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## Social Housing Reform

### (Housing Restructuring and Tenancy Matters Amendment) Bill 116-1

National Council of Women Oral Submission to the Social Services Select Committee  
Wednesday 31 July 2013 at 12 noon.

Good afternoon, my name is Wendy Zemanek and my colleague is Helen Reilly. We are both members of the Parliamentary Watch Committee of the National Council of Women of New Zealand. This submission has been prepared from a background of policy decisions and consultation with the members of our organisation.

This bill aroused considerable interest and concern, with responses from several of our branches and also from organisations affiliated to them. In total, the responses recorded the opinions and concerns of 122 women, many of whom have experience of working with people in the lower socio-economic sector. Several of our branches made time for a full discussion on the bill at their monthly meetings.

Overall, our members did not think this bill provided a reasonable approach to providing more affordable housing. Members did not think the transfer of responsibilities for Social Housing from Housing NZ Corporation to the Ministry of Social Development would be a good approach. There was a strong feeling of concern that the Ministry of Social Development is already overloaded and that the responsibilities for Social Housing should remain with Housing NZ, working with the Department of Social Welfare.

Some members felt that the Ministry of Housing should work with church, marae and similar groups to provide a co-ordinated approach. It should also help facilitate acquisition of suitable land for other groups to develop affordable housing. The environment is important and there should be parks, walkways, safe playgrounds, tree planting and other civic amenities.

We were pleased to note that Housing NZ Corporation is budgeting to spend \$2.9 billion over the next 3 years on: completing the insulating of all State Houses, building extra bedrooms; rebuilding Christchurch homes; and earthquake-strengthening State Houses in other parts of the country.

Housing NZ should remain as a separate organisation, working closely with The Department of Social Welfare. However, our members recognised that the Ministry of Social Development is more likely to be informed of the family's situation and therefore more able to match the housing situation with the actual family.

Concern was expressed that HNZ and other community housing tenancies are to become insecure. At present people know they can remain settled as long as they pay their rent. Having to move can lead to problems if there is a greater distance to travel and consequently an increase in travel costs. Moving can also mean a disruption to stability, especially for children who have to change schools. Leaving old friends can create a strong sense of loss and it can be very difficult to adjust to new teachers and try to make friends. This is a major concern.

Just two weeks ago, a severely disabled Hutt Valley woman who cannot move without her walking frame, was provided with a flat designed to make life easier for her. She is delighted with it, but she only has one small heater and no money to provide any additional warmth. Each client's needs must be addressed.



Housing NZ should work with church, marae and similar groups to develop a co-ordinated approach. It should help facilitate acquisition of suitable land for other groups to develop affordable housing. There will be a need for better public transport if developments are on the edge of cities. The environment is important and there should be parks, walkways, safe playgrounds, tree planting and other civic amenities.

NCWNZ applauds the fact that the Bill proposes a better assessment of need for social housing, eligibility for social housing, and assessment of eligibility for an income-related rent. However we would like to see definitions of 'housing eligibility' and 'housing need' added to the Act.

Another positive is the ability for tenants of social housing to be eligible for income related rents.

There was support for rent to be taken from the benefit at source, presumably by the Ministry of Social Development. Other suggestions were: having clear processes for tenants to raise concerns about their property; having repairs done promptly eg blocked drains and vandalised letter boxes; and having clarity about the separate responsibilities of tenant and landlord.

The inclusion of fines of up to \$2000 for incorrect provision of information is a real concern. Perhaps it is meant as a deterrent. Our members doubt whether any beneficiary could pay such a sum of money.

Our Manawatu Branch noted that because the Housing NZ criteria have already been tightened, the number of people on the Housing NZ list in Palmerston North has been reduced from 1000 to 300. But that means 700 families out there who are still in need of accommodation. Provision for single men is already a problem which will not be helped by these new proposals.

There was concern for people whose financial circumstances were just sufficient to lift them over the threshold away from qualifying for Housing NZ accommodation, but not sufficient to allow them to pay market rent.

There was strong approval and support for the \$2.9 billion that Housing NZ is budgeting to spend over the next three years on completing the insulating of all state houses – including the building of extra bedrooms, the rebuild of Christchurch homes and earthquake strengthening state houses in other parts of the country.

One member wrote: "What does affordable housing mean? The definition goes well beyond whether the number of bedrooms is appropriate to the size of the family. Is the home located near employment? Are there medical and community services within a reasonable distance? What's the public transport like?" How far away are the shops if the family doesn't have transport?

Another noted the importance of social workers with the appropriate language skills to interact successfully with people who speak English as a second language.

There was a suggestion that housing areas should include a mixture of house sizes so that social disruption would be minimised when tenants need a larger house as more children are born, or a smaller house after children grow up and leave home.

In conclusion: the overall premise in the responses was that good planning and good communication are vital.

Thank you for the opportunity to present these views, suggestions and opinions.