

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES IN GROWING CITIES



> *David Zussman and Marc Slade show how community housing partnerships are delivering sustainable, mixed tenure communities.*

Several years ago, when the Housing Foundation (HF) approached the people of Weymouth in South Auckland about building new housing on a very nice, existing horse paddock, the reaction was immediate and heartfelt.

"They were very concerned and didn't like that idea at all," says HF Strategy and Development General Manager Paul Gilberd. Despite members of the development team going to schools, churches, community centres and residents' association meetings to ask for, and listen to, feedback, people still didn't warm to the idea.

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Yet, they kept going to the meetings, kept listening, telling their story and talking to people while nearly 300 homes were built through a partnership with the non-profit Tamaki Collective, The Māori Trustee, CORT Community Housing and The Housing Foundation, *mana whenua* (people of the land – with traditional authority over the land), the housing sector, and local and central government. Attitudes only started changing once families moved in, HF hosted some events and people started meeting each other.



Sustainable CORT development Lynton, in Auckland

"People bumped into each other walking their dog and realised, 'Wow, you're just like me and this is actually okay'," says Paul. "That took time and patience and a lot of energy. But now we have people in the community who had previously rejected the idea strongly advocating for what we have delivered there, because they think it has really lifted the area."

Today, Waimahia Inlet, on the shores of the Manukau Harbour, is seen as a success story, with 53 percent of residents in a

2016 survey saying the overall quality of their life has improved (compared with just seven percent who had a better quality of life before Waimahia).¹ Research shows household incomes have increased, financial stress has declined, there have been massive improvements in household health, and 70 percent of residents say the move has improved their long-term financial prospects.² The homes include a mix of housing types from two bedroom apartments to five bedroom family homes.

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"Everyone lives together and no-one is stigmatised by their tenure, because all houses look the same," Paul remarks. "We don't believe in large, high-density mono-tenure developments, and we will never do that as a community housing provider. All the international evidence shows it doesn't work."

"Anecdotally, people say moving into stable housing has meant less stress and anxiety and more peace and security," he continues. "There were fewer hospitalisations and sick days for children, which meant less time off work for caregivers. People become involved in their community again and began to have energy to direct outward toward others, rather than spending it on just surviving. It's 'transformational'."

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New Zealand's housing crisis has brought with it an urgent need to reshape our cities to meet the clamour for affordable and social housing. The pressure is on housing providers to quickly deliver solutions at scale for those in most need.

One response from the Government has been to develop these schemes at greater densities but that usually triggers resistance from neighbours who fear the 'ghettoisation' of their suburbs, and that housing providers will repeat mistakes made both here and overseas where high concentrations of low-income, high-needs tenants caused social problems.

A solution often suggested in new medium density developments is mixed tenure housing – that is housing that is 'tenure blind' – where in any one subdivision there are a range of tenures represented, as at Waimahia, and potentially a range of owners.

1 Foote, D., (2017) 'Life at Waimahia: A survey of residents.' Presentation prepared for The Waimahia Inlet Neighbourhood Limited Partnership, managed by the general partner Tamaki Makaurau Community Housing Limited (TMCHL). New Zealand Housing Federation. www.nzhf.org

2 Witten, K., Opit, S., Fergusson, E., and Kearns, R., (2018) *Developing community: Following the Waimahia Inlet affordable housing initiative*. Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities. <http://www.buildingbetter.nz/>



Waimahia Inlet community day out

So, how do you build a successful community? Should mixed tenure housing be pepper-potted in existing communities? Should housing blocks with one specific class of tenure be built? What about private developers and others worried about 'bringing down the value' of the suburb?

All the community housing providers we spoke to are in favour of a highly individualised approach, choosing the right mix of housing and people very specifically for the area. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

"We have built 850 homes over the last 10 years and we are now working in our 37th neighbourhood, and the answer in every place is very different," Paul says. "It is important, however, to blend with the existing community wherever possible."

"The people who live in the new houses came from the other side of the fence. Among the reasons we chose them to live there was they already lived in the area, their kids were in school, they already had work, church or *marae* (meeting grounds), existing community connections or family living in area. Those people got preference for new homes."

The cultural demographics also match those of the three suburbs in the surrounding area.

"The crowning glory is we are just this week finishing an early childhood centre and community centre, and the operator is a very trusted leader of community organisations who already ran one down the road. That's just another connection point of continuity."

Paul admits these decisions are made intentionally: "It's not by accident. We could have got a better commercial deal from another ECE operator but we didn't, because it wasn't the right thing to do for that community. We're not in this to make

money. We're here for community development. Money has got us into this [housing crisis] mess. The market does not, and will never, deliver affordable housing outcomes for communities."

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Compass Housing Services General Manager Bernadette Pinnell studied social housing renewal projects for her doctorate, in particular, how to deliver social mix successfully. She says building single-mix social housing in one area at the scale of thousands or even hundreds of homes is "really negative."³

"The problem with the housing situation is everyone wants a one-size-fits-all solution."

She says putting affordable or social housing on the edge of the city – where there aren't local jobs, shops or transport – has proven to be the wrong approach since the 1980s.

"That's one of the problems New Zealand has been facing; the growth in cities and moving more social housing onto the fringe of the city where there's nothing but housing," she says. "It doesn't matter what mix of people you put into those locations, the reality is that low-income households rely on public services, as well as local transport, shops, community facilities and health services. Housing in and of itself isn't enough, people need to participate as well."

3 Pinnell, B. (2014) 'Living in a Parallel Universe: Using a pragmatic realist evaluation framework to evaluate the socio-spatial impacts of public housing renewal programmes.' Faculty of Built Environment, University of New South Wales, <http://handle.unsw.edu.au/1959.4/54565>



Social mix is also important: "It helps bring a wider population together, people who are more active in our community. Many of our social housing tenants volunteer and that is something that isn't widely recognised; that many people in social housing contribute, spend a lot of time looking after their family and the grandkids on weekends and holidays."

"It's really important their voice is heard as well, in terms of what they actually want for their communities that they live in, and what their expectations are."

Community of Refuge Trust (CORT) Chief Executive Peter

Jeffries advocates having small clusters of housing pepper-potted across the whole of the community, as widely as possible, and having each development closely tailored to the surrounding neighborhood. He believes a key concept for success is blind tenure – when people walking past don't know whether a development is social or affordable housing.

"Can we blend into the community sufficiently in planning, design, tenancy and asset management so that it's not obvious we're there? That, I think, is what the community is saying: Come on in, but we don't want you to stand out; we want you to be part of us, not separate from us."

CORT Operations Manager Stephen Hart says they know from experience that tenants feel more likely to make a place their home when it's a truly mixed community, and when they feel their home is equal to everyone else's.

"There's not a sense that 'I have to move into that public housing place; I hope no one finds out'. They can walk down the street and feel proud when they turn into their door because it looks as good as everyone else's. That fulfils our mission of providing good homes and, from a community and social point of view, it's a much better model."

The neighbourhood will always be apprehensive, says Peter Jeffries, "but we have to say 'trust us' and we have to earn that trust in delivery."



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