

The Healthy Housing Programme Outcomes Evaluation



Housing New Zealand Corporation and some district health boards collaborate to implement the Healthy Housing programme (Healthy Housing) for Housing New Zealand's tenants. Healthy Housing matches households to houses appropriate to their needs. It links families to the health and social services they require to improve their health and wellbeing. It assists tenants to maximise the benefits of living in houses that are insulated, ventilated and heated effectively. The evaluation determined that healthy environments in the home resulted in increased household wellbeing and reductions in hospitalisations. This in turn resulted in tenants with greater self-sufficiency and a greater sense of control over their lives. Greater control over their living environments was expressed as feelings of pride in their house and the level to which their homes were maintained. The evaluation found that Healthy Housing was an effective and sustainable intervention with positive outcomes.

Overview

Since January 2001 Healthy Housing has been improving the health and welfare of Housing New Zealand's tenants, many of whom are Māori and Pacific Island families, living in areas of extreme health risk. Health and welfare are improved by:

- reducing the risk of housing-related health problems
- improving the quality and availability of state housing for larger families
- improving access to health and social services
- increasing awareness of healthy living.

The success of Healthy Housing relies on tenant engagement and participation. Healthy Housing starts with providers interviewing families to identify housing, health and wellbeing issues that are uppermost for them. Together they work out the most important things that need to be done to houses, living arrangements, and about health and social issues. Families and providers then work together to implement agreed action plans to reduce overcrowding, improve the health of the house and the household, and link families to appropriate health and social services.

Healthy Housing operates in partnership with district health boards in Counties Manukau, Auckland, Northland and the Hutt Valley. It intervenes in priority localities.

Healthy Housing comprises three related interventions undertaken concurrently:

- a housing intervention by Housing New Zealand
- a health intervention by the district health boards
- a joint intervention that identifies issues of a social/welfare nature and provides a linking and facilitation service to appropriate government and social service agencies.

Housing New Zealand's housing intervention provides:

- healthy environments (through passive ventilation, insulation and heating)
- design improvements (such as upgrading kitchens and bathrooms)
- house extensions (such as adding bedrooms and bathrooms, and increasing the size of living spaces)

- transfers to other Housing New Zealand accommodation that better matches the needs of the household.

The health partners act as health assessors, educators and referral agents to health and social services.

Housing New Zealand tenancies are usually managed from a neighbourhood unit. Healthy Housing team members visit and assess all households within the target areas. An intervention involves a wider team working with a household, including a builder/designer/architect, tenancy manager, public health nurse and other social service providers. At the completion of the intervention, the management of the tenancy returns to the neighbourhood unit.

Evaluation purpose and approach

The aims of the outcomes evaluation were to identify and critically review:

- the evidence that Healthy Housing had made a difference in the risk and rate of housing-related diseases, conditions and injuries, and improved wellbeing
- the outcomes Healthy Housing has achieved
- any barriers to Healthy Housing achieving expected and unexpected outcomes.

The research approach had two components:

- A review of the intervention logic and outcomes framework for Healthy Housing which resulted in all the evaluation questions being linked to the intervention logic and outcomes framework. Answers to the evaluation questions are analysed and provide the basis for assessing Healthy Housing's achievements.
- Over three years 44 recipient households and 18 providers of Healthy Housing interventions were interviewed on multiple occasions. In the second year of the evaluation an additional 24 key stakeholders who engaged with Healthy Housing were interviewed.

Key points

- The evaluation found that Healthy Housing has significantly reduced the risk and rate of housing-related diseases (asthma, respiratory diseases, rheumatic fever, cellulitis and meningitis), injuries (falls and burns), addressed conditions (obesity and reduced mobility) and improved wellbeing.
- The evaluation suggested that households, providers and key stakeholders have very similar views of what the Healthy Housing intervention involves and that it achieves positive, sustainable outcomes for families.

- The evaluation indicated that collaborative and flexible interagency relationships lead to programme sustainability between Housing New Zealand and the district health boards.
- Barriers to achieving outcomes identified in the evaluation were addressed quickly and effectively. Healthy Housing worked with other business groups in Housing New Zealand to respond to these barriers, such as maintenance issues in parts of a house not extended or modernised, and upgrading of the grounds.
- Healthy Housing's knowledge and experience is being transferred to other business groups within Housing New Zealand and to other government agencies through policy and operational activities

Findings

The evaluation indicated that Healthy Housing achieved positive outcomes for households and programme providers. The success of Healthy Housing depends on collaborative and flexible relationships between Housing New Zealand and the district health boards. Barriers to achieving outcomes were addressed. Healthy Housing worked with other business groups in Housing New Zealand to respond to barriers outside the control of Healthy Housing, such as maintenance issues in parts of a house not extended or modernised, and upgrading of the grounds. Healthy Housing is a sustainable approach to achieving improved health and wellbeing for Housing New Zealand tenants.

Outcomes achieved for households

Positive changes in households included:

- more functional families
- a greater sense of self-identified physical and psychological wellbeing
- a self-identified reduction in the frequency of doctor and hospital contacts
- an increase in children's school attendance identified by families.

The evaluation showed that tenants receiving minimal interventions (insulation, ventilation and heating) often noticed an improvement in the comfort of their homes on a continuum from 'more enjoyment of the home' to 'observed reductions in asthma and respiratory infections'. Tenants were in many cases unaware of the relationship between condensation reduction through adequate ventilation and heating, and prevention of mould. They were also unaware of the relationship between the existence of mould and respiratory conditions. The heaters commonly installed in Housing New Zealand houses are heat pumps on which householders need some instruction to use efficiently.

Tenants for whom Healthy Housing delivered greater structural change (modification, extension or transfer) gave more detailed stories about how the changes in space, communal services areas and specific modifications had created a more suitable living environment for their household.

Positive effects translated into greater social cohesion and a collective sense of belonging. The evaluation showed that householders developed a strong sense of home, and linked improved living environments with a more positive sense of self. The positive effects of Healthy Housing on recipients' wellbeing were sustained.

A Tokelauan family of ten had their four-bedroom house extended to a seven-bedroom house in 2002. Before the extension the family experienced flu, colds and diarrhoea and high levels of stress. The children were always fighting. Since the extension the family have had fewer visits to the GP and no more cases of diarrhoea. They feel this is because of the changes that were made to the house.

The children are at home more, rather than just walking the streets. The parents have taken a more active role in their children's education and they are doing well in school. The family as a whole are happier and are involved more in community activities, and they feel more able to open up their home. They are always receiving compliments about how nice their house is and have a great sense of pride in their home. Family visits and functions are more frequent than before because of the large spacious living room, improved kitchen and additional bathroom.

Even after the extensions the parents are sleeping in the lounge so their children can have their own space. In 2005 disabled twins were born and the father stopped work to help with the children and the housework. In 2007 the house was no longer big enough because of natural family growth. (For a discussion of barriers see opposite.)

Outcomes achieved for providers

Positive changes that Healthy Housing providers experienced included:

- increases in awareness and professional expertise
- a philosophical shift linked to playing a greater role in advocacy for, and education of, tenants
- greater job satisfaction.

Collaborative and flexible relationships

The relationship between Housing New Zealand and the district health boards showed positive changes including:

- a marked increase in the development and effectiveness of collaboration not only between Housing New Zealand and the district health boards but also between Healthy Housing and other government agencies
- links among agencies which were critical in designing housing solutions for people with disabilities such as limited mobility or morbid obesity – disability emerged in the evaluation as a common challenge for many households
- continued commitment to the programme and its principle of intersectoral collaboration.

The evaluation concluded that Healthy Housing presents opportunities for staff to be flexible in responding to tenants' needs. Healthy Housing succeeds in addressing tenants' concerns that extend beyond the walls of the house, in particular, reducing social isolation (which is corrosive of health). In addressing the breadth of connections between housing and human welfare, Healthy Housing offers tenants greater control over their housing. Families therefore gain greater control over their lives.

Barriers to achieving outcomes

Obstacles to the achievement of Healthy Housing outcomes tended to be outside the control of the programme, such as recipient concerns about upkeep of grounds, maintenance and household finances. Some obstacles identified by the providers included:

- the impact on, and relationships with, neighbourhood units
- 'no shows' by tenants at assessment meetings
- the risk of recurrence of the original problem
- delays to the process of interventions as a consequence of the availability of builders and maintenance contractors.

The evaluation found that, in houses modified by Healthy Housing, space issues have arisen as children have grown older. This highlighted the changing nature of household composition and how Housing New Zealand has a challenge related to anticipating need.

Programme sustainability

The evaluation indicated that Healthy Housing is strong, sustainable and responsive to recipients' needs. For instance, upgrading of grounds has since become an aspect of Healthy Housing. The evaluation provided compelling evidence, from household recipients and programme providers, of Healthy Housing's ongoing positive impacts on housing-related diseases, conditions, and wellbeing. The evaluation found that some participants no longer make specific reference to Healthy Housing. The invisibility of the programme was seen as a strength of a mature intervention. It appeared to some that Healthy Housing was simply what Housing New Zealand did as a responsible landlord. Results showed that a number of Housing New Zealand's regional offices were incorporating aspects of Healthy Housing into their services, highlighting the programme's success.

Implications for policy and programme development

The Healthy Housing programme evaluation has provided rare evidence of the potential of housing solutions as a catalyst for achieving wider social outcomes. This has been recognised in changes to a whole-of-government approach to addressing persistent disadvantage which now includes housing more centrally than previously.

The evaluation has been an integral part of Healthy Housing with the programme responding quickly to any improvements suggested by the evaluation. Healthy Housing has used the evidence provided by the evaluation and worked closely with other business groups in the Housing New Zealand to achieve the best possible outcomes for tenants.

The evaluation provided one of the inspirations for further research. Research and Evaluation are undertaking a project with the objectives of:

- understanding how houses are used to achieve/ not achieve healthy environments
- developing a typology of house usage that results in health environments
- suggesting changes to the ways houses are used so that they are healthier.

Further information

This paper is based on reports prepared by Auckland UniServices on the outcomes evaluation (2005–2007).

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