



An Analysis of the Political Discourse around (Un)Healthy Housing in New Zealand 2022- 2033

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Findings from this research have informed the content of a 'Short Guide on how to talk about Healthy Homes'. Please contact Amanda Scothern on Amanda.Scothern@sustaintrust.org.nz for more information on the Short Guide, the Healthy Homes Communication Action Research Programme, or the research discussed in this report.

1.0. Introduction to Research

The Healthy Homes narrative discourse analysis is part of an ongoing programme of work of the Wellington Regional Healthy Housing Group (WRHHG), aiming to develop and test new ways of talking about healthy homes to help people think more productively about the issue.

The purpose of this research was to build understanding about how healthy homes are framed in political discourse in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The findings from this research will be used together with insights gathered via other research being undertaken by WRHHG into unhelpful and helpful narratives to inform development of messaging and communication around healthy homes.

This research was carried out with financial and technical support from Building Research Association of New Zealand (BRANZ), and advisory input from The Workshop.

1.1. Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this research is to understand what narratives about housing are in play in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as demonstrated in speeches by politicians during Parliament sessions from August 2022 to August 2023. The research is particularly focused on narratives about healthy housing as a public good. We developed three more specific questions that encapsulate the main foci of the research. These are:

1. How are problems associated with housing defined? Eg., as health problems? Social/public good problems? Individual problems?
2. What causes are healthy housing/housing inequity/lack of access to healthy housing deemed to be attributable to?
3. What kinds of remedies or interventions are discussed as being made available for (un)healthy housing?

1.2. Structure of the Report

This report outlines the approach used for the analysis of Hansard reports (transcripts of speeches and debates delivered in New Zealand Parliament), describes how the data was collected, and presents the results. Broader themes identified through Critical Discourse Analysis are explained and discussed in relation to the research questions.

2.0. Methodology

This section clarifies the primary methods used for analysis of the transcripts of Hansard debates – Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It also describes the selection criteria around the data.

The research was carried out in August 2023, using Hansard transcripts of debates and speeches delivered in New Zealand Parliament in the 12 months from the start of August 2022

to August 2023. While there have been many claims about what constitutes 'healthy housing' in New Zealand, this debate has intensified in recent years with the passing of the Healthy Homes Standards in 2021, and subsequent discussion of government and landlord responsibilities under the Standards, as well as breaches of the Standards.

As housing is a broad term, the following search criteria were used when looking for references to healthy housing, in order of preference:

1. **Health(y) housing/homes** was searched to look for spoken text on how housing is referenced as a contributor to or as a determinant of health. Alternative search terms include:
 - a. **Wellbeing and housing/homes**
 - b. **Sick(ness) and housing/homes**
 - c. **Warm, dry housing/homes**
 - d. **Insulation**
2. **Housing and asset** was then used to ascertain if housing is more commonly framed as a social or public good or an individual asset. Alternative search terms for this area included:
 - a. **Asset and housing/homes**
 - b. **Affordable housing/homes**
 - c. **Public good and housing/homes**
 - d. **Real estate and housing/homes**

Search terms were used in the order of the ranked list above. A Grounded Theory approach was used to determine when to halt a search: if a search term returned a suitable amount of text, the textual analysis stopped when no new themes or material were found in relation to that search term.

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to analyse how *healthy housing* is framed in political discourse, using Hansard speeches as data. CDA is a form of text-based analysis that seeks to uncover how "social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts."¹ In this way, it treats discourse as a "form of social practice" in which language use is crucial.² In approaching language in this way, CDA treats language as something that is not simply a communicative medium for talking about a pre-existing reality, but rather as a means through which reality is produced or constructed.

¹ T Teun A. van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 352.

² Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *Discourse as Social Interaction*, ed. Teun A. van Dijk (London: SAGE, 1997), 258.

As this research seeks to uncover how ‘healthy housing’ is framed and produced in New Zealand’s political discourse, CDA is a highly appropriate tool to understand how housing as a phenomenon has been problematised in politics and operationalised in policy. CDA’s concern with power and language, such as in policy formation and the deliberation process, is also an effective means to uncover the interests of stakeholders and the assumptions that underlie the current political construction of healthy housing.

This project will use Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model to analyse New Zealand’s political discourse about healthy housing.³

Fairclough’s model distinguishes between different types of discourse:

1. Linguistic features of the text, such as predicates, word choices, and phrases;
2. The discursive process, or, how the speaker positions the discourse in relation to other ideas (including, in this case, the search terms listed above); and
3. The wider social context within which the text sits – in other words, what are the wider forces shaping it?
 - a. Given the parameters of this study, the wider social context can only be considered within time and length constraints of the project. This project may use the other research done in the wider project (eg. the public survey) as the social context.

Coding was carried out on NVivo to identify the claims and patterns that politicians use in reference to the search terms and the types of discourse practices above.

2.2. The Data

Empirical analysis was carried out on Hansard speeches.⁴ The speeches of all government representatives and members of Parliament (MPs), including cabinet ministers, relevant government ministers, and the Opposition were analysed as these actors all influence and shape political discourse. The aim of this study was also to understand political discourse around this topic generally. Hansard is a suitable ground to understand key political narratives shaping framings of healthy housing in New Zealand as it is an enclosed text that captures the understanding of healthy housing expressed by political elites in the New Zealand Government. As explained by Pierre Bourdieu, government officials and ministers constitute political elites who wield world making power as they have privileged access to public discourse.⁵ These elites have great influence over the production of discourse, and control how these discourses are disseminated, created, and received. Therefore, the way these elites interpret and describe healthy housing is particularly worth analysing.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hansard – or *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)* – is the official report of debate in New Zealand’s House of Representatives. It is produced by editors who go into the debating chamber and report on what members of Parliament say. The report is then published and made available online and as a physical copy. Some of the transcripts analysed as part of this project were still in draft format at the time of conducting analysis and may have been corrected since.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

3.0. Results

In this section, we share the main themes derived from the Hansard transcripts. In discussing these, the research questions laid out in section 1.1 are addressed.

This section is introduced with a quick summary of key findings, followed by a discussion of the data and analysis in more detail. The themes discussed here are by no means an exhaustive list of all that were identified in the data; however, they are the key messages identified that relate to this issue of healthy housing and the questions guiding this research.

Housing (un)affordability and quality are pressing issues in New Zealand and have become increasingly important in recent years due to rising housing prices and a shortage of affordable housing. As such, housing is frequently mentioned during the twelve-month period examined in this research, during oral questions, speeches, and in legislative contexts, direct and indirect. The key legislative contexts in which healthy housing was discussed during the research period were:

- Residential Property Managers Bill
- Spatial Planning Bill and Natural and Built Environment Bill
- Residential Tenancies (Healthy Home Standards) Amendment Bill
- Housing Infrastructure (GST-Sharing) Bill
- Taxation (Annual Rates for 2022-23) Platform Economy, and Remedial Matters Bill

Summary of Key Findings

In the way in which housing is talked about in this dataset, there is a dominant discourse that key policy focus should be around solving issues of supply and affordability. This framing is raised even if housing is being discussed in the context of housing quality or (un)healthy housing. Healthy housing and affordable housing are often put at odds with each other, with supply being presented as the more pressing issue for both the New Zealand economy and population.

There is also little contestation of the idea that housing impacts health, but there is disagreement over how to address this issue and the extent of the effects. Houses that are mouldy, cold, or have poor ventilation are routinely identified as being a cause of poor health. *Unhealthy housing* tends to be the focus of such discussion; the definition or concept of healthy housing itself is rarely raised. In other words, there is no proactive or positive description of healthy housing in the discourse (outside of *warm and dry*). There is little-to-no discussion about broader systemic housing issues that cause housing to become unhealthy.

As unhealthy housing is given a narrow definition – individual houses being cold, damp and draughty – a similarly narrow solution is proposed to fix unhealthy housing: technical solutions for individual houses, i.e., heat pumps and insulation. As such, a discourse is perpetuated in which housing risk is presented as an issue to be managed at the individual household level rather than as an issue with predominantly structural roots. The effect of unhealthy housing on inhabitants is also depicted as being borne by the most vulnerable New

Zealanders, namely renters. The intention here is not to contest or disagree with this point, but rather to highlight how unhealthy housing is constructed as something that affects ‘some unlucky individual households’, rather than being a broader issue with the housing system.

The process of making homes ‘healthy’ is framed primarily in economic language (“cost” and “efficiency”) rather than as a social or public good. In the case of private rental housing, landlords are positioned as the ones who carry this cost and enable the retrofitting of houses; in the narrative, the requirement to do so is often positioned as impeding the ability of landlords to supply (affordable) rental housing. Despite healthy housing legislation being enacted to improve the lives and health of tenants, a tension is apparent in the discourse between the idea that people deserve to live in healthy homes and the idea that rental housing should be profitable. The prominence of this way of thinking is exemplified by the repeated reference to landlords as the providers of housing and the importance of making landlordism profitable in order to allow this private rental housing provision to continue. As such, enabling landlords is sometimes privileged over the health and welfare of tenants, whose existence as renters is depicted as being dependent on landlords first providing housing.

These findings are discussed in the Discussion section (section 4.0) of this report. This analysis finds that New Zealand’s political discourse frames housing as providing exchange-value rather than use-value. Issues of housing are also repeatedly conceptualised at the individuated household level. These findings suggest that New Zealand’s housing narrative is embedded in neoliberal ideas of privatisation and marketisation.

3.1 Housing as a problem of supply and affordability

In the way in which housing is talked about in parliamentary debates and speeches, there is a dominant discourse that key policy should be focused on solving issues of supply and affordability. Whenever the issue of housing is raised, MPs repeatedly point to what is understood as the underlying cause of New Zealand’s failed housing context: a lack of housing supply and a shortage of affordable homes. In the narrative, these issues are often explained as being caused by poor infrastructural planning and a decades-long housing crisis.

For example, ACT party MP Brooke van Velden identifies inadequate infrastructural planning as leading to supply-side housing problems in New Zealand. She then links this supply-side issue to a lack of healthy housing stock:

But the real problem with the housing crisis is that we just don't have the right rules underpinning us so that we can get more residential accommodation in general. We want to see more development in infrastructure and infrastructure financing and funding so we can actually get to the heart of the problem of why we don't have enough homes for people to live in and why we don't have more accommodation that is warmer, drier, and safer for people to live in.⁶

⁶ Brooke van Velden (22 November 2022) 764 NZPD 14006

As demonstrated in this quote from Labour Party MP and Minister of Housing Megan Woods, providing healthy housing is presented as coming second to solving the problem of housing supply:

We will continue our record investment and delivery in public housing as a priority, in addition to our wide range of other actions to boost housing supply, because we know how crucial adequate housing is for the health, security, and stability of individuals and whānau.⁷

As these quotes indicate, New Zealand's housing narrative presents supply as being at the centre of housing-related issues. This is further demonstrated by MPs such as Labour Party MP Tāmāti Coffey describing the Government's answer to the housing crisis as being simply increasing housing supply:

We're definitely trying to build that supply, build ourselves out of this crisis one house at a time.⁸

The importance placed on increasing supply in the narrative means that policies which take houses off the market, including the Healthy Homes Standards (HHS), are often portrayed as contradicting broader housing policy goals. HHS are the specific and minimum standards for heating, insulation, ventilation, moisture and drainage, and draught stopping in rental properties: the "five aspects of a property which all contribute to a warm dry home."⁹ As demonstrated by ACT Party leader and MP, David Seymour, the HHS are presented as preventing the provision of private rental accommodation:

Would she rather have a person kicked out of a house and be homeless than live in a house that does not meet the healthy homes standard?¹⁰

Housing affordability and supply is therefore presented in the narrative as the most pressing housing policy issue in New Zealand. It is also repeatedly framed as being more pressing than issues of (un)healthy housing. While healthy housing policy is routinely linked to issues of housing affordability and supply, resolving housing affordability and supply is not regularly linked to issues of (un)healthy housing.

⁷ Megan Woods (2 August 2022) 761 NZPD 11094

⁸ Tāmāti Coffey (4 May 2023) 767 NZPD 16242

⁹ MBIE (November 2022) <https://www.tenancy.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/files/healthy-homes-standards-key-facts.pdf>

¹⁰ David Seymour (22 November 2022) 764 NZPD 14017

In terms of resolving issues of housing unaffordability and supply shortages, housing is primarily discussed as an asset, rather than as a social good or as providing homes. As such, proposed solutions are often market-based. As said by National MP Sam Uffindell:

We need to address our housing supply shortages; free developers and community providers from overly burdensome regulatory constraints; and get Government out of the way and let the experts build houses.¹¹

Property investors and developers are therefore positioned as central to resolving New Zealand housing crisis. Another example of this is seen in proposals to establish build-to-rent (BTR) schemes to relieve shortages and improve housing quality in the private rental sector. BTR are market-driven housing developments which are owned and managed by investors. Set up to produce commercially viable returns, BTRs are promoted by MPs as an effective model to attract new sources of capital to the rental housing sector. While the BTR model does not in-and-of-itself improve the quality and affordability of rental housing, MPs argue that it can support these outcomes with the right policy and market settings. BTR is explained by Labour MP Deborah Russell as being an effective way of providing affordable housing:

[...] if an investor sells their property within the 10-year brightline and makes a profit on it, well, that's fantastic. You know, that's a good thing. Making a profit is always a good thing. Now, they will pay tax on that profit that they make, but they can, at that stage, claim the interest deductions as well. All right? So quite clearly, because they're paying the tax on capital gain, they can claim the interest deductions that's sitting in the law as it is [...] And the reason that we have the carve-out in this Act for build-to-rents is because, actually, we straightforwardly need more housing. We need more housing that is provided at a level that people can afford to rent it. And that is what the build-to-rent market does; it provides another mode of finding accommodation in New Zealand, not our highly, highly distributed private rental market—not necessarily buying a house, but sitting in that space of a build-to-rent.¹²

The carve-out that Russell refers to is the proposition to exclude BTR assets in perpetuity from the interest limitation rules which were laid out in the Taxation (Annual Rates for 2022-23, Platform Economy, and Remedial Matters) Bill. Russell argues that this will help encourage more private developers to provide housing through the BTR scheme. Megan Woods explains further:

¹¹ Sam Uffindell (2 August 2022) 761 NZPD 11140

¹² Deborah Russell (28 March 2023) 776 NZPD 15499

The Government is encouraging more long-term rental options by giving Build to Rent developers an exemption on the interest deductibility limitations. We are exempting Build to Rent developments from interest limitation in perpetuity. This will attract new sources of [sic] forms of stable, long-term investments such as iwi or superannuation funds [...] We recognise that Build to Rent can help to continue the current momentum of new supply and improve the quality of rental housing with new, warm, dry, secure homes.¹³

As evidenced in these quotes, the narrative around housing and housing provision tends to adopt a developer or investor perspective on providing housing and encourage market-based solutions. There were only a few speakers who talked about New Zealand's failed housing context from a renter or tenant perspective. An example of this can be seen in the following quote from Megan Woods:

I don't think it is too much to say that renters have the right to live in a warm, dry home. I don't think it is a war on landlords to say that we want landlords to be part of solving a housing crisis but we want them to add to supply—i.e., solve a housing crisis.¹⁴

We see another example in the following statement from Green MP Julie Anne Genter:

Well, let's start with a rent freeze, a warrant of fitness on rental properties, and a huge public housing bill, because every single person in Aotearoa can and should have a secure, warm, dry, healthy home, so let's make that happen. Rents are driving inflation, and the National Party solution to this is to allow landlords to keep creaming it. That doesn't make any sense to me. We can have reasonable rents, and we need to regulate for that while we increase the housing supply from the public sector.¹⁵

Similarly, while the concept of housing as a human right was raised by some MPs, it is not substantially explored as a means of providing housing or resolving existing housing policy issues. It is, however, used to reframe renter rights around housing. As said by Chloe Swarbrick:

¹³ Megan Woods (23 August 2022) 762 NZPD 11638

¹⁴ Megan Woods (15 March 2023) 766 NZPD 15345

¹⁵ Julie Anne Genter (15 March 2023) 766 NZPD 15380-81

Housing, or rather, human rights—and housing, it turns out—is for everyone. You don't get human rights only if you are good, if you wear a nice suit to an open home, or if you don't complain about the mouldy bathroom for fear of being kicked out of your rental. You have human rights because you are human. That is kind of the point. Rights are not meant to shift and change with whoever is in power changing the definition of who is worthy and who is not. We all have these rights, regardless of whether we rent or own our home.¹⁶

This quote shows Swarbrick arguing that all New Zealanders, including renters, have rights, and that these rights are not contingent on their status as owner-occupiers. While renter perspectives and entitlements are acknowledged by some MPs, discussion around these issues still mostly frames housing as a financial asset, belonging to landlords, rather than a home that human renters occupy, and that therefore contributes to, or impinges on their human rights. This will be discussed in further detail in Section 3.3.

3.2 Housing as a health issue

In parliamentary discourse, there is little-to-no contestation of the idea that poor quality housing impacts health. Poor quality or unhealthy houses are described as being mouldy, damp, cold or having poor ventilation. Healthy houses instead are described as being warm and dry. Homes which are described as healthy in the discourse are linked to positive health outcomes for inhabitants and are described as leading to a reduced burden on healthcare services. For example, as said by Megan Woods when discussing Warmer Kiwi Homes, a government programme which retrofitted 100,000 eligible low-income homes with heaters and insulation:

An independent review by Motu also found that Warmer Kiwi Homes were delivering better outcomes, with homes being, on average, 2 degrees Celsius warmer, 89 percent of homeowners reported less condensation on windows, and around half of homeowners noticed a reduction in dampness. Warmer Kiwi Homes improves health outcomes for New Zealanders, contributing to fewer doctors visits and hospitalisations being required, with research finding that this equates to over \$15 million per year saved in avoided health costs.¹⁷

Cold and damp homes are identified by MPs as causing health issues for inhabitants, such as “sore throats and rheumatic fever, skin conditions, and respiratory issues.”¹⁸ While healthy

¹⁶ Chloe Swarbrick (22 November 2022) 764 NZPD 14038-39

¹⁷ Megan Woods (6 June 2023) 768 NZPD 17054

¹⁸ Anae Neru Leavasa (22 November 2022) 764 NZPD 14045

homes – or houses that are warm and dry – are described as reducing these health outcomes, a healthy home in-and-of-itself is not defined, other than being described as “warm and dry”.¹⁹

Warm and dry is used in the formation of the Healthy Homes Standards (HHS) introduced in 2019. The rationale behind the HHS also states:

The research shows a link between cold, damp and mouldy homes and negative health outcomes, particularly for illnesses such as asthma and cardiovascular conditions. By improving the quality of rental homes, New Zealanders who rent will experience improved health, as well as lower medical costs and lower levels of hospitalisations. Warmer and drier homes are also less likely to have issues with mould or mildew damage, which better protects a landlord’s investment.²⁰

This phrase ‘warm and dry’ is also used repeatedly in other government texts to refer to healthy housing.²¹ As such, when housing is described as ‘warm and dry’ in parliamentary discourse, we can see it being used in two ways: as a reference to legislated conditions; and as a reference to housing that is not cold, damp or mouldy, and as such meets the minimum standards of heating, insulation, ventilation, moisture and drainage, and draught stopping. ‘Healthy’ in the context of housing is not proactively defined, outside of being warm and dry, nor are the broader social and community impacts of healthy housing explored.

The impacts of inadequate housing on mental health are also referred to, here by Chloe Swarbrick:

In fewer than 40 years, political decisions have made not only housing one of the major drivers of inequality in this country, but one of the major determiners of physical and mental health, not to mention educational achievement and school attendance. Who pays the

¹⁹ For example: Grant Robertson (18 May 2023) 768 NZPD 16665

²⁰ MBIE (November 2022) <https://www.tenancy.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/files/healthy-homes-standards-key-facts.pdf>

²¹ ‘Warm and dry’ is a phrase repeatedly to refer to and describe healthy housing. For example, it is used by the Ministry of Health as part of their advice on healthier living: “keeping your family healthy this winter means keeping your home warm and dry.” (<https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/warmer-drier-homes>). It is also used in the 2023 Budget Policy Statement, Child wellbeing – reducing child poverty and improving child wellbeing, to say that access to warm and dry housing provides children with a good start in life, and this has been shown to contribute to lasting wellbeing outcomes in areas like health, housing, and education. According to the report, “investing in a good start in life for our children is one of the most important ways we can ensure the wellbeing of New Zealanders for the long term. It will strengthen our social cohesion and human capability, leading to better economic and financial capital outcomes.”

cost? Well, disproportionately, it's 1.4 million renters in this country.²²

Mental health impacts are not, however, linked in any detail to specific poor housing conditions. Housing-related mental health issues are also explicitly linked to those living in rental accommodation rather than owner-occupied housing. Specific language is also used to link housing related health issues to Māori and “low-income” families.²³ As such, inadequate housing is routinely linked to poverty and the inability to pay for heating, rather than broader housing system problems.

In the twelve months of Hansard scripts analysed for this research, there were only very few references to broader systemic issues which lead to poor quality housing. As such, the housing system is presented as broadly functional, except in the case of particularly vulnerable households and renters.

3.3 Resolving unhealthy housing

As unhealthy housing is explained as being ‘cold’ and ‘damp’, the solution to unhealthy housing is described as retrofitting houses with insulation and heat pumps.²⁴ As Megan Woods explains about the Warmer Kiwi Homes Programme:

Since its launch in 2018, the Warmer Kiwi Homes programme has played a key role in our Government’s action to lower power bills and make homes healthier for New Zealanders and their families. Low-income families, young children, and older Kiwis are especially vulnerable to the impacts of living in cold, damp homes. Since coming into Government, we have now completed more than 110,000 installations of insulation and efficient heat sources [...] Warmer Kiwi Homes is directly assisting households to manage cost of living pressures by offering grants [...] This makes it far more affordable and accessible for homeowners to make their homes warm, dry and healthy, and reduce their spend on power bills.²⁵

As such, in response to cold and damp housing stock, technical solutions (insulation, heat pumps and thermal curtains) are promoted to resolve the issue of unhealthy housing rather than system change. There is almost no discussion of structural issues causing or enabling unhealthy housing. New private builds and the building system are not discussed in relation to resolving unhealthy housing. Instead, the problem is focused on the individuated household

²² Chloe Swarbrick (28 June 2023) 769 NZPD (draft)

²³ For example: Rawiri Waititi (22 November 2022) 764 NZPD 14044-45; Megan Woods (10 May 2023) 767 NZPD 16354

²⁴ Megan Woods (6 June 2023) 768 NZPD 17054-55

²⁵ Megan Woods (10 May 2023) 767 NZPD 16354

and the solution is presented as helping individual households and owners manage housing risks. As such, the narrative discursively frames (un)healthy housing as an issue for individuals (tenants, landlords, and owner-occupiers) to manage rather than as an issue with predominantly structural roots. For example, as said by Labour MP and Finance Minister Grant Robertson:

We can also do this through household energy bills. A warm, dry home is key to improved health and wellbeing outcomes for New Zealanders. Homes that lack adequate insulation and efficient heating lead to higher energy bills and poor health outcomes.²⁶

As such, the policy solution for (un)healthy housing in New Zealand is framed as helping individuals to make their individual houses warmer and drier. In the case of rental accommodation, private landlords are positioned as being the provider of (un)healthy homes, and as carrying the cost of making them healthy. This is exemplified in the following statement from Brooke van Velden:

I'd like to thank the landlords who have done a really good job of not only meeting the costs that have been associated with this law but by doing everything that they can to provide another home for somebody in their own community. Over the last few years, as housing spokesperson, I have heard from many people—through emails, from going to public meetings, from having one-on-one discussions with landlords and people from the Property Investors Association—that people have been really struggling and doing it tough, especially those landlords who have intentionally held their rents low because they have somebody living in their home that they genuinely care about and want to provide a safe, stable environment for. But with all the changes and all the taxes and regulations that this Government puts on them, they have become stretched to capacity and, in some cases, have needed to end tenancies for some vulnerable members of our communities.²⁷

The law referred to here is the Residential Tenancies (Health Homes Standards) Regulation 2019, which brought the HHS into law. Van Velden's statement reflects a common trend in the narrative where private landlords are framed as providing a social good – housing for New Zealanders, or rental accommodation. The costs of making rental accommodation warm and dry is explained as having to be borne by either the landlord or the tenant. Van Velden later goes on to say that in order for the government to provide more warm, dry and affordable rental housing, the government needs to allow “New Zealanders to get on and provide

²⁶ Grant Robertson (18 May 2023) 768 NZPD 16662

²⁷ Brooke van Velden (22 November 2022) 764 NZPD 14042-43

accommodation.”²⁸ Further, she described the HHS as imposing “huge costs on private landlords who have been trying to put their homes up to a healthy homes standard, some of them forking out tens of thousands of dollars, and that cost is needed to go on to the tenants.” By framing landlords and rental accommodation in this way, we see healthy rental accommodation being assessed in market terms and we see landlords, the providers of housing, being presented as victims of the Government’s healthy housing legislation.

Further, HHS standards, among other policies, are sometimes described as “a war on landlords” as it is in the following oral question asked by National MP Chris Bishop to Minister of Housing Megan Woods:

Does she accept her war on landlords is causing collateral damage for tenants by forcing rents upwards?²⁹

It is important to note here that there is a concurrent narrative that stresses the importance of private rental accommodation being regulated and being brought up to HHS. For example, as said by Julie Anne Genter:

I know we have healthy homes legislation – it doesn’t go far enough. When someone can rent out a house with no curtains in the bedroom, no heating in the bedroom, no insulation, and the temperature can fall to 6 degrees overnight, we have a problem and a health crisis. It makes sense for Government to intervene. We’ve heard that there are some landlords that are renting places with leaky roofs – that needs to stop.³⁰

While it is clear that some MPs do not think that some private landlords and the HHS provide sufficiently high-quality private rental housing, the narrative still discursively presents non-compliant or poor-quality homes as being offered by “some” landlords – the bad apples of an otherwise compliant and well-intended group.³¹ For example, National MP Simon O’Connor says that his observation is that “most private landlords are moving relatively swiftly to implement what is required”, in regards to the HHS.³² Landlords are framed as providing a public service to New Zealand’s most vulnerable; as said by National MP Paul Goldsmith, “the war on landlords has seen people retreat from renting out their houses – it’s not compulsory to rent out your houses.”³³

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Chris Bishop (15 March 2023) 766 NZPD 15345

³⁰ Julie Anne Genter (26 October 2022) 763 NZPD 13111

³¹ Ibid.

³² Simon O’Connor (22 November 2022) 764 NZPD 14016

³³ Paul Goldsmith (7 March 2023) 766 NZPD 15039-40

These concurrent framings of landlord responsibilities reveal a tension around rental housing in the narrative: that private rental housing needs to be profitable, and that healthy housing should be a right for private rental tenants. These two ideas are not reconciled in the narrative. Often, the importance of rental accommodation being profitable is privileged in the narrative, as landlord responsibilities are often defined by what is financially prudent in the market rather than as providing a healthy home. This can also be seen in the case of public housing – while HHS should be implemented, it should only be done so in a way that is financially advantageous for the taxpayer.³⁴

Primary terms used in the framing of HHS standards in rental property include *rent*, *mortgages*, *investments*, *efficiency*, and *cost*, showing the focus on the financial impact of HHS legislation on landlords and the housing market more generally. This focus highlights the financial and economic factors of HHS changes, rather than the social impact of health housing on families, neighbourhoods and cities (although, as mentioned in Section 3.2, hospital bills and individual illnesses are considered).

Discussion

The results sections of this report have detailed the dominant framings of (un)healthy housing in political discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand. This discussion section will now interpret and analyse some of these findings.

The policy issue of (un)healthy housing is consistently positioned as secondary to the issue of housing affordability and supply. While there is little-to-no contestation that healthy housing is an important policy goal, it is often framed as secondary to, or contingent on first solving issues of supply and affordability. In discussing housing as primarily an issue of supply and affordability, housing is not being valued for its use-value but rather as a financial asset with a focus on exchange-value.

As such, housing is discursively framed in the narrative in two separate ways: as providing use-value, and as a commodity with exchange-value. However, as these two framings contradict each other, they are artificially separated in the narrative. Housing is discussed as either something that should provide a healthy and a secure home, or, as a commodity to be sold and bought. The two framings are not reconciled.

A similar contradiction can also be identified in regards to landlord-provided rental accommodation. While landlords are framed as providing a social good, rental accommodation is also framed as a financial asset for landlords. The concept that rental accommodation should be financially lucrative for landlords is treated as a given in the narrative; this also is not reconciled with the framing of housing as providing a social good for renters.

As the narrative treats issues of housing affordability and supply as being the more pressing housing policy issue – it appears that despite healthy housing being identified as a policy goal, housing continues to be more valued for its exchange-value rather than its use-value. The contradiction between housing as use-value and housing as exchange-value means that issues of housing supply and quality are rarely considered together in the context of New Zealand's

³⁴ Brooke van Velden (30 August 2022) 762 NZPD 11880-81

housing system. As such, broader systemic issues of New Zealand housing context are not discussed in relation to (un)healthy housing in New Zealand.

Unhealthy housing is instead discussed at the household level and unhealthy housing is defined as problems with individual houses. Healthy – and unhealthy – are ambiguous terms and the narrative does little to explore what healthy housing looks like in the New Zealand context. Unhealthy housing is narrowly defined as being cold, damp and draughty; healthy housing is defined reactively as being warm and dry. Issues of climate comfort (for example, keeping housing cool when it's hot) are rarely, if at all, considered in discursive framings of healthy housing. Aside from some examples, social determinants are not truly dealt with. More proactive or aspirational definitions of healthy housing are not raised, nor are broader, collective and societal-level impacts of healthy housing (outside of saved hospital costs).

An interesting feature of the narrative is that poor-quality housing is constructed as affecting the most vulnerable households. The point here is not to disagree with this point, but rather to highlight the tendency in the narrative to frame unhealthy housing as only affecting some households – low-income and rental households – rather than being a systemic housing issue. For example, unhealthy housing is linked to households which also struggle to heat their homes, rather than simply being described as the result of a legacy of poor housing stock. This framing reinforces the prospect constructed elsewhere in the discourse that unhealthy housing risk is an issue for individual households to manage – and for the government to help individuals to manage – rather than an issue with predominantly structural roots requiring structural change. The focus on individual houses also works to portray unhealthy housing as one problem in an otherwise functioning housing system.

The representation of unhealthy housing as being resolvable with few technical solutions could be criticised as masking the complexity of situations and solutions required in dealing with unhealthy housing risks. Absent from this discourse is widespread acceptance that structural barriers prevent the provision of healthy housing and that broader economic and social forces influence individual housing outcomes.

Another important point to note here concerns the speakers themselves. While discussion around issues of supply and affordability were shared across the house, most of the discussion around what constitutes a healthy house and how to resolve unhealthy housing came from Green Party and Labour Party MPs. Therefore, spoken text from Labour and Green MPs are overrepresented in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 of this report. Discussion of structural issues around affordability and ownership and healthy housing was almost exclusively by Green Party MPs.

This analysis has found that housing is primarily framed as providing exchange-value (more so than use-value) and issues of unhealthy housing are conceptualised at the individual household level. This suggests that New Zealand's housing narrative, while addressing issues of (un)healthy housing in New Zealand, is still embedded in ideas of privatisation and marketisation. Ideas of market primacy in the housing system therefore continue to be upheld, despite contradicting with assertions of housing as a social good.

4.0 Conclusion

This report gives insight into the language and narratives used by Ministers of Parliament and government officials in relation to homes, housing and health in Aotearoa New Zealand. While housing is discussed often and in a range of contexts in parliament, there are some dominant framings of the issue of (un)healthy housing as laid out in this report. These framings shape the wider narrative of (un)healthy housing and the housing system more generally. This research provides some insight into the role of ideology, values, and the underlying assumptions in the construction and reconstruction of (un)healthy housing discourse. In doing so, it also adds to existing research which highlights the importance of interpretative and constructionist scholarship when addressing New Zealand's failed housing context.

This report has found that there is a dominant discourse that the government's key policy focus should instead be on solving issues of housing supply and affordability. The ability to resolve issues of (un)healthy housing is presented as being either secondary to or reliant on first fixing issues of supply and affordability.

The narrow definition of unhealthy housing (and the lack or lacking definition of healthy housing) means that solutions proposed for unhealthy housing are also narrow in design. Specifically, they are focused on technical remedies to resolve issues of cold and dampness. There is little-to-no proactive discussion of what healthy housing *could* look like. The focus on technical solutions also keeps the narrative focused on individual (draughty, cold and damp) houses as causing health problems, rather than on the housing system more broadly.

The focus on low-income rental housing as bearing the worst health effects of poor housing reinforces the idea that only particular households are suffering and need to be 'fixed' in an otherwise functioning housing system.

The process of making homes healthy is framed primarily in economic language rather than as a social or public good. As such, a clear tension is made apparent in the narrative, namely between the idea that tenants deserve to live in a healthy home and the idea that rental housing should be profitable for landlords.

In analysing these results, this report finds that Parliamentary discourse privileges housing as providing exchange-value, rather than use-value, and that housing is thought of as individuated units rather than a connected housing system. Causes and solutions are discussed at the individual household level rather than including the housing or building system more broadly. By ignoring structural forces, dominant discourses around healthy housing in New Zealand tend to uphold a narrow neoliberal representation of housing risk. To reframe this discourse towards supporting healthy housing outcomes for New Zealand, housing should be framed as providing use-value, and housing should be described as a system, rather than as individuated units, which if improved could have far-reaching benefits for the entire community.

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