Mixed income, mixed tenure communities is a term used in this sector for creating successful communities where housing developments are involved. But what do we mean by this? In this article, CHA’s Hope Simonsen and Angie Cairncross explore what a good mixed income, mixed tenure community looks like with Dominic Foote of the New Zealand Housing Foundation.

Thriving communities are those that people want to live in. These are communities that have a strong, positive identity that recognise and value diversity. People who live in these communities have access to quality services, transport and schools. Businesses thrive and there are employment opportunities. Housing is well designed and is of a good quality and neighbourhoods have attractive public spaces.

A mix of housing tenure is part of this picture and, in housing redevelopment projects, contributes to improving the desirability of neighbourhoods. It promotes greater choice and opportunity for existing and new residents. It enables people to stay in the communities they have formed connections with.

So what is this term ‘mixed tenure’ all about? Tenure is the term to describe how a home is held or occupied. Typically they are owned or rented by the family. When rented, the property may be owned privately, by the state or by community housing provider landlords. Mixed tenure is any community where these forms of rental and ownership co-exist. Private homes include those that are owner-occupied and those held as rental investments. Social housing includes social and affordable rentals provided by the state or community housing providers, including shared ownership and assisted ownership.

Applying mixed tenure to the regeneration of areas is intended to do two things: one is to integrate private ownership and rental in areas where a high concentration of low income households have existed, largely through state rental housing. The other is to create new or replacement affordable and social housing as part of the redevelopment project.

Mixed communities have been successful in improving external perceptions of neighbourhoods, making the area more desirable and avoiding the stigmatisation associated with mono-tenure areas. This is particularly the case where it is visually difficult to distinguish between the tenure of residents. Often referred to as ‘tenure blind’, homes for private sale and those built for social rental purposes are purposefully designed to be similar to mask the tenure, assisting better social integration without affecting property prices. Tenure blind housing design emphasises the similarities between residents, instead of the differences.- that families and people need good housing!

More than just tenure mix is required for successful communities. Communities require well-designed homes in high quality, planned environments with access to quality services. They also require interventions to address problems of disadvantage such as economic and social exclusion. There needs to be a focus on community cohesion, fostering a sense of belonging, identity, tolerance, respect and engagement with people from different backgrounds cultures and beliefs. Communities are not grown over night, cohesive neighbourhoods need community development support to be sustainable. In most cases, it is the thoughtful work of community housing providers over many years that facilitate and lead this work in partnership with the local community.
If this is achieved, long term benefits from can be seen in people staying longer in their neighbourhoods. With mixed tenure, there is more choice for people to achieve their housing aspirations within the same community. Where there are more housing options they are able to move through from social rental to assisted and market rental (along the housing continuum) and then on to home ownership within the same area. Balanced neighbourhoods also tend to be more self-managing, requiring less outside intervention than areas with high concentrations of low income households. This creates financial and social benefits for all and stability for families and households who benefit from sustained connections in their community.

In 2008 the New Zealand Housing Foundation (HF) commenced the development of 73 new homes in what was probably New Zealand’s first truly mixed tenure larger scale housing development off West Coast Road in Auckland. Dominic Foote of HF says that mixed-tenure communities need considerable pre-planning before being set-up. The HF experience at West Coast Road showed the importance of understanding the housing needs of the community and applying place making principles that shapes the masterplan density and layout design while informing at the neighbourhood plan, at the street level the mix of housing tenure and typology. This we believe enables stronger community cohesion while avoiding as best as is possible concentrations of a type of tenure or typology.

“We didn’t want to build a homogeneous, unconnected new development in the middle of an existing neighbourhood. Rather we wanted the development to recognise the diversity of this West Auckland neighbourhood, where there was a choice of affordable tenures meeting different household needs. We sought to create a sustainable community where residents supported each other and connected in to the wider community.”

Understanding the typology of houses in the area, which were largely three bedrooms, in conjunction with the demographic demands for larger homes and smaller two bedroom options, was important in developing the master plan. Shared home ownership, rent to buy, affordable rental and social housing (through HNZ) were included in the design in recognition of the high number of renters in the area.

“We then took our ideas and housing tenures out to talk with the local community, community organisations and Waitakere City Council.”

“We’ve learned from our West Coast Road experience that this is the time when it is important to start working with households and other community housing providers who have shown an interest in the housing being offered. This goes a long way towards developing community cohesion within the finished development. In the mixed tenure developments we’re delivering, we now bring together small groups of approved households before they move in to their home so they can meet the households who will be their neighbours, learn about the development, and what is expected of them. This is important for place-making.”

What the HF did at West Coast Road was hold a number of interactive neighbourhood events. “As we finished stages within the development so we brought the new households together for BBQ’s as a means of socialising and to give them the idea that this is a simple and easy way of connecting with your neighbours. HF also organised tree planting and landscaping community events which were even attended by local councillors. This afforded neighbours the chance to get to know each other and start networking. Other communities have introduced other tools for staying in touch, for instance in Waimahia all households can belong to a private Facebook page managed and operated by the local households. This seems to work really well.”

“What community housing providers need to realise is it’s not the CHPs community – the community is the people living there, it’s their community. CHPs can initiate the resources and facilitate the initial engagement but then it’s time to back-out and let the community organise things. This is what community development is about.”
Vicki Hamm, a resident of another HF development says, "There is great community spirit in the street. We all look out for each other and each other's properties. I knew nothing about gardening and I've never had the need to own a lawn mower until now. It's great to have neighbours who are there to give gardening advice and help me out. They share their ideas and gardening products."¹

Research by Julie McKenzie of Nexus Planning and Research, in 2014 on West Coast Road found that there were many positive outcomes for residents and that the mixed-tenure environment was working well. She found that a strong sense of community had been key to improved quality of life. This was driven by residents shared commitment and stake in the community. ²

"Community life is the single biggest driver of changed quality of life. In other words, the residents who experienced a big improvement in their enjoyment of the community are the residents most likely to have also experienced an improvement in their quality of life. This means that not only has NZHF been successful in creating a strong community, but that this community has been effective in improving quality of life. This finding underscores the importance of community building as a way of improving quality of life in future developments."³

CHA supports greater understanding of the principles behind mixed income, mixed tenure community development. Upskilling our colleagues in government, developers and across the community housing sector to achieve best practice in this area will take time. But the rewards are huge, it’s one of the things we can all do to achieve better outcomes for communities, individuals and families.

Dominic Foote will be presenting at the AHI Mixed Tenure Housing Professional seminar on 29 November

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¹ www.nzhf.org retrieved 10/11/2016