

## HOUSING

### Introduction

The following is a position statement on housing prepared by the Public Health Unit for Waikato District Health Board (Waikato DHB).

The position statement is intended to provide a high-level policy position for our organisation and guide local response across our DHB catchment and broader as required.

### The Waikato District Health Board's Position

The Waikato DHB

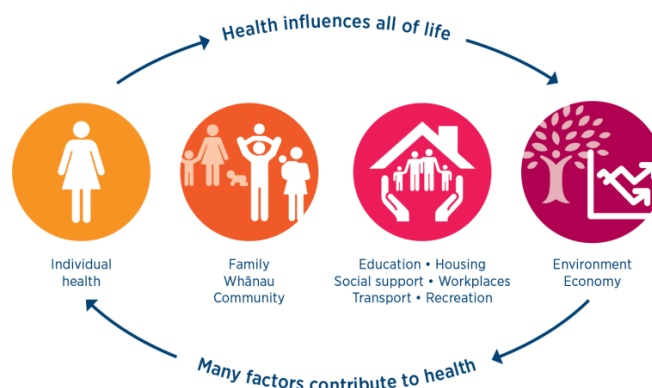
1. Advocates and supports the position that the quality, affordability, safety, and suitability of housing and security of housing tenure are all key determinants of health and wellbeing outcomes, and important mediating factors in reducing health inequities [3] [4] [5].
2. Recognises the responsibility Government has in improving housing availability, affordability, and suitability, especially for Māori as outlined in te Tiriti o Waitangi provisions [6].
3. Recognises that greater investment and more comprehensive housing policy is needed to improve housing quality, affordability, safety and suitability particularly targeting those at highest public health risk [7].
4. Advocates for and supports the position that Māori, Pacific peoples, older people, children, those with pre-existing medical conditions and people with disabilities are at higher risk of negative health impacts associated with poor quality housing or housing insecurity [8].
5. Advocates for and supports evidence-based initiatives and existing programmes that improve housing quality standards, as well as access to suitable and affordable housing, particularly where they target those at highest public health risk, and help address issues associated with housing [9].
6. Advocates for and supports planning for housing that allows residents/future residents to walk, cycle, or travel by public transport to work, services, and amenities [10].
7. Advocates for and supports the provision of affordable, quality and secure social housing for populations at higher health risk such as Māori, Pacific peoples, the homeless, elderly, low income families, and people with disabilities [11].
8. Advocates for and supports education for home owners and tenants about health risks associated with housing including the benefits of maintaining a healthy home and effective management of housing-related costs [12].

Date Issued: June 2018	Review Date: January 2021	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 13 January 2019		Page 1 of 6

9. Advocates for and supports the position that housing quality, affordability, safety, and suitability initiatives can be cost-effective measures to improve population health and reduce avoidable hospital admissions [13].
10. Advocates for and supports recognition by local and central government of the importance of housing to community health and wellbeing.
11. Supports the continuation of the making of submissions to all levels of government and organisations as appropriate to ensure investment in housing is equitable and inclusive.

### Health links and the wider environment

Wellbeing is a dynamic process across the life-course. This is reflected in the Ministry of Health’s (2016) representation of health in the wider context (figure 1) which illustrates the various factors that contribute to health and the way in which health influences people’s lives.[1]



Source: NZ Health Strategy (2016)

### Radical improvement in Maori Health Outcomes by Eliminating Health Inequities for Māori

Health disparities are significant contributors to the burden of disease. A key strategic priority for the Waikato DHB is to achieve a radical improvement in Maori health outcomes by eliminating health inequities for Māori.[2] Waikato DHB position statements contribute to the DHB’s commitment to reducing health inequities to improve health and wellbeing for Māori.

### Key information

Housing is a key determinant of health and wellbeing [14]. The determinants of health are the social factors and physical conditions in the environment that influence where people are born, where they live, learn, play, work, and age; the opportunities they have and the choices they make. These circumstances are shaped by how money, power, and resources are distributed at the global, national, regional, and local levels and can contribute to health inequities [15].

The social and physical environment in general and housing in particular are significant determinants of health, along with a person’s genetic makeup and personal behaviour [16].

Date Issued: June 2018	Review Date: January 2021	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 13 January 2019		Page 2 of 6

The concept of a healthy home brings together three key aspects: the physical conditions of the house, the suitability and security of the house for its occupants, and the affordability of owning and running the house. Evidence identifies housing as a significant determinant of our health and wellbeing.

Unhealthy homes can impact on health in many ways. Poorly maintained houses increase the risk of injury, and cold, damp, and mouldy homes are associated with illnesses such as asthma, respiratory infections, anxiety, and depression [17]. Additionally, cold indoor temperatures (below 18°C) increase the risk of acute cardiovascular events [18]. When hazardous physical conditions or injury risks are present in a home the health of its inhabitants can be affected in both the short and long term [19]. Household crowding increases the risk of infectious disease transmission [20].

New Zealand-based research has shown that improving housing quality improves self-rated health and self-reported wheezing, and reduced days off school and work, visits to general practitioners, and hospital admissions for respiratory conditions; for children with asthma, it significantly reduced their symptoms, days off school, and healthcare visits [21].

We are aware that many people in the Waikato do not have access to suitable, safe, warm, dry, affordable, and secure housing; all of which are essential for physical and mental health and wellbeing. The high cost of housing is leading to household crowding, increased risk of infectious disease transmission, and increased rates of homelessness. The 2013 Census found that New Zealand has the highest rate of homelessness across OECD countries [22].

In particular, we acknowledge the effects that pressures on housing can have on Māori and other groups at higher risk of poor and inequitable health outcomes. These groups are likely to have higher negative health impacts related to housing e.g. higher rates of rheumatic fever [23]. This could be in part due to Māori being more commonly affected by issues related to housing insecurity and overcrowding.

Whare Ora is one of nine Healthy Homes Initiatives in New Zealand and operates within Waikato DHB district boundary. The programme brings together multiple agencies to create safe healthy warm homes for children and whanau. Key components of the Whare Ora Programme are Advocacy, Healthy Home education, and Intervention supply and coordination (insulation referrals, beds, bedding, curtains, handy man services, on referral services etc). In 2015 only five of the 400 children in the Whare Ora Programme who were admitted to hospital returned the following year<sup>1</sup>.

A crucial part of Government, local government and third parties responses must focus on helping more people from high need population groups such as those highlighted into housing that is suitable, safe, warm, dry, affordable, and secure (including security of tenure). There are opportunities to partner with third party organisations and/or iwi in this [24].

Crowded, cold, damp, and unaffordable housing can affect physical and mental health and wellbeing [25]. However, housing interventions such as the Warm-up New Zealand Heat Smart Programme and Healthy Housing Programmes have shown promising results in improving health and reducing avoidable hospitalisations. An economic evaluation of the Warm-up New Zealand Heat Smart Programme revealed that implemented housing interventions demonstrated a benefit-cost ratio of 3.9 [26]. Furthermore, having secure housing tenure and housing that enables connection with local community promotes and supports mental health and wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided by Waikato DHB Whare Ora Programme Manager (22<sup>nd</sup> June 2018).

Date Issued: June 2018	Review Date: January 2021	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 13 January 2019		Page 3 of 6

## Conclusion

Waikato DHB recognises the importance of working alongside other sectors to optimise housing. We will work alongside and support local government and other organisations in initiatives aimed at improving population health and wellbeing and equity outcomes through housing policy development, planning and implementation.

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Date Issued: June 2018	Review Date: January 2021	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 13 January 2019		Page 4 of 6

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Date Issued: June 2018	Review Date: January 2021	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 13 January 2019		Page 5 of 6

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Date Issued: June 2018	Review Date: January 2021	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 13 January 2019		Page 6 of 6