



TOI TE ORA PUBLIC HEALTH

Bay of Plenty + Lakes Districts



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Healthy Homes Standards
Housing and Urban Branch
Ministry of Housing and Urban Development
PO Box 1473
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Submission to Healthy Homes Standards

Introduction

The Bay of Plenty District Health Board (Bay of Plenty DHB) and the Lakes District Health Board (Lakes DHB) are required by the Public Health and Disability Act 2000 to improve, promote, and protect the health of people and communities, to promote the inclusion and participation in society and independence of people with disabilities and to reduce health disparities by improving health outcomes for Māori and other population groups.

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organization, 1946). Whilst health care services are important health interventions their primary purpose is to manage disease, ill-health and trauma at an individual level. The health and wellbeing of a community is more strongly influenced by a wide range of factors beyond the health sector. These factors are referred to as the 'determinants of health'. Many determinants of health are directly influenced by the decisions and activities of central government.

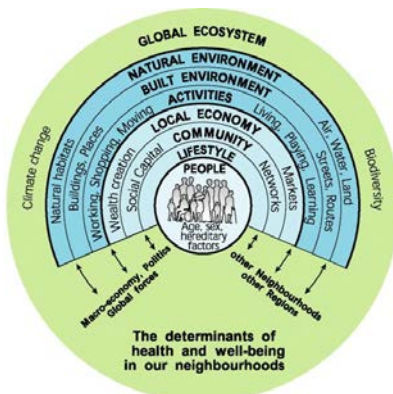


Figure 1: A model of the determinants of health (Barton & Grant, 2006)

For these reasons the Bay of Plenty DHB and Lakes DHB (the DHBs) welcome the opportunity to provide helpful, objective and independent input to inform legislative decisions for the health of people living in rental accommodation.

This submission has been prepared by Toi Te Ora Public Health (Toi Te Ora) which is the Public Health Unit for both Bay of Plenty DHB and Lakes DHB.

Submission

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines housing as a broad concept involving four interrelated elements: the home, the dwelling, the community, and the neighbourhood. Housing is a significant determinant of health and a significant influencing factor in health inequalities and poverty.

Good quality housing and secure tenure is essential for physical and mental wellbeing. The lack of affordable housing options and the poor condition of some housing is having an inequitable effect on the health of many people in Aotearoa.

A house needs to be uncrowded, warm, dry and affordable for its occupants including any associated cost such as heating. Cold, damp, and mouldy homes are associated with illnesses such as asthma and respiratory infections. Cold indoor temperatures also increase the risk of acute cardiovascular events and household crowding increases the risk of infectious disease transmission.

Homelessness and living in unhealthy homes and insecure tenancy arrangements is largely beyond the control of individuals, especially children, and requires action by public authorities at all levels. The proposal to develop healthy home standards to ensure New Zealand rental homes are warm and dry will improve health for many people, including low-income families, children, an increasing elderly population and Maori.

Home living environments should improve, not harm, our health. Consequently, the DHBs support the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development's objective to establish minimum standards to allow New Zealand tenants to live in warm and dry rental homes.

Section 1 – Heating

Section 1.1 – Where in the home should landlords be required to provide heating?

All habitable rooms of a home must be capable of maintaining an agreed minimum indoor temperature, regardless of occupant behaviour.

Option one is dependent on the layout of the home and occupant behaviour. Option two requiring heating devices in every bedroom could be achieved by a ducting system from the heating device located in the living room. It would also account for occupant behaviour, such as closing a bedroom door for privacy.

The DHBs suggest another option be considered requiring a landlord to locate heating devices in a rental home so that the minimum indoor temperature is maintained in all habitable rooms when bedroom and living room doors are closed.

Section 1.3 – What achievable indoor temperature should heating devices be sized for?

The discussion document recognises the current World Health Organization guidance of 18°C for the general public and 20°C for vulnerable groups of the population.

The DHBs support option two because setting the achievable indoor temperature will allow all tenants, regardless of circumstance, to achieve a suitable temperature, particularly with in increasing older population. Requiring 20°C will protect vulnerable populations such as families with young children and low income families, and raise the bar for everyone in the process.

Section 1.4 - Should landlords only be required to provide heating devices where portable electric heaters are insufficient to achieve the required indoor temperature?

The DHBs support option two for landlords to provide fixed and portable heating devices to heat the required room. This is to encourage compliance by providing flexibility for landlords. The desired outcome is to maintain a healthy temperature in all rooms.

Section 1.5 – should we accept some heating devices, and not others?

The DHBs support the heating standard excluding unhealthy, inefficient and unaffordable forms of heating as acceptable heating devices. The DHBs support excluding the list of devices considered unacceptable on page 19 of the discussion document.

The DHBs support the exclusion of unhealthy, inefficient and unaffordable forms of heating because there is evidence that unflued heaters are harmful to health as well as being inefficient¹. Open fires² are also inefficient and pollute the air leading to reduced air quality that impacts on the health of tenants and the wider population. Taking this approach will also have co-benefits and reduce combustion emissions that contribute to climate change.

Everyone, regardless of their income or education, should have the opportunity to heat their home and be warm and dry. Excluding inefficient and expensive to operate forms of heating will give everyone a chance to live a healthy life and improve and protect the health of people who rent their homes.

¹ Tin Tin S, Woodward, A, Saraf R, Berry S, Atatoa Carr, P, Morton SMB, Grant CC. (2016). **Internal living environment and respiratory disease in children: findings from the Growing Up in New Zealand longitudinal child cohort study.** *Environmental Health* 15:120. doi: [10.1186/s12940-016-0207-z](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-016-0207-z)

Unflued gas heaters promote mould growth:

Boulic, M., Phipps, R. A., Cunningham, M., Cleland, D. J., Fjällström, P., Abe, K., & Howden-Chapman, P. (2015). Heater choice, dampness and mould growth in 26 New Zealand homes: A Study of Propensity for Mould Growth using encapsulated fungal spores. *Buildings*, 5(1), 149-162.

² Lai HK, Berry SD, Verbiest MEA, Tricker PJ, Atatoa Carr PE, Morton SMB, Grant CC (2017). **Emergency department visits of young children and long-term exposure to neighbourhood smoke from household heating – The Growing Up in New Zealand child cohort study** *Environmental Pollution* 231 533-540. doi: [10.1016/j.envpol.201708.035](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.201708.035)

Bearing in mind the reasons above, the DHBs recommend that the following electrical and flued gas device features be included to help keep rental homes warm. The device is:

- Capable of being used safely (unattended) 24 hours a day
- Easy to operate
- Fitted with a thermostat that can be set at the minimum room temperature
- Preferably fitted with a timer which enables occupants to heat the home when the home is occupied or about to be occupied; for instance before returning from work and or school.

Section 2 – Insulation

Section 2.1 – What minimum level of insulation should be required in rental homes?

Option three is supported and is the preferred approach to the minimum level of insulation requirements. This is because all houses should be insulated to the extent that is necessary and reasonably practical. The approach to insulate based on the seasonal temperature of the home's location will promote a warm and dry home while reducing the need for heating and increasing housing affordability which in turn supports good health and mental wellbeing.

The DHBs agree that the exceptions set out in the 2016 regulations should continue for houses rented to the general population. However, the DHBs consider the benefits of insulation are especially significant to the health of vulnerable population groups. A warm home reduces the burden of chronic disease and the risk of becoming unwell from infection. Therefore the DHBs encourage and support no exceptions for public housing because:

- Public housing tends to house our vulnerable population including the elderly, families with children and low income families and,
- Government agencies and state owned enterprises have the resources and flexibility to comply with the standards for all their properties.

Section 2.2 – How should the degradation of insulation under 'reasonable condition' be assessed?

The DHBs support option two and the reasonable condition minimum thickness outlined in Table 3. To maintain ceiling insulation effectiveness will mean that homes are more likely to meet the warm and dry minimum standards by ensuring the insulation is performing as expected and fit for purpose.

The discussion document notes that option two will benefit health, including housing affordability. However, landlords are likely to face higher costs. The DHBs consider the benefits to health outweigh the increased costs to landlords. Having effective insulation will result in lower capacity heating devices being needed to maintain the minimum room temperature requirements. Additional costs to landlords will be minimised.

Insulation is the primary measure to support a warm and dry home. For this reason compliance with the insulation standard by retaining particular records is supported.

Without landlords having to demonstrate compliance there is no assurance that rental homes will be protective of health.

Section 3 – Ventilation

Section 3.1 – what level of ventilation is required in rental homes.

The provision of adequate ventilation is important to prevent moisture build up within the living environment. Ventilating bathrooms, laundry areas, kitchens, installing vapour barriers in crawl spaces, having adequate guttering and ensuring there is no water leaks are all measures which contribute to a dry home. In addition to extractor fans the DHBs would like to see each of these prevention measures included in the minimum standard for healthy homes.

The DHBs support option three which adds an extractor fan requirement for rooms that have a shower, bath or indoor cooktop and outlines which rooms require opening windows. Option 3 is appropriate ventilation for the landlord to provide and the DHBs would also like to see:

- All extractor fans installed to operate automatically in wet areas such as the kitchen, laundry, and bath and shower rooms to ensure ventilation occurs.
- Bathrooms are included in the rooms required to have windows that can be opened for the entry of air. This is because bathrooms that do not contain a shower or bath are still wet areas and will generate odour and moisture that require venting.

Venting naturally, such as opening a window, is the cheapest form of venting a home and must be encouraged whenever possible. Exemption from natural ventilation should only occur when opening a window poses a higher health risk. For instance, noise from the outdoor environment results in noise levels in a bedroom that will disturb sleep, i.e. internal noise limits are exceeded. In these situations mechanical ventilation would be acceptable provided the ventilation meets the Building Code G6 – ventilation requirements for indoor occupied spaces. This recognises that a kitchen, laundry, bath or shower room is considered an occupied space because it is a space where a person will be present from time to time during the intended use of the building.

The DHBs consider there to be no circumstance where the provision of no natural or mechanical ventilation in an occupied space is acceptable. The DHBs also do not consider it acceptable to rent a home that does not comply with the ventilation requirements of the Building Code and therefore do not agree that exemptions should be available.

Section 4 – Moisture ingress and drainage

Section 4.1 – How should landlords protect rental homes against moisture entering the home and inadequate drainage?

Landlords need to continue to meet the requirements of the Building Code, Residential Tenancies Act and the Housing Improvement Regulations, and provide efficient drainage and guttering, downpipes and drains, and ensure that the subfloor has a ground moisture barrier,

unless there is already adequate subfloor ventilation. Therefore the DHBs support option two to manage moisture ingress and drainage.

The reason for this approach is that option one is unlikely to achieve the desired outcome of dry rental homes, and will present a risk rather than prevent risk to health. Public health emphasises keeping people healthy and improving the health of populations. However, compliance with existing regulations is not generally enforced in a proactive manner. Factors such as dampness that impact on health is largely responded to in a reactive manner based on receipt of a complaint. This means that the health of occupants has already been put at risk of harm.

Section 5 – Draught stopping

Section 5.1 – What is the appropriate level of draught stopping to create warm and dry rental homes?

The DHBs would like to see option two be required to stop draughts and create warm and dry rental homes. Landlords should be required to stop any unnecessary gaps or holes that cause noticeable draughts (in or out of the home) which promote colder temperatures. This requirement should be for every habitable room and occupied space.

The DHBs consider there to be no reason for an exemption to this standard and would not support regulations to give effect to exemptions.

Section 6 - When and how should the healthy homes standards be implemented?

Question – do you support option one, two or three for the date that landlords need to comply with the standards?

The DHBs do not support option one. Option two which provides a single date for landlords to comply with the standards is supported. The DHBs consider three years a reasonable timeframe to allow landlords, industry and government to comply. This is because landlords are likely to already be broadly aware of the issues being considered for inclusion in the standards and are unlikely to be taken by surprise.

The DHBs would support an implementation programme that encourages compliance earlier than legally provided for. In part this could be achieved by promoting the financial incentives to the landlord through health literacy communication. Please see comments in Section 7.2.

Given the importance a home is to health, the actual date for compliance should be enforced with no grace periods.

Question – for option three, which approach do you think is an appropriate way to stagger implementation (by standard or location)? Do you have an alternative approach that should be considered?

The DHBs partially support option three which proposes to stagger implementation dates provided a single date for full compliance is agreed for all rental homes. The DHBs suggest that interim milestones be included leading up to the single compliance date. For instance,

the standards or interventions which require less cost or need little expertise, such as draught prevention, portable heating and water tightness could be required within 6 months, and insulation and mechanical ventilation requirements given a longer timeframe.

The DHBs acknowledge that demand for products and services may be an issue. However, the key healthy home components such as heating devices, moisture, draughts and insulation that will be included in the standards are unlikely to be a surprise to landlords or the industry. Early communication to encourage landlords to assess what they may need to do and can implement now will help reduce demand later in the implementation process.

Question – Is there a feasible compliance date option that has not been considered?

There is another approach which hasn't been considered which will protect public health from the outset.

Options one to three refer to existing and first time rented homes. The DHBs recommend that compliance be required for all homes rented for the first time once the standards are fully implemented.

Section 7 - Implementation

Section 7.1 – When and how should healthy homes standards be enforced?

Question – What records should a landlord retain to show compliance? What could be included on the tenancy agreement to show the landlord has complied with each healthy home standard.

The DHBs have made a submission to the Residential Tenancy Act Reform and discussed active and passive enforcement approaches. Because public health is about focusing on groups of people to keep everyone well and preventing harm by avoiding and reducing risks to health the DHBs recommend an active compliance approach by Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. This should include document review and physical inspection to ensure compliance with the standards prior to the first tenancy for a house, and at reasonable times thereafter.

It is unfair and unrealistic to expect tenants to know whether the rental home or records provided by the landlord show compliance with each healthy home standard. To prevent a person or entity renting, or marketing for rent, a house that does not comply with the standards the DHBs recommend landlords be required to be registered and the homes they rent are known by Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Compliance with each healthy home standard should be maintained by Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and certification available to the landlord or prospective tenant indicating the house is suitable to be rented.

Section 7.2 – Online tool to assist landlords comply with the standards

To assist landlords comply with the standards and to assist tenants to recognise unlawful therefore unhealthy rental homes, the DHBs suggest each healthy home standard criterion be detailed with rationale and intent, and supported with plain language guidance. This

should include things for landlords and tenants to consider and useful information such as photos/videos of what compliance looks like.

The DHBs recommend Ministry of Housing and Urban Development refers to the Ministry of Education's Licensing Criteria for Centre-Based Early Childhood Centre Services website as an example of a detailed plain language tool that describes a licensing and regulatory framework. While it refers to early learning centres the layout and comprehensive information is easy to follow. The regulatory and licensing framework may be viewed here: <http://www.education.govt.nz/early-childhood/licensing-and-regulations/the-regulatory-framework-for-ece/> and the criteria and guidance viewed here: <http://www.education.govt.nz/early-childhood/licensing-and-regulations/the-regulatory-framework-for-ece/licensing-criteria/centre-based-ece-services/premises-and-facilities/general/>

The DHBs also recommend that Ministry of Housing and Urban Development takes a health literacy³ approach when developing a tool to help tenants and landlords understand the healthy homes standards.

Health literacy is about communicating health information clearly and understanding it correctly. By taking a health literacy approach to communicating information, landlords and tenants will understand the benefits to the health of tenants and the economic benefits to the landlord. For instance resale and longer tenancies leading to voluntary actions that create a healthy home based on good-nature and moral grounds rather than being required through regulation.

The Ministry of Health has developed a Framework for Health Literacy and other supporting resources. To find out more go to <http://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/health-literacy/health-literacy-publications>.

Other matters for consideration

Window covering such as curtains and blinds provide privacy, warmth and enable sleep. Window coverings significantly lower home heating costs.

Undisturbed sleep is essential for health and development, especially in children. Children and people who work at night and who need to sleep in the daytime need a dark room to encourage productive sleep.

The DHBs recommend that a standard requires window coverings in the living room and all bedrooms to improve the healthiness of rental homes. The minimum criteria for the window coverings should achieve:

- Privacy for the occupants in the bedrooms

³ In New Zealand, health literacy has been defined as 'the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services in order to make informed and appropriate health decisions' (Ministry of Health, 2010).

- Blocking of light in bedrooms. Ideally, window coverings should be lined with black-out material in bedrooms
- Coverage of the entire window frame and preferably be to the floor, and;
- Be easy to open and close daily

The DHBs also recommend that thermal lined window coverings be considered a minimum standard in colder areas and for homes with single glazed windows.

Bay of Plenty and Lakes DHBs wish to thank the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development for the opportunity to submit.

Yours sincerely



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