

Senior Housing Development on George Street

The MSH supports the Council investment in the Senior Housing Development on George Street.

The proposed new senior housing in George Street provides a welcome addition to affordable housing for seniors in Blenheim. However, the proposed two-storey design, which lacks a lift, does not reflect good practice in age-friendly housing design. If the council is to be committed to promoting positive ageing in Marlborough, it must lead in its own new-built senior housing, by using universal design to future-proof housing, ensuring it caters for changing needs.

New Zealand has a world-leading universal design standard in LifeMark.² Increasingly, developers of residential housing, including retirement villages, community housing providers and Kāinga Ora, now build to LifeMark standard. This standard provides practical and easy to incorporate design solutions for new-build housing, including apartments similar to those proposed for the Council development. Incorporating universal design features do not significantly increase the cost of new builds; about 0.5% increased cost. A lift in the type of development put forward by council is essential, and would be cheaper to do as part of the build, rather than retrofit later.

We note that some recent news articles have commented that many seniors are fit and can handle stairs, and that we should not “write-off our seniors”. However, that is precisely what the Council will be doing if it does not provide a lift. Only some council tenants will be able to manage carrying groceries and other items upstairs. What happens when those tenants are no longer able to manage stairs, or have an accident or hospital admission that impairs their mobility, even temporarily? If a lift is not provided, the Council will be creating a barrier to tenants ‘ageing in place’. Council needs to be mindful of the population its senior housing serves. Across New Zealand, public-sector tenants aged 65 and older, including council tenants, have the poorest health compared to private renters and owner-occupiers in the same age group. Older public renters are statistically more likely to have diabetes, asthma, a heart attack, arthritis and chronic pain.³ They are also more likely to use GP services and to be admitted to hospital than older private renters and older owner-occupiers.⁴

As well as incorporating universal design, we also urge the Council to design senior housing with superior thermal performance so that tenants can enjoy low operating costs, and ensure that rents are affordable for residents. Rents should be indexed to income, based on no more than 25% gross of residents’ household income. At present many council tenants receive the Accommodation Supplement, which by definition means that their current rent is unaffordable. Any increase in rents will generate further housing stress, which will not be addressed by an increase in Accommodation Supplement, once the maximum amount for the tenant is reached.

² <https://www.lifemark.co.nz/>

³ Pledger, M., McDonald, J., Dunn, P., Cumming, J., & Saville-Smith, K. (2019) The health of older New Zealanders in relation to housing tenure: analysis of pooled data from three consecutive, annual New Zealand Health Surveys, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 43(6).

⁴ Pledger, M., Dunn, P., McDonald, J., Cumming, J., & Saville-Smith, K. (2020) Is the use of health services by older adults in New Zealand associated with their housing tenure? *The New Zealand Medical Journal*, 133(1510).

In conclusion, the George Street development is a commitment already made. We would like to see information in the LTP on the Council's future intentions for ensuring the provision of functional, affordable housing for seniors in Marlborough.