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Towards a level playing field: housing support services

Three sector associations have come together to call for a clear and consistent funding approach for housing support services. Community Housing Aotearoa (CHA), Platform Charitable Trust and Social Service Providers Aotearoa (SSPA) have jointly prepared this summary of the issue and a proposed way forward.

Introduction

HNZC recently announced that it is establishing an Intensive Tenancy Support Team to work with 'the highest need tenants to understand their needs, build trusting and respectful relationships and link them with appropriate local or national support organisations¹'. HNZC say that the goal of this programme is to help people sustain their tenancies. This is aligned with a new focus by HNZC of seeking to sustain tenancies rather than evicting tenants in response to problematic issues or behaviours. This programme has a similar intent to the MSD Sustaining Tenancies Pilot, but is using a different model in that the need is identified and responded to by the Landlord (HNZ) rather than by a third party (MSD or contracted provider).

The Minister of Housing has talked publicly about HNZC taking a more pastoral role with tenants, and this may have driven some of the concern and questions from within the sector as it is unclear what this may involve or how it would be delivered. We may also be doing tenants a disservice if the social housing system implies that every tenant needs mental health or other social services, when in fact many are simply managing on their own with very low incomes.

We understand that HNZC is initially employing around 20 staff in the Intensive Tenancy Support Team to support high-needs households across the portfolio of 63,000 properties. Given the direction of the Minister this would seem to be an initial response by HNZC.

This initiative has raised concerns from some social service providers (some of whom are also Community Housing Providers, [CHPs]) that HNZC is becoming involved in the business of providing direct 'specialist social support services' to its tenants, something that they argue it has neither the experience nor the remit to do effectively.

In order to understand this concern, it is important to clarify language and definitions. The differences between 'Intensive Tenancy Support' (also known as housing support) and 'specialist social support' e.g. mental health or addictions services needs to be understood. There is no agreed definition of Housing Support in New Zealand although some housing

¹ HNZC Website – Job Advert Manager Intensive Support

providers already use this model, including WCC's City Housing and many CHPs. This model is widely used overseas where the concept has well-established operational policy and funding certainty. In the UK the Government established the 'Supporting People' programme in the early 2000s to commission and resource exactly this kind of support; a parallel development in the USA called 'Permanent Supportive Housing' occurred around the same time.

Any tenant should be able to access the right level of support to meet their needs, regardless of who their landlord is. CHA, SSPA, and Platform hope this paper can spur further development of a level playing field across all housing providers and social service providers, backed by a consistently effective policy and funding environment.

Difference between 'housing support' and 'specialist social support'

Housing support has been defined as the provision of services to vulnerable tenants or owners in their own homes to develop and sustain the Tenant's capacity to live independently in their own home². In general housing support is support provided to tenants with the primary aim of sustaining tenancies. If not provided by a Landlord it is often 'commissioned' by the Landlord to assist it achieve its social objectives and to help reduce management problems caused by tenancies breaking down or by 'anti-social behaviour'.

Why is Housing Support needed?

The reality is that for many tenants who need specialist social support, accessing this support is difficult and can take a considerable amount of time. Most social services are assigned by third parties such as DHBs or MSD, and these agencies are often underfunded. We know from a survey³ conducted by Social Service Providers Aotearoa that 25% are funded to provide housing support; 26% deliver housing support without being funded to do so. Many social service providers contracted by DHBs or MSD are stretched with long referral lists and heavy caseloads – meaning they are often unable to devote the amount of time clients really need. This can result in tenants with complex needs 'falling through the cracks' and not accessing the level of support they need which can impact their tenancies.

Additional problems include people with multiple complex needs such as dual diagnosis or personality disorders finding it almost impossible to access services from mainstream mental health or addictions services, leaving housing providers, the Police and others to deal with people when they are in crisis. There is a vital role housing support workers play in a multi-disciplinary environment that is client-centred, so getting this right really matters.

The role of the Tenancy Manager

One of the often-stated advantages of 'community providers' is their ability to provide 'wrap around services' to tenants helping them to sustain their tenancies. Arguably the role of Tenancy Manager should be focused on the administration of the tenancy – the letting of properties, dealing with rents and rent arrears, carrying out property inspections and in

² Slade, M, Housing Support Services in Aotearoa New Zealand, Future Policy and Funding Options (2007), Community Housing Aotearoa

³ Source: Workforce Planning Survey Dec 2017, Carte Blanche

some cases dealing with breaches of the Tenancy Agreement and taking cases through the tenancy tribunal.

The reality of a large landlord such as HNZN is that Tenancy Managers have large ‘patches’ (HNZN currently has a ratio of 300 properties per tenancy manager – which internationally is not a particularly large ratio). This means that TMs do not have time, and often do not have the necessary skills to provide the level of support needed to help tenants access services or address behaviour that may threaten their tenancy. This does not mean that social housing tenancy managers do not play an important role in identifying support needs and signposting or referring tenants onto more appropriate services. The tenancy manager is the first and best point of contact and access point to identify and / or receive a request for additional support as they already have an established relationship (based on 1:1 contact) with the tenant.

It is important to note that many registered Community Housing Providers have origins as support agencies providing services for clients with mental health and substance misuse issues, and were established to meet the unmet housing needs of clients with these needs. This means they have closer links with support services and may have better integration between housing and support. Another issue is that owing to the small size of most CHPs, the ratio of tenancies to tenancy managers is very much lower than the international average, meaning they do have more time to work with tenants.

Separation of Landlord and Support

Some commentators have concerns about the HNZN service relating to the importance of the separation of landlord function from support function, and they see HNZN’s move as being potentially in conflict with this principle and the Regulatory guidance in New Zealand.

‘Best practice’, supported by Regulatory Guidance in New Zealand, reinforces the importance of maintaining a clear separation between the provision of housing and support services offered by CHPs to social housing tenants. The CHRA Guidance Note says *“the blurring of the provision of housing and other support services potentially puts [the objectives of providing sufficient protection for social housing tenants] at risk. If there is no clear separation between the landlord and the service provider, a tenant could feel obligated to accept additional support services provided by their landlord’s wider business operations in order to secure somewhere to live⁴.”*

The intent of this guidance and best practice is to ensure that housing is allocated on the basis of housing need, and not conditional on the provision of any additional services, where withdrawal from these services may threaten the Tenant’s occupation of that home. CHRA go on to say *“we expect a CHP to assist its tenants to access additional services to help them sustain a tenancy, for example by linking them to budgeting, employment or training services, or other health-related support services e.g. mental health services⁵.”*

⁴ CHRA Guidance Note – Separation of Services

⁵ Ibid

HNZC's approach appears to be consistent with the principles of separation. It is important to understand that HNZC is not currently required to meet the CHRA regulatory requirements.

The new programme more demonstrates HNZC's changing focus, resulting from the change in government, towards HNZC fulfilling the role as a social landlord rather than being primarily an asset manager.

Funding for Housing Support

At present we understand that HNZC is funding the pilot from baseline funding, but has indicated that it will evaluate the pilot and if it proves successful make a Budget Bid in a future Budget to extend the service.

CHA/SSPA/Platform supports the development of housing support services focused on making tenancies sustainable and filling the gap between tenancy management and specialist social services.

Yet we must ensure the development of equivalent services for all social housing providers, with adequate funding for the direct social service and mental health providers. There are too many examples where 'navigation' services are funded yet the direct service provision is not.

Developing a consistent model can also build on the lessons learned from MSD's Sustaining Tenancies pilot.

There is an opportunity to partner with HNZC to deliver a level playing field that would benefit all tenants with equal access to services, regardless of their landlord. That partnership should use the position of HNZC to support funding at social service providers and CHPs.

Next steps

We welcome comments and engagement on this paper. We suggest the following actions:

1. A clear and consistent model for housing support service delivery
2. A level playing field for funding – across both housing support and direct mental health and social services
3. Engagement with Government that would result in adoption of the consistent delivery model and funding settings as set out above.

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