

Reimagining Social Housing

“We must reimagine social housing.” That was the challenge Alan Johnson (Child Poverty Action Group) proposed at a Post Budget Lunch organised by Anglican Action, Child Poverty Action Group, DV Bryant Trust and Poverty Action Waikato recently.

Housing has been a popular topic recently with rising house prices, pressure from the Auckland market squeezing opportunities in Hamilton and local council withdrawing from social housing. Community organisations have come together to discuss the issues around housing (and social housing in particular) to see if they can identify a pathway forward to at least alleviate the problem. But can the problem of social housing be resolved by an already stretched community sector?

Johnson shared his concerns that as our population ages, as the number of people who own their homes decreases, and as the gap between the haves and have nots increases, the need for social housing will increase significantly. Mr Johnson identified that since National became the government, Housing New Zealand has 2500 less state homes. The decision by Hamilton City Council to sell off pensioner housing has caused some angst for those who have relied on this support and for those who anticipated a need for the availability of this support in the future.

Secure and quality housing is a key component to building healthy communities. Cities need quality affordable rental stocks and realistic pathways to home ownership. With the minimum wage being set well below a living wage, a growing number of life-time renters and an aging population, social housing is essential. Johnson says "social housing has a small and diminishing importance in New Zealand's housing landscape – a landscape which is dominated by middle-class homeownership and small-scale private landlordism. The problem with this slowly evolving housing landscape is that there is not really any place in it for the poor".

So how do we reimagine social housing? Mr Johnson suggests we need to get back to a sense of pride for collective ownership of community resources. Many of us share a sense of pride in our local hospital, schools and parks and we need to extend that pride to the social housing resources in our community. To do so, those resources need to be cared for and maintained and we need to understand their value to the people who use them. This is about investing in social housing and state housing with a view to supporting communities to continue to thrive regardless of the complications life inevitably throws our way.

