

## **ARE THE SALLIES TAKING OVER HOUSING NEW ZEALAND**

Pick up any newspaper or turn on the radio or TV news and you are likely to encounter an item on some aspect of housing. Whether it's about the cost of land, the Auckland housing bubble, arguments for a warrant fitness for rental housing or a story of someone living permanently in a camping ground, all news outlets seems to be talking or writing about housing in New Zealand.

It should not be surprising that there is such a concentration on housing because home and shelter are a vital part of all our lives. We need somewhere to live and engage with our family.

The truth, however, is that until recently housing policy and housing supply have not really been issues at the top of people's concerns. The difficulty of affording homeownership for middle class households may have helped to focus attention on the subject.

Some indication that housing has become an issue of significance was signalled when Prime Minister John Key, immediately after the election stated, housing would be a top issue for his Government. He followed that up by appointing three heavy weight ministers to the various housing portfolios.

In all this new emphasis and media noise around housing The Salvation Army has been often been mentioned as a significant player. I even found myself the subject of a Fairfax cartoon regarding the sale of State Houses. Unfortunately, no one in the Government seems to have thought that they might need to have more substantial discussions with us before announcing us as a potential participant.

The Salvation Army is keen to see a better approach to social housing. Our concern springs from our experience in dealing with people unable to find suitable housing to live in. In Auckland the Army sees on average forty people a week who need help to get a house. Sadly, in most of the cases we are unable to find accommodation for the families involved.

Of even more concern is, on the rare occasions when we successfully advocate for a family to receive a State house, the house allocated is often of poor standard with repairs needing to be undertaken. On such occasions the best advice we could give to the family would be, "Don't take the house." Yet we don't do this as families have little choice when they are living in vehicles, camping grounds or garages and need immediate accommodation.

The Salvation Army is concerned that the State housing stock is seriously under-supplied in areas of high need, and is often of poor quality and poorly managed. We have been a strong advocate with various Governments, departments and Housing New Zealand Corporation (HNZC) for an improvement in that situation over many years. In our view, successive Governments have been highly neglectful of State housing and have provided poor governance to the State stock, resulting in what is now a serious crisis in areas like Auckland and Christchurch. The Salvation Army strongly believes the State has a responsibility to provide housing access for families unable to achieve satisfactory housing from their own resources. We have strongly advocated for more and better State housing with the current and previous Governments.

Our experience of HNZC is of a monopolistic provider of housing, who are very inconsistent in how they manage their clients, houses, repairs and neighbourhoods.

Overseas experience suggests social housing can be managed in a far more creative way. On a recent visit to the UK I discovered an approach to social housing by community government funded providers that far exceeded anything I had seen provided in New Zealand. Tenants were enjoying services such as

- Refurbished and updated housing stock with a strong programme of preventative maintenance
- The installation of photo voltaic electricity generation units in their houses
- Social enterprises run by the housing provider that created significant employment and training opportunities for tenants
- A Speak Easy tenants group who are involved in a range of activities including focus groups, mystery shopping and taking part in occasional surveys to improve the social housing experience
- A 100 Club- a virtual group of 100 tenants looking closely at particular tenant issues and giving advice and feedback to the Housing provider, reviewing the annual report and publishing a tenant magazine 'Insight'
- Hotspotters acting as local community champions and voices for change in their neighbourhoods working with the housing provider on staff walkabouts and other activities
- A Training Academy developing training opportunities for tenants and guiding them into private or government funded employment preparation
- Specialist Anti-Social Behaviours Teams who provides dedicated advice and guidance and who lead in cases where an injunction or legal remedy is required to combat anti-social behaviour of tenants
- A Cleaning Company developed to employ tenants to help clean-ups of houses, or villages or community projects.

These are the sorts of things New Zealand social tenants should be enjoying. This is why The Salvation Army supports the exploration of an orderly transfer of some of the State stock to community housing providers. Such a transfer could benefit New Zealand communities by providing an alternative social housing system of superior housing and support. It could also set a competitive standard of tenancy management for HNZC to achieve. HNZC, we believe should always be the main social housing provider.

Although The Salvation Army is often mentioned in the media and by Government as one of the potential community housing providers it has not made any decision to be involved in taking housing stock from the Crown. Such a commitment needs a thorough and comprehensive review of what this would involve before a decision can be made. We will as part of our duty to provide support to vulnerable New Zealanders explore the option of being a housing provider in the future. Our bottom line, however, would be we would only do this if we could guarantee that we can provide more and better housing than is currently enjoyed by social housing tenants in New Zealand.

To manage a few thousand houses requires very significant skill and organisation. Although The Salvation Army currently runs some social housing we do not have sufficient in-house skill and expertise to run a bigger portfolio. This would mean the need to create a specialist part of The Salvation Army to undertake this work.

The Salvation Army does support the move to transfer some of the State assets to community organisations to provide a stronger social housing service in New Zealand. Whether The Salvation Army will be one of those providers, however, is still to be decided.