

Decoding housing messages

By looking at how politicians have defined New Zealand's housing problems, particularly supply and affordability, researchers hope to better understand how diverse messages are translated into policy and practice.

BY DR GAURI NANDEKAR AND PROFESSOR IAIN WHITE, UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

IN THE 2017 election year, housing has been a hot-button issue with politicians, broader government and the public. What is it about these overarching themes of social justice and wellbeing that capture our attention?

Applying framing lens to analyse housing

Public policy research stresses the importance of framing for understanding the diverse ways in which a problem is defined by government, its influence on public opinion and its uneven translation into policy and practice. In the New Zealand context, we have analysed how political messages have influenced outcomes in practice.

In Australia, the US and the UK, researchers have applied framing to analyse housing in terms of:

- zoning and schooling
- infrastructure and transport

- welfare recipients
- race and ethnicity.

Messages may be conflicting

Global research shows tracing the politics and dominant framing of a problem such as housing supply and affordability can reveal multiple and sometimes conflicting messaging that may affect its translation into outcomes.

Drawing on this, we are exploring the extent to which housing is influenced by the values, beliefs and modes of thought that may have become institutionalised or locked in to our planning system.

What are the dominant government messages? How are they deciphered and translated by others? Are they clear or conflicting? How are new political priorities struggling to change long-standing ways of practice?

Looking at New Zealand

To explore these issues, we used a critical discourse analysis approach and examined ministerial speeches and housing reports from the last two National-led governments in 2011-14 and 2014-17.

This revealed four dominant political frames for New Zealand housing of:

- regulation
- demographics/migration
- culture/Kiwi dream
- quality.

These frames shape the wider narratives of housing supply and demand, including issues of blame and direction, and help us understand the ways that other agencies may receive messages and respond (see Figure 1).

Regulation

Analysis identified a high number of political messages, beginning with a

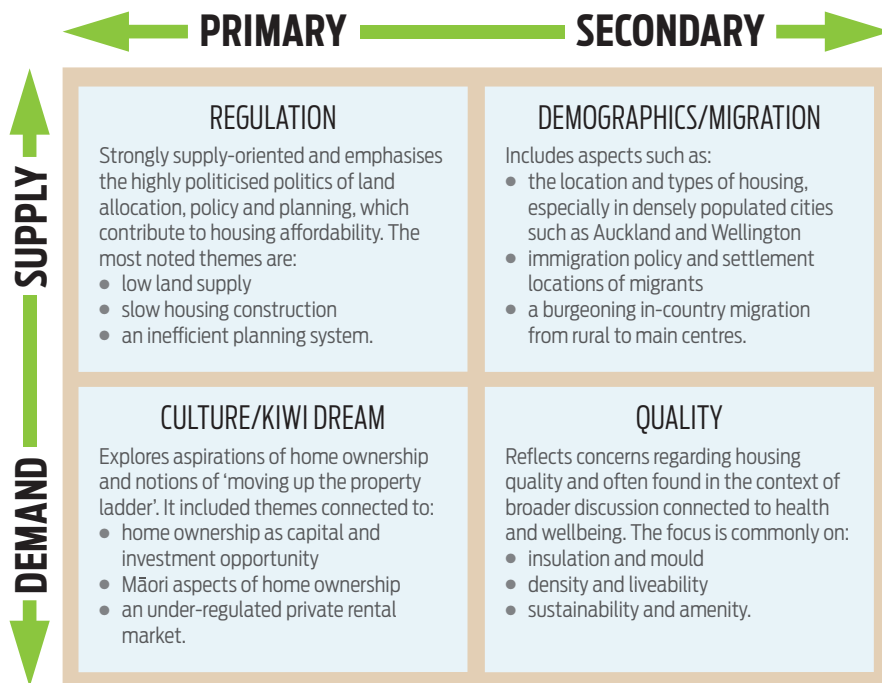


Figure 1: The four housing frames in New Zealand (2011–17).

primary focus on the argument that the housing problem is strongly supply-oriented and centred on the Resource Management Act (RMA) and inefficient decision making.

For example, in a 2013 speech, then Minister of Housing, Nick Smith stated, 'We've got a convoluted RMA planning system where it takes an average of 7 years to get a plan changed by the time you get through all the consultation and appeal processes.'

In a speech 2 years later, Dr Smith commented that government had a plan to reform the RMA in order to 'tackle the

long-term issues affecting housing affordability and supply'.

In 2015, then Finance Minister Bill English argued, 'Poor planning drives inequality. Poor regulation of housing has the largest proportionate effect on the lowest quartile of housing costs and rents.' The consequence is that the supply of affordable housing has dried up, therefore 'poor planning favours insiders - homeowners ... - on high incomes and who have relatively high wealth.'

Linking this to better decision making, he remarked that those on lower incomes had

the most to lose, but also the most to gain, from better decision making.

Demographics/migration

A secondary supply-oriented frame emerged related to demographics and migration, but it was much less in evidence than the focus on inefficient regulation.

In his Budget speech in 2015, Mr English commented, 'When the supply of housing is relatively fixed, shocks to demand - like migration flows increasing sharply as they have recently - are absorbed through higher prices rather than the supply of more houses.'

In the same speech, Mr English mentioned that 'quarter-acre sections' with a classic Kiwi 3-bedroom home were located relatively close to Auckland's CBD and that this was 'a massive misuse of scarce land ... at the taxpayer's expense'.

A year later, in a nod to the primary regulatory frame, Dr Smith stated, 'In Auckland, which is still functioning on 1993 planning documents implemented when there were half a million fewer people living there, that will mean going up and out.'

Culture/Kiwi dream

In this frame, it can be seen that, in 2015, for example, Dr Smith explained, 'Government has had its foot on the accelerator to address the housing supply and affordability challenge ... [It has] achieved strong growth in residential construction in each of the past 3 years. We recognise the importance of maintaining this momentum to get more New Zealand families into home ownership.'

Later that year, Mr English outlined why the link between housing and home ownership could contribute to New Zealanders' ➤

wellbeing. ‘It’s important that a broad group of people understand our single-biggest asset class - the most important asset most of us will own - how it is valued, how it is regulated and how it can contribute to our general welfare.’

Home ownership is part of the Kiwi dream, and as such, the government is actively involved in supporting new homeowners via the KiwiSaver HomeStart scheme.

According to Dr Smith’s 2015 speech, the scheme would provide ‘financial assistance to 90,000 first home buyers’. In 2017, Te Ururoa Flavell of the Maori Party stated the Pathways to Home Ownership Te Ara Mauwhare would provide ‘NZ\$9 million over 3 years to trial innovative approaches helping whānau achieve more housing independence’.

Quality

In this fourth frame, we hear from then Energy and Resources Minister Simon Bridges and Health Minister Jonathan Coleman in May 2016 concerning government investment in

this area. For example, the Ministers stated that an investment of NZ\$36 million was being made ‘to ensure more New Zealand families live in warmer, drier and healthier homes’.

Indeed, support was being offered to landlords through the initiative, Warm Up New Zealand to provide ‘incentives ... to insulate, including 50% financial assistance, to support [landlords] in meeting requirements of the Residential Tenancies Act’.

Findings aid understanding

These initial findings demonstrate various frames the government uses to define the issue of housing supply and affordability in New Zealand. They are a device to help understand how multiple messages may be deciphered and balanced with some outcomes privileged over others.

The four frames are not equal, with a significant dominance of the two primary frames, which may have consequences for

interpretation and practice. There was also evidence of potential conflict. For example, regulation on housing quality could be needed for better insulation, but this could also be construed as more red tape.

Future steps

Now the frames are developed, they will be used to better understand:

- how they may contrast with frames operating at the city scale of politics
- the decision outcomes in practice
- how this may vary spatially.

The complexity in framing housing supply and affordability as an issue, therefore, requires a multi-faceted, contextual response to better balance the various agendas of better homes and liveable spaces for every New Zealander. ◀

