

Manawatū Tenants' Union

Housing Today

Annual Report 2020



**Manawatū
Tenants'
Union**

MTU Committee and Staff

Chairperson

Lawrence O'Halloran

Secretary

Izzy Pat

Treasurer/s

Leigh Basile
Lorna Ryland

Committee Members

Leigh Basile
Jean Hera
Kelly Renata
Kathleen Stephens
Judith Lacy

Coordinator

Ben Schmidt

Administrator and Analyst

Daniel Ryland

Data Entry Volunteer

Jeremy Parry

With thanks to those who have served on the committee in the past year and previously for their leadership and contributions.

And Kevin Reilly, Lifetime member of the Manawatu Tenants' Union

With acknowledgement to:

- Ministry of Social Development
- Palmerston North City Council
- Massey University Students' Association
- Palmerston North Community Services Council,
- Community Organisation Grants Scheme,
- Catholic Diocese of Palmerston North,
- Thomas MCarthy Trust.
- Lottery Community Funding
- Lion Foundation
- Tenant Advocates' Network
- Housing Advice Centre
- Mediaworks
- Palmerston North District Court
- Manawatu Homes Budgeting Services
- UCOL

Thanks also to our many valued supporters and partners across the community.

MTU Coordinator's Report 2020

Ben Schmidt, Coordinator

Growing numbers of tenant issues and COVID-19 have defined this year to date. Strong welfare support for tenants and the community during COVID-19 has yet to develop into longer term changes for a fairer society where all people can enjoy stable, warm, dry, where and housing as a basic human right. This report comments on:

- Tenancy Issues and Trends
- Societal Advocacy
- Community Engagement and Relationships
- Internal changes
- What's next

Tenancy Issues and Trends

Primary issues facing tenants continue to be sub-standard housing and evictions/termination of tenancies. We are increasingly working with tenants and people experiencing homelessness, acknowledging that this has been influenced by our adoption of a more consistent definition of homelessness. While MTU is a Manawatū organisation, we have worked at times with tenants across the country; including on the East Coast, South Island, Wellington, Auckland, and surrounding towns and cities.

In contrast to previous years, MTU has represented tenants at the tenancy tribunal on several occasions. Awards by the Tenancy Tribunal continue to not fully reflect the impact of housing issues on tenants, which we hope will be improved by the upcoming Residential Tenancies Act (RTA) Amendment Bill.

COVID-19 saw new contacts drop significantly, with flatmates and boarders especially vulnerable during Level 4. This was accompanied by a major increase in support available to tenants alongside a reduction in barriers to emergency housing. As COVID protections for tenants are dropped by the government, we are again working with more tenants than the same time last year.

Of significant concern is the continued lack of rent control to limit rent increases. Over the past few years, this has been a major issue. With the rent freeze in place until September 2020, it is crucial that restrictions are placed on rent increases emerging from this period as unemployment is predicted to peak. Coinciding with the election, this will likely be a make or break moment for advancing tenant rights.

The impact of Kainga Ora moving towards a social focus has been hugely encouraging for our mahi, and for the tenants we work with. More importantly, it demonstrates the need for more state housing, the failure of the private market, and that a better renting system is possible.

Collecting feedback continues to prove challenging, however the feedback gained is overwhelmingly positive. The *Data Report* provides a more comprehensive outline of our advice and advocacy work over the last year.

Societal Advocacy

MTU continues to engage nationally with the Tenant Advocate Network, and has attended hui in other regions to support the development of tenant advocacy organisations and practice.

In response to a lack of stronger government action on COVID-19 for renters, we organised an open letter to Ministers calling for stronger COVID-19 protections for tenants, signed by fourteen other national and local organisations.

In addition to regular lobbying and campaigning, we have made at least five different submissions for local and national government proposals. The Palmerston North City Council has continued to set an example for local government by further building social housing and retaining subsidised rent.

Domestic violence continues to be a significant issue for tenants and the community, leading to MTU working to join the Manawatū Abuse Intervention Network, organising a hui on strengthening tenancy rights for abuse survivors, building partner relationships, and lobbying the government for stronger protections in this area.

Community Engagement and Relationships

Community engagement and events has included both education seminars with community organisations, and public events/expos. Engagement with media has included our continued Access Radio *Flatting Today Show*, and mention in *Stuff*, *NZ Herald*, *RNZ*, *Mediaworks*, amongst others.

Partnership and whanaungatanga is crucial to our practice and achieving positive outcomes for tenants. Formally, this includes MoU's held with the Housing Advice Centre and Manawatu Home Budgeting Services. Informally, we value and utilise relationships with a range of community workers and organisations who are invaluable to the work we do.

Internal changes

Joined by some new faces on the MTU committee, we have seen an ongoing review of MTU Policies and further work on improving procedures. MTU welcomed Jeremy Parry to join the MTU team in entering data and conducting data analysis as a volunteer, which is greatly appreciated. Kerry Howe, RSW and former committee member, continues to provide free supervision for myself which is greatly appreciated.

What Next?

Moving forwards, MTU will continue to support increasing numbers of tenants, requiring work on building our capability. However we can not focus on charity at the cost of social justice. Structural change is essential for housing to be a basic human right. It is this kaupapa that drives us as we advocate for change through empowering tenants both locally and nationally in the coming year.

