



# Briefing

<b>Supporting tenants in public, transitional, and emergency housing through Alert Level 4</b>			
<b>Date:</b>	1 April 2020	<b>Security level:</b>	In Confidence
<b>Priority:</b>	High	<b>Report number:</b>	BRF19/20030601

<b>Action sought</b>	
	<b>Action sought</b>
Hon Dr Megan Woods <b>Minister of Housing</b>	Note the contents of this briefing
Hon Kris Faafoi <b>Associate Minister of Housing (Public Housing)</b>	Note the contents of this briefing

<b>Contact for discussion</b>			
<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Telephone</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> contact</b>
Jo Hogg	Acting Deputy Chief Executive, Funding and Programme Delivery, HUD		s 9(2)(a)
Andrew Leach	Senior Advisor, Funding and Programme Delivery	04 832 2521	✓

<b>Other agencies consulted</b>
The Ministry of Social Development, Kāinga Ora – Homes and Communities

## Minister's office to complete

<input type="checkbox"/> Noted <input type="checkbox"/> Seen <input type="checkbox"/> Approved <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change <input type="checkbox"/> Not seen by Minister <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by events <input type="checkbox"/> Declined <input type="checkbox"/> Referred to (specify)  <hr/>
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<b>Comments</b>          
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**Date returned to MHUD:**

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# Briefing

## Supporting tenants in public, transitional, and emergency housing through Alert Level 4

**For:** Hon Dr Megan Woods, Minister of Housing  
Hon Kris Faafoi, Associate Minister of Housing (Public Housing)

**Date:** 1 April 2020                      **Security level:** In Confidence

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### Purpose

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1. This briefing outlines action the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Kāinga Ora, and the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) are taking to support tenants in public, transitional, and emergency housing through Alert Level 4 of the response COVID-19.

### Recommended actions

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2. It is recommended that you:
  1. Note the contents of this paper *Noted*

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Jo Hogg  
**Acting Deputy Chief Executive,  
Funding and Programme Delivery**

Ministry of Housing and Urban  
Development

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Hon Dr Megan Woods  
**Minister of Housing**

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Hon Kris Faafoi  
**Associate Minister of Housing (Public  
Housing)**

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## Background

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3. On 25 March 2020, New Zealand entered Alert Level 4 to help reduce community transmission of COVID-19.
4. Housing and service providers are an Essential Service and so remain in operation. They are playing a critical role in supporting some of New Zealand's most vulnerable individuals and whānau to access and remain in safe and stable housing.
5. Agencies have been working to focus collective efforts and resources on supporting those providers and their tenants, with the aim of keeping essential operations open, keeping people housed, and trying to reduce disruption and uncertainty for tenants.
6. This paper discusses how agencies are supporting tenants in public, transitional, and emergency housing. It does not update you on support for tenants in the private market, which to date has included the freeze of rent increases and protections against tenancy terminations, as announced by the Minister of Finance on 23 March 2020.
7. Public housing providers often employ Tenancy Managers to assist tenants whilst they are living in public housing and the requirements for managing tenancies operate much in the same way as tenancies in the private market. Tenancy Managers, for example, will conduct property inspections, will work with tenants to ensure rents are paid on time, and can also help with organising utilities and internet. Ordinarily, public housing tenants will have tenancy and rent reviews to ensure they still qualify for public housing, that the place they are living still meets their needs, and that they are paying the correct amount of rent.

## Proactive steps we have taken following the transition to Alert Level 4

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*We are fast tracking essential housing activities and pausing other, non-essential, housing activities*

8. Many of our public, transitional, and emergency housing tenants' incomes have been significantly affected by the move to Alert Level 4. We are, therefore, taking steps to ensure we are supporting them to remain in or access safe and stable housing by:
  - a. **Fast-tracking Income Related Rent re-assessments for public housing tenants whose income is reduced because of the COVID-19 response.** If the tenant or housing provider proactively contacts MSD about reduced income, this will apply even if the change of income lasts for less than 8 weeks.
  - b. **Freezing rents and pausing the mandatory annual reviews of tenants' Income Related Rent (IRR).** Agencies are freezing IRR for 6 months to ensure tenants have more of their income available to them. MSD is also pausing its annual review of IRR for up to six months to ensure tenants have certainty over their rents. Aligned with the Government's rent freeze, this will ensure no-one living in public housing receives a rent increase during this period. People who proactively contact MSD to discuss instances where their IRR should be reduced will still be processed, in line with point a above.
  - c. **Pausing public housing tenancy reviews.** Ordinarily, MSD would review public housing tenants' tenancies to ensure they still qualify for public housing and that the place they are living still meets their needs. Reviews, however, have been paused for the duration of Alert Level 4 to avoid creating uncertainty or anxiety for tenants.
  - d. **Suspending debt recovery action for tenants in rent arrears.** We are working with public housing providers to ensure that no debt recovery actions are raised in the short term. We are still asking providers to negotiate re-payment plans with the tenant.
  - e. **Pausing 90-day notices and eviction activity.** Public housing providers are pausing any eviction activity on public housing tenants until further notice.
9. HUD, MSD, and Kāinga Ora have also agreed to pause all non-essential placement activity for both public and transitional housing for the duration of Alert Level 4. Continued placement activity increases the risk of community transmission of COVID-19, creating both health and

safety risks for staff and clients. Essential placement activity is limited to the following situations:

- a. Moving a person or household who are unable to safely isolate in their current accommodation to a property that allows them to safely isolate.<sup>1</sup> This includes moving a household from communal accommodation into a stand-alone property or moving a homeless person off the street into more appropriate accommodation.
- b. Moving a person or household from an over-crowded situation that may heighten the risk of infection into accommodation that allows them to safely live within their 'bubble', e.g. moving an existing public housing tenant into alternative accommodation.
- c. Moving a person or household from a housing situation that presents another serious risk to the health, safety and security of the tenant, e.g. moving people who may be at risk of family violence to alternative accommodation.
- d. If clients lack the essentials needed to live safely and independently in a new property (e.g. whiteware, beds, utilities) we recommend not placing them as doing so will expand the number of individuals and organisations (e.g. delivery drivers) required to support the move. If their current accommodation is unsuitable MSD may be able to assist with Emergency Housing in the interim.

*We are conducting tenant welfare checks over the phone and we are updating our websites to explain how services will be adapted during Alert Level 4*

10. In response to the threat from COVID-19, Kāinga Ora and Community Housing Providers (CHPs) are taking action to inform and assist tenants to stay safe. Kāinga Ora has provided multi-lingual information on its website for tenants and their whānau about COVID-19, how services will be adapted, and what happens during Alert Level 4. Similarly, HUD has published detailed FAQs and guidance to help housing providers and their tenants navigate this uncertain and rapidly changing environment.
11. Communication with tenants is essential. Whilst restrictions brought about by the move to Alert Level 4 have meant in-person meetings with tenants have stopped, public housing providers are conducting welfare checks on all tenants over the phone. Kāinga Ora and CHPs are contacting their most vulnerable tenants as a priority, to ensure they have adequate support. Kāinga Ora, for example, is establishing a vulnerability prioritisation framework to help target services at those most in need. Kāinga Ora is also building a customer support service directory so that its tenancy management teams can link vulnerable customers to essential support agencies and networks.
12. Where tenants do not have access to basic necessities, CHPs have been working to meet these gaps. This has included purchasing mobile phones for their tenants to help keep them connected with support providers and whanau, as well as delivering groceries and hygiene products to support tenants' wellbeing.
13. Kāinga Ora is working to identify which of its tenants do not or cannot communicate by phone or email. Kāinga Ora is aware some tenants have chosen not to have a phone and have instead given consent to other agencies, neighbours, or family to take calls on their behalf. Work is underway to determine the best method of safely staying in contact with tenants who have not got a phone and who have not provided alternative contacts.
14. Kāinga Ora is also looking at leveraging community support to ensure its tenants receive any support they may need. This may include, for example, asking local community groups like

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, self-isolation refers to tenants and clients who are required to live within their 'bubble' during Alert Level 4. It does not relate to individuals who are required to self-isolate because of age, underlying health concerns, or because they have recently returned from overseas travel.

Age Concern or a tenant's neighbour to check in on them when Kāinga Ora is unable to reach them by phone, text, or email.

15. Agencies are currently working on establishing a 24-hour escalation process to ensure we can react quickly to tenants' changing circumstances. This will include, for example, informing MSD of a client's change in income or circumstance which may affect their eligibility for a main benefit. Recognising that many tenants will find themselves in greater financial need as a result of COVID-19 Level 4 restrictions, public housing providers are suspending debt recovery to ensure tenants are properly supported in sustaining their tenancies.
16. CHPs have advised that tenants' welfare and wellbeing is beginning to be impacted by the Alert Level 4 restrictions. Tenants with existing mental health needs will likely be affected first, due to the uncertainty around, and disruption to, their home environment. It is essential agencies wrap support around these tenants as soon as possible.

*Only urgent repairs to homes will be processed and we have put processes in place to ensure the safety of tenants and our construction partners*

17. Building and construction work, unless related to critical infrastructure or health and safety requirements, is not deemed an essential service and has, therefore, been paused whilst Alert Level 4 is in place. In line with this, Kāinga Ora and CHPs will continue to resolve all urgent repairs during Alert Level 4. This may include, for example, repairs to water pipes or damaged roofs.
18. All non-urgent repairs, however, will be put on hold. Non-urgent repairs, such as a broken plasterboard or a broken garden gate, will be resolved when the Government reduces the alert level for the region to either a 1 or a 2. If a non-urgent repair becomes critical during the Alert Level 4 period, it will be resolved.
19. The safety of our tenants and the contractors we work with is paramount. We are asking contractors to make an appointment with the tenant prior to visiting (unless they are considered emergency repairs) and will re-check to ensure the situation has not changed. Emergency repairs will be responded to in four hours. Tenants have been advised they must inform Kāinga Ora or the CHP if anyone in the home is unwell, been diagnosed with COVID-19 or is experiencing any symptoms, prior to the contractor's arrival.

*We are increasing the supply of emergency housing, and have made certain process changes to improve support for clients*

20. Whilst new public housing needs assessments have been paused, MSD is continuing to assess and place vulnerable individuals and whanau into emergency housing. It is essential that the most vulnerable people are supported out of homelessness and into more stable housing during the level four lockdown period.
21. HUD is working at pace and scale to deliver additional places (over 650 at time of writing) to support this increased need. These places will be primarily sourced through motel accommodation and will be available for anyone requiring support, including rough sleepers, people living in night shelters. People living in boarding houses can also access this accommodation if their current living arrangements are not adequate during the lockdown period.
22. MSD can now grant Emergency Housing Special Needs Grants (EH SNG) for longer periods – up to 21 nights at a time – to provide tenants with increased confidence and certainty of their short-term accommodation. This also reduces the need for meetings with clients, which will free up staff and other resources to focus on delivering essential housing services.
23. Transitional housing contributions will now be an allowable cost for Temporary Additional Support and Special Benefit. Furthermore, the implementation of the 25% client co-contribution for the EH SNG has been paused. Both of these steps will mean tenants have more of their income available to them to buy groceries, utilities and other essentials. It will also avoid creating financial hardship for clients self-isolating in emergency accommodation.

## **Next steps**

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24. Agencies will continue to monitor and respond to tenants' concerns resulting from the transition to Alert Level 4.
25. Agencies will provide further advice on how these changes will adapt as New Zealand's alert levels are reduced.