BUILDING ACCESSIBLE, AFFORDABLE SMALL HOMES

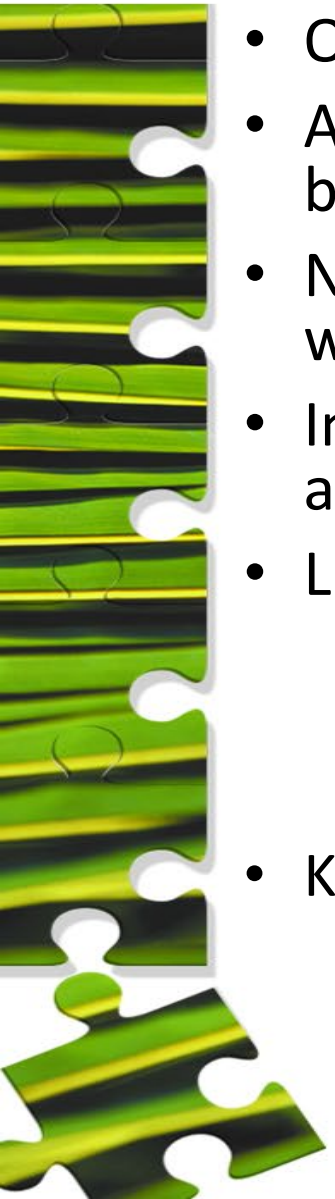
Presentation to FAAB Seminar

Christchurch, 20 May 2024

Bev James

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Housing (in)accessibility



- Only about 2% of NZ's housing stock is accessible
- Accessibility standards are excluded from Building Code for residential buildings
- NZ does not meet obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- In 2016, there were about 1,500 homes with LifeMark certification, and approx. 500 are certified per year
- LifeMark certifications in 2023:
  - 54% in social housing (councils and not-for-profit housing providers)
  - 23% in private sector retirement villages
  - 23% in the general private market
- Kāinga Ora, the state housing provider, has its own accessibility standards
  - Goal: 15% accessible stock

Interviews with providers

- 21 in-depth interviews
  - 10 not-for-profit housing providers: collectively they have built about 325 accessible dwellings
  - 6 builders/developers: building for NFPs and the private market
  - 5 architects/designers: building for NFPs and the private market

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Key questions

1) What accessible features are easy to include in small homes and what are challenging to achieve?
2) Is there a minimum size that an accessible dwelling can be?
3) Can small dwellings be affordable as well as accessible?
4) How can the industry and housing providers be encouraged to build small, affordable homes with accessible design?

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Awareness and understanding

- Strong support for improving accessibility in new-builds
- Accessibility is associated with quality housing
- Perception of low public awareness and knowledge about housing accessibility
- Awareness and understanding of accessible design varies in housing and construction sector
- Knowledge and use of accessible design is increasing through relationships and networks

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Use of accessible design

- No common accessibility standard used
- Wide range of accessibility features
- Motivations for incorporating accessible features:
  - Philosophical / mission commitment
  - Servicing seniors and disabled
  - Perceived market advantage, point of difference
  - Responding to consumer demand
  - Driven by individual ‘champion’

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Reasons for not using accessible design

- Perceptions of increased cost
- Site size, shape, gradients
- Perceived stigma
- Marketability concerns, perceived lack of consumer demand
- Planning impediments

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Easy-to-achieve features

- Easily and commonly incorporated features:
  - Future-proofing in bathrooms
  - Power points and switches at accessible heights
  - Lever taps and door handles
  - Turning circles
  - Wider doorways and hallways
  - Disability car parks
- Why features are easy to include:
  - ‘Off the shelf’ products that are easy to source
  - Familiar techniques and processes
  - Easy to incorporate into existing practices
  - Relatively inexpensive / modest additional expense
  - There is little or no impact on consenting requirements

Hard-to-achieve features

- The accessible features hardest to implement are lifts, level entry and accessible kitchens
- Why features are hard to include:
  1) Lack of skilled, knowledgeable practitioners
  2) Lack of or inconsistent application of acceptable solutions
  3) Expense

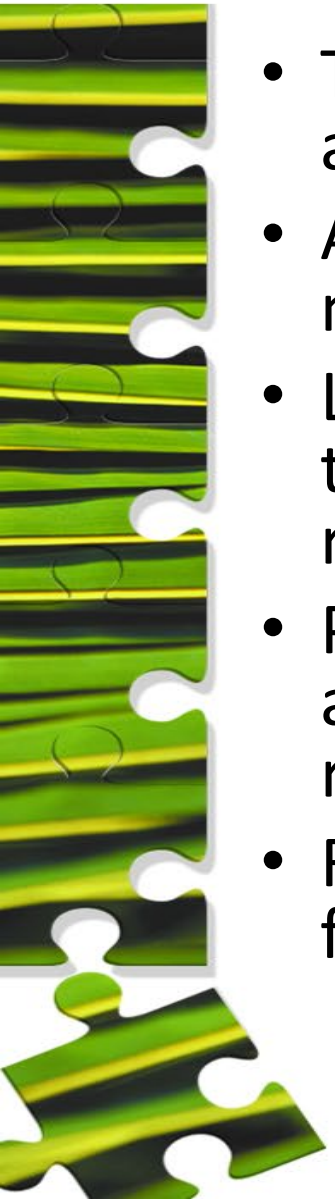
bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Dwelling size and accessibility

- Design solutions to maximise space e.g., cavity sliders
- Designing multi-functional spaces
- Willing to make space compromises on car parking
- Unwilling to make compromises on bedroom size
- Storage requirements and preferences are most challenging
- The optimum sizes were considered to be 50m^2 (one-bedroom) and 75m^2 (two-bedroom)
- A few participants would not go below 80m^2 (two-bedroom)

bevjames
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Affordability and accessibility



- The cost of accessibility is not excessive and can be managed
- Actual costs of achieving accessibility may not be well understood
- Lack of consistency around acceptable techniques, materials and products can result in additional costs
- Poorly-designed or poorly installed accessible features that must be re-done result in additional costs
- Retrofitting is much more expensive and financially unsustainable

Expense, but that's not as much as people might think. Future proofing a bathroom … Other cheap things are siting of power points … Lighting etc., it's an easy thing to do that doesn't cost a lot to do, that can make all the difference. Especially if you can avoid trips and falls … It can be encouraged with a bit of thought. Early decisions are easy to change, it's much more expensive later on (Architect).

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Intentionality

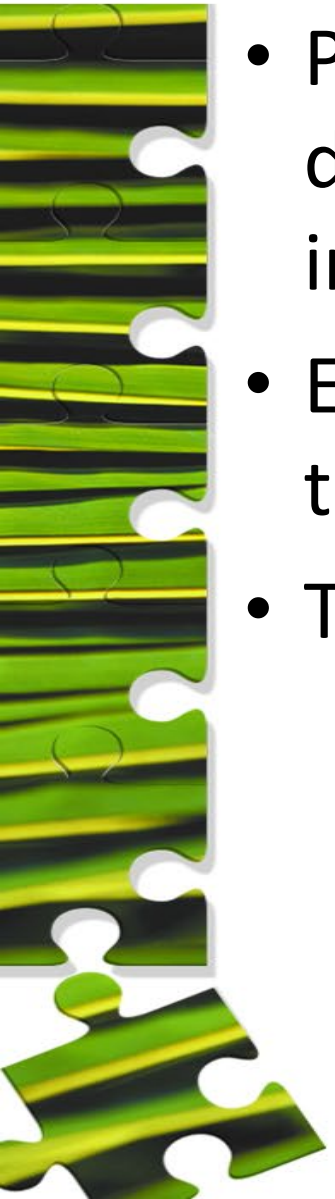
- A ‘deliberate’ and ‘purposeful’ approach
- Design in accessibility early
- Strong management oversight across multiple stages and trades to ensure design is implemented as intended

It has to be very intentional. It’s in the too hard basket for a lot of people otherwise … You have to think about it from the very start. Can’t really do it as an afterthought. You’ve literally got to design it into the whole development … It’s all pretty easy if it’s intentional (Medium-sized NFP housing provider)

We’re a big business so there are many people involved in the delivery, so many subtrades … We’re trying to improve our specs and internal communications process. Making sure everyone is on the same page is probably the most difficult part (Urban design manager, property developer)

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Engagement with residents



- Participants are aware of the importance of user-centred design, but the concept is not well understood, nor applied in most developments
- Even if end-user perspectives are gathered and valued, they are often secondary to building imperatives
- There is almost no post-occupancy assessment

bev james
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Encouraging more accessible design

- Some support for regulation
- Funding incentives
- Planning incentives
- Professional development
- Raising public awareness
- Value cases
- Technical guidance, easy-to-use products and techniques
- Consistent specification and use of acceptable solutions

If you enable it, the private sector will pick up the tab, they will find a way to do it (Builder/developer)

When you think about it, it's not hard at all. People not understanding what the process is and therefore they put up brick walls, it's too expensive, too hard. When we first started doing it, I was probably one of the ones that felt that, I felt it was a mission. The more we got to understand and work with it, we found it's simple and not expensive at all. I'd like to see a lot more building, we should push it, it's where we should be going in future (Builder/developer)

Conclusions

- Accessible, small dwellings are being built, mainly by not-for-profit housing providers
- A learning community around accessible design is emerging
- Our findings reinforce other research suggesting that a mix of approaches for achieving housing accessibility is needed
- Key actions:
  - User-centred design
  - Addressing planning impediments and creating enablers
  - Identifying acceptable solutions, techniques, materials and products

bevjames
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED

Thanks for listening!

Contact me at: bev@bevjames.nz

bevjames
PUBLIC POLICY & RESEARCH LIMITED