions...?*

These questions would typically be ignored by policy-makers as beyond the scope of their task, both in the sense of not being a recognized part of the problem definition, nor within the expectations of political leaders in terms of what should be addressed.

Concern with ‘narrative’ is also closely tied to concern about paradigms: another ambiguous systems-oriented term that needs definition to make it worth using at all. In general terms we consider that a paradigm is a typical pattern or primary example of a system and the way it works.

We are comfortable with the idea that systems generally have paradigm level definitions, and those paradigms play a role in defining the system in a mutually reinforcing way. We work on the basis that

paradigm shifts across our political and housing systems are possible, in particular by identifying existing paradigms, critiquing them, and proposing/presenting new paradigms.

We recognize that policy changes within a system will generally reinforce and restate the existing paradigm, unless they are expressly intended to challenge the paradigm and are therefore associated with systems level discussion about the underlying forces in and expectations of a system. This intentionally implies that policy change without the associated desire to change the system, will only reinforce the paradigm: and this would be fine if there was agreement that the system was working just fine.

So that is a useful place to propose some [non-exhaustive] paradigm definitions of our housing system:

- Our system is defined by a rhetorical rule against market intervention by government;
- In our system Te Tiriti o Waitangi is marginalized as a confusing non-specific externality*;
- In our system Māori outcomes are *not a priority* and characterised by inequality and injustice*;
- Everyone could own their own home if they just worked hard and saved like we did
- Our system is defined by reliance on temporal policy, and an absence of democratically informed strategic forward planning in a transparent form;
- Dominant paradigms at play in our market include the words ‘profit’ and ‘investment’
- Some paradigms defining our public housing are ‘failing’ and ‘under-supply’*
- Some paradigms which define our rental system are ‘competitive’, ‘profit’, and ‘short tenure’.

* These paradigms are subject to relevant/potential change underway in the Crown-Māori relationship in housing, and public housing supply. So it follows that we believe narrative and paradigm change is possible, and we believe there are two key pathways to that change: changing the narrative around an issue, and instigating far-reaching change in core government policy.

Just as the paradigm of our housing system shifted in 1991 from government participation to government withdrawal, and from market reliance and system neglect to a return to government spending in 2016, we want to plot a pathway to the next paradigm shift.

We think this might be possible in relation to a range of key future moves:

1. Developing a national housing strategy that secures government investment in housing over a 20 – 30 year period [or two strategies as the case may be], among other things;
2. Implementing the full range of interventions and supports inherent in the right to a decent home;
3. Clarifying the role of government in relation to the housing market – defined as the transactional market-place in which property titles are traded and converted, and in relation to the housing system, where government’s social welfare and human rights obligations reside.

Narrative transformation is required to achieve a change in the way New Zealanders think about and talk about the housing system. Thinking and talking about the housing system differently means perceiving it differently. As with paradigm change, what is required is that existing harmful narratives need to be identified and critiqued, and new narratives provided to fill the void.

One such narrative, for example, is that *we can have a great housing system*. When was the last time you heard that in the news? Well actually it’s true, and most of us wouldn’t be in housing if we didn’t believe.

One powerful transformative *narrative* here is the idea of a long-term national strategy. We reckon Kiwis can make the leap to understanding that – while our housing system may be failing now, and our public supply characterized by undersupply – if we could find a way to lock in current government investment for the next 25 years, wouldn’t we be in a very different position?

This also highlights the role of the media: it is in the media that constant criticism and coverage focused on the negative outcomes comes together to present an urgency and immediacy that prevents long term strategic options getting any airtime. Without airtime we struggle to share this simple solution with New Zealanders, and we therefore remain isolated in our call for what could be the most simple, logical, and powerful paradigm shift for our housing system: strategy.

What are we hoping to achieve through the conference, in relation to Narrative Transformation?

Setting the scene for narrative transformation by exploring harmful narratives, and identifying an agreed suite of new, productive, informed and engaging narratives we will collectively use and promote from June 2021 to June 2023.

The sections above set out some not-so-great paradigms each of which plays a role in defining our housing system, and some examples of dominant narratives that sit behind and to some extent power the engine of much of our news coverage, fuelled as it is by controversy and criticism.

But neither the paradigms nor the narratives mentioned so far express great visions for our housing system, or tell basic truths about our housing system. Nor do they represent the reason we should talk about *narrative transformation* at our conference.

The opportunity to the conference offers is to demonstrate leadership in seeking a deep change in our housing system including through narrative, narrative change, and new narratives. Through the conference and the pre-conference work programmes we can agree, and agree a set of new, productive, informed and engaging narratives and agree collectively to use and reinforce them. We need to use them across all channels, and all communications, and continue to influence our partners to do the same.

As noted elsewhere, we think it is probably nearing time for housing to exit the limelight, at least it is time for housing coverage dominated by outdated paradigms and sensationalist narratives to exit the limelight. We don't mind our media being full of housing stories: we'd just like to see those stories reflect real opportunities, real solutions, and a positive view of a better housing system.

For the moment there continues to be vast amounts of confusion represented in the media about the key issues, roles and responsibilities, and solutions around housing. Many of these are simply narratives, constantly reinforced and repackaged to contain 'new' news.

We definitely want housing, the right to a decent home, to no longer be reduced to media fodder or a political football. More importantly we want our housing system to be a mark of success rather than failure, characterized by the broad good outcomes it supports, rather than crisis and controversy. These are issues of narrative as much as policy or systems change, and we reckon that if we link policy, narrative, paradigm and a systems oriented approach, then we must be on the right track.

That's the transformation we are hoping to crystallise through conference 2021. We are experts in housing, and we need to harness that expertise by making strategic choices, and by helping establish a new housing narrative for Aotearoa.

Our pre-conference work programme includes a series of engagement meetings on these matters. Please let us know if you would to be involved.

Pre-conference work programme | initial schedule of meetings

2021 work programme	Constitutional transformation*	Housing System Settings	Narrative Change	Development phase
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Shift Aotearoa | Conference 2021

Meeting agenda prepared 3 working days prior published via available channels				
Meeting minutes circulated 3 days after specifying agreed next steps/tasks published via available channels				
Meetings are open and inclusive – there is no membership or limit on attendance: feedback will consistently be sought				
This schedule offers a framework: there can and will be other meetings, 'offline' and otherwise				
Existing networks and sector networks will be kept up to date and consistently invited to feedback and participate				
Standard timing	-	1PM – 3PM	10AM-Midday	
January	TBC	26 Jan	26 Jan	Convene conversation with those interested in each workstream Draft forward work/discussion milestones to June 2021
February	TBC	9 Feb	9 Feb	Agree vision for what could be achieved at conference, & to 2023 How? Develop ideas to get there
March	TBC	9 March	9 March	Agree vision for what could be achieved at conference, & to 2023 How? Develop ideas to get there
April	TBC	13 April	13 April	Conference presentations planned – key points agreed Issues paper or discussion papers agreed
April / May	Evolving work stream leadership engages with sector Wide net engagement on issues and discussion papers			
May	TBC	11 May	11 May	Feedback on issues and discussion papers circulated to inform presentations
May 12 - 31	Networking and engagement Conference presentations pre-recording			
Conference date:	9 June	10 June	11 June	Conference presentations focus on decision making and advocacy opportunities
Post conference initial review	TBC	29 June	29 June	Review conference proceedings and plan future work Establish forward meeting schedule
Conference 2021 outcomes include the development of a clear agreed future work programme				