

Enriching environments when upgrading apartments for vulnerable tenants

Engaging with tenants throughout the design process can lead to better outcomes for all.

THIS FACT SHEET is one of a series looking at practical, cost-effective measures to improve comfort, utility and occupant satisfaction when retrofitting residential rental properties. It focuses on the unique needs of tenants, particularly vulnerable tenants.

To increase affordability and meet the needs of vulnerable people, there was a period when rental units were built as apartment buildings. Many of those apartments are ageing and increasingly difficult to maintain, and they under-deliver in terms of liveability. However, these buildings have often seen close communities develop among the tenants and have considerable potential if appropriately retrofitted. This fact sheet highlights the needs and aspirations of tenants and the things to keep in mind when retrofitting apartments tenanted with vulnerable people.

Background

The case study used is the upgrade of Kotuku Apartments (Figure 1) carried out by Wellington City Council. The apartments are located near Wellington International Airport. The four 4-storey buildings were built in the 1960s, and their thermal performance improvement was part of a multi-million-dollar upgrade over 2013–2017. The total upgrade included considerable improvements to internal features (fixtures, finishes and appliances), the thermal envelope of the building (windows, wall, roof and floor) as well as the external landscaping and hardscaping.



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Kotuku Apartments before and after the upgrade.

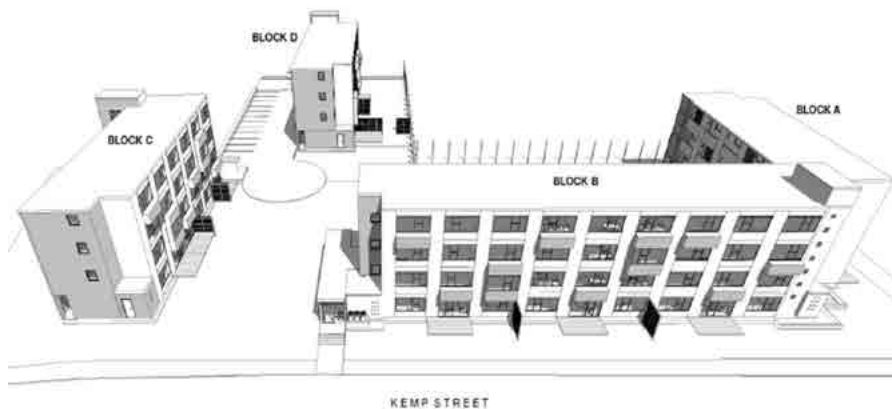


Figure 1. Kotuku Apartments (looking to the west),

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Working with tenants during upgrades

Upgrading can be complex and subject to delays. Where tenants have to move out of their units, there are costs to both landlords and tenants. These are exacerbated if the original timeframes are not met. Understanding tenant needs, working with them to time upgrades and helping them with interim accommodation (including recognising and compensating around moving costs) means that landlords can retain desirable tenants.

The keys to good tenant management when upgrading are:

- keeping tenants informed
- working with tenants to jointly agree on interim accommodation solutions
- keeping to upgrading timeframes and, if there is a delay, talking about it with tenants
- not underestimating the costs to tenants both financially and, sometimes even more importantly, socially. Many tenants will be part of a community based on the apartment building. Look to preserve positive community attachments.

Learning from tenants when commissioning apartment upgrades

One of the greatest resources that an apartment landlord has in the commissioning process is the tenants. They intimately experience what is working or not working in a refurbished apartment building: where there may be leaks, poor lighting, appliances not performing well, windows not functioning properly or draughts. Engaging with tenants allows landlords to remedy problems.

For landlords planning upgrades of other apartments, the response of tenants to already upgraded apartments provides real insights into what works and what doesn't. Using that resource allows many tenants to express their appreciation of the work and investment put in by a landlord but is also an expression of the respect a landlord has for their tenants.

The point of retrofitting

In retrofitting Kotuku Apartments, Wellington City Council wanted to:

- improve thermal efficiency and tenant comfort
- reduce the costs of heating and resource use to tenants
- diversify the apartments from providing for only one-person households to meet the needs of other vulnerable households and families.

The goals of the project were, therefore, a mix of outcomes that were seen as beneficial to existing tenants, beneficial to future tenants and improving the utility of the apartments in the context of changing demand.

Tenant aspirations and benefits

Interviews with tenants before and after the apartment upgrade highlighted the difference between tenant aspirations and the sorts of benefits Wellington City Council wanted to deliver. In particular, there was little interest in the thermal benefits associated with an upgrade.

Tenants' main concerns were:

- retaining a tenancy in a set of apartments that tenants saw as very desirable in a location meeting their needs
- promoting safety in the apartments and reducing vulnerability to anti-social behaviour by other tenants and by people coming onto the property
- getting better storage
- improving the aesthetics of the buildings and cleanliness of the grounds

- developing and extending a sense of community and opportunities for participation.

Understanding the connection between the benefits the upgrades will deliver and the aspirations and concerns of tenants is a critical part of planning and delivering apartment upgrades.

Despite significant thermal upgrades, the reduction of resource use and associated costs are not likely to be high among vulnerable tenants. Typically, vulnerable tenants already reduce their resource costs by under-consumption. The ability to reduce those costs further is, consequently, limited. However, there is an opportunity to increase comfort and ensure that tenants are living in temperatures conducive to good health and wellbeing while minimising cost. Ensuring that tenants live in warm environments reduces the likelihood that tenants will need to retreat to their beds as a way of keeping warm. Warm environments and comfort can contribute to making people less isolated and building an active community around apartments. These in turn contribute to other aspects of wellbeing and safety.

If upgrades can be planned to align with tenant aspirations, the benefits associated with thermal upgrades will be leveraged further. In the Kotuku Apartments, reworking of the outdoor environment to include sheltered seating, vegetable gardens, play areas and fencing and making careful use of colour were all identified as raising a sense of pride and satisfaction.

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