What the media told New Zealand about housing

September 2026

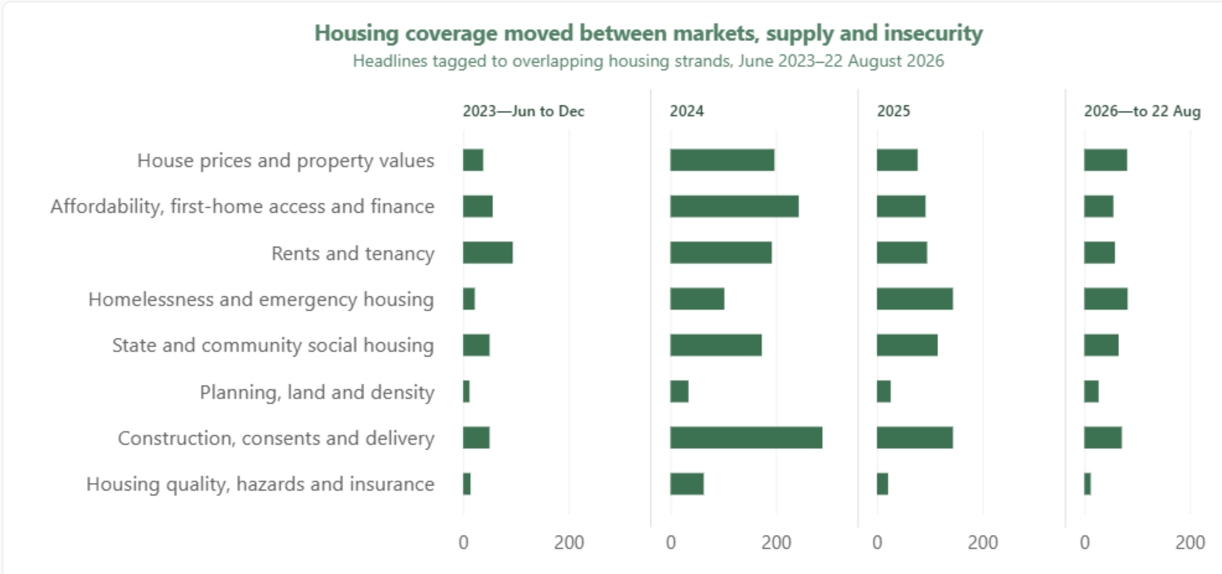
Prices, pressures and the missing connections

Lilly Herds
SocialHerds

Contents

1 Executive summary

This report examines what New Zealand's media told—and enabled New Zealanders to understand—about housing between June 2023 and 22 August 2026. It analyses approximately 3,800 housing headlines published across 109 outlets. Housing represented 4.6% of the 82,390 headlines in the wider Social Herds record and remained one of the country's most frequently reported public-policy issues.



The coverage spanned house prices, rents, homeownership, mortgages, homelessness, public and social housing, construction, planning, and housing quality. Attention shifted as market conditions and government policies changed. Construction and delivery were particularly prominent in 2024, while homelessness and emergency housing became more visible in 2025. Lower counts in the partial 2026 period may reflect changing conditions or news priorities; what is unclear is whether the underlying problems improved.

The reporting showed substantial activity. House prices and mortgage rates fell from earlier peaks, improving access for some first-home buyers. Homes were proposed, enabled and completed; planning and building-control settings changed; emergency-motel use fell; and Kāinga Ora underwent major financial and operational reform.

Media coverage did not establish that New Zealand achieved a net increase in suitable, affordable and occupied homes in the places of greatest need. Lower prices did not make ownership broadly affordable. Housing shortages were described using inconsistent measures. Social-housing announcements were not always followed through to completed and occupied homes. Falling emergency-housing numbers did not provide a complete account of people denied assistance or remaining in other forms of housing insecurity.

The **strongest finding is a lack of continuity across the housing system and its coverage**. Headlines commonly reported one stage—a shortage, policy announcement, rezoning, approval, consent or completed development—without following the full pathway to infrastructure, finance, construction, occupation and affordability. Responsibility was divided among central government, councils, housing agencies, developers, financiers and service providers, with no single institution controlling the complete result.

These gaps leave five challenges requiring continuing scrutiny:

I. whether additional housing matches local need and is genuinely affordable;

II. whether homelessness is declining rather than moving beyond the measures being reported;

III. whether planning and Fast-track approvals are supported by funded infrastructure and commercially feasible construction;

IV. whether building-control reform protects owners from defects and transferred liability; and

V. whether zoning, construction and insurance decisions are reducing climate and natural-hazard risks rather than passing future costs to owners, insurers, ratepayers and taxpayers.

The report shows that housing pressures, policy activity and political disagreement were made highly visible.

What the reporting did not resolve was whether more New Zealanders obtained safe, suitable and lasting homes at a sustainable cost.

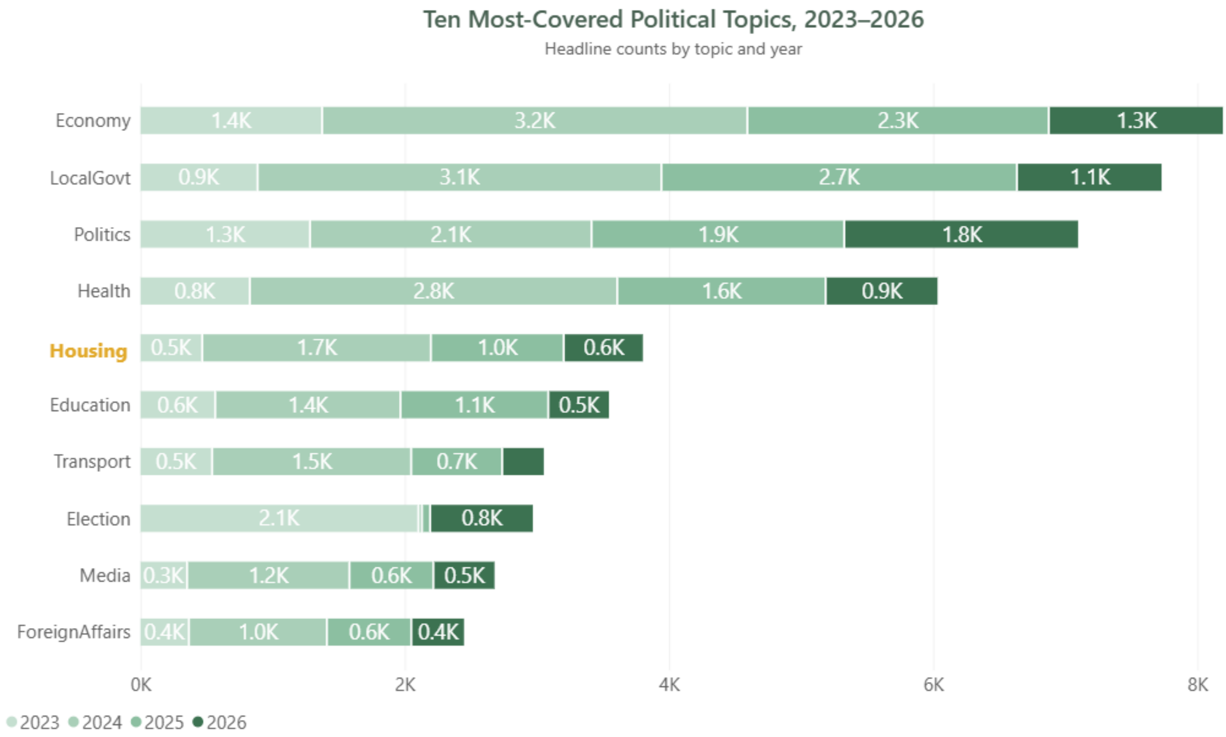
2 Background

2.1 Housing is a persistent public issue

Housing was one of the most frequently reported topics in the Social Herds headline record. Between June 2023 and 22 August 2026, 3,802 of the 82,390 recorded headlines—approximately 4.6%—were classified under Housing. Coverage appeared across 109 media outlets. Housing ranked seventh by headline volume in the partial 2023 period, ninth in 2024, seventh in 2025 and equal fourth in 2026 to 22 August.

FIGURE 1

The prominence given to housing by New Zealand media



Frequency alone does not prove that housing conditions worsened or that policies failed. It does show that **housing has remained a substantial and contested public issue**. The focus of coverage also changed. Prices, rents, public housing, homelessness, construction and first-home access moved in and out of prominence as market conditions and government policies changed.

"The housing crisis" is not one measurable problem. Headlines may describe a shortage of homes, unaffordable prices, rising rents, homelessness, inadequate infrastructure, falling property values or insufficient construction. These conditions can exist simultaneously and may require different responses.

2.2 One debate contains several different problems

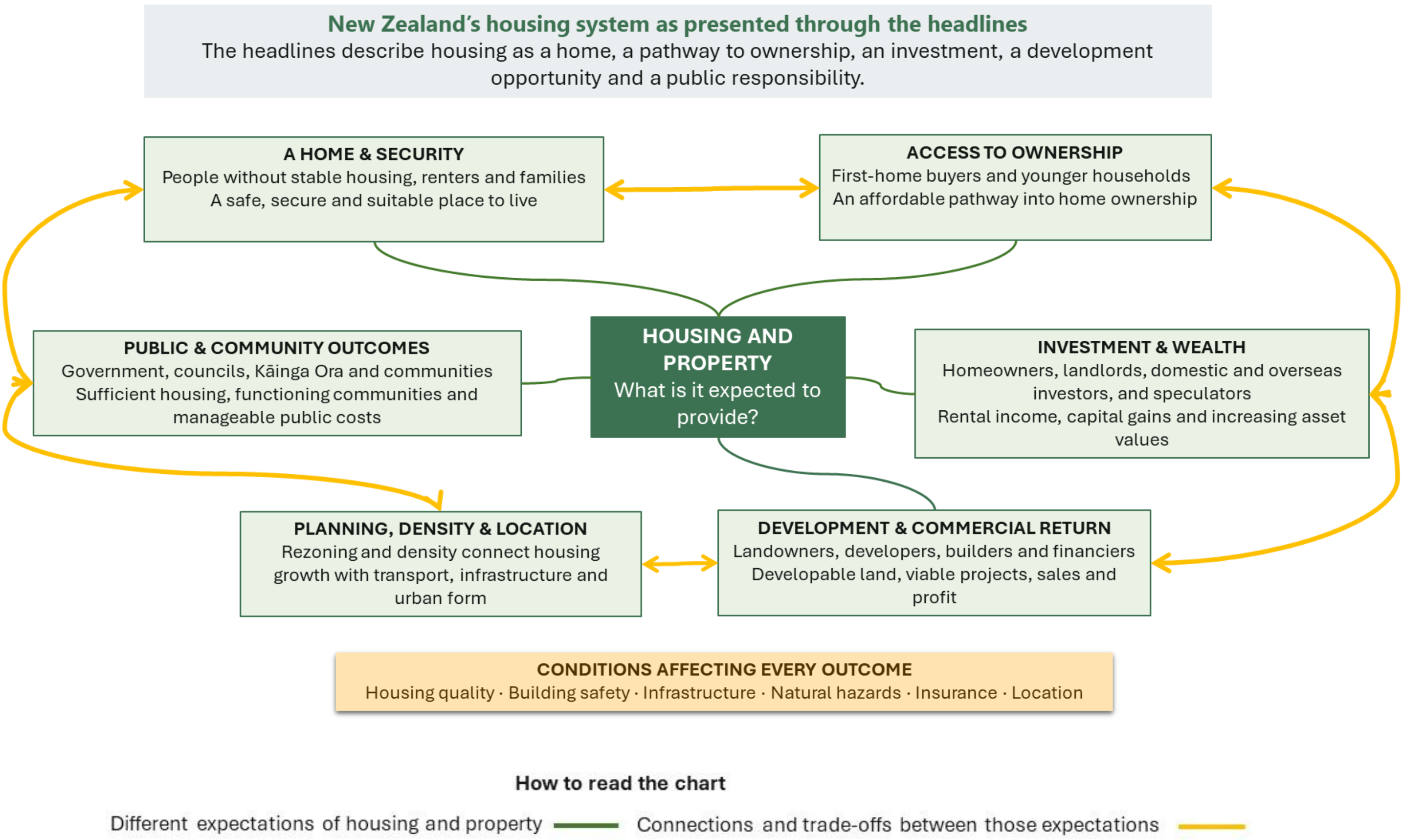
The housing system is expected to provide different outcomes for different groups. People without stable accommodation need a safe and secure home. Renters need suitable housing at a manageable cost. First-home buyers need an affordable pathway into ownership. Existing homeowners and investors may seek financial security, rental income or increasing asset values. Developers require commercially viable projects. Central government, councils and Kāinga Ora must consider housing need, infrastructure, urban form, hazards and public cost.

These expectations can reinforce one another, but they can also conflict. Falling prices may improve access for some first-home buyers while reducing the equity of recent purchasers. Rezoning may enable more homes near employment and public transport, but it can also increase land values, require infrastructure upgrades, and generate disputes about neighbourhood form. New development may increase overall supply without producing the affordable rentals, public housing or supported accommodation required by people in greatest need.

The relevant question is not simply whether a policy increases "housing supply". It is which housing problem the policy is intended to address, for whom, in which places and how success will be measured.

FIGURE 2

New Zealand's housing system as presented through the headlines



The same housing change can be experienced as an opportunity, a cost or a risk, depending on what people need housing and property to achieve.

2.2.1 The measurement gap

Media coverage and political claims do not consistently assess housing against the same problem or measure. An increase in consents or zoned capacity may be presented as progress even when homes are not built, rents remain unaffordable, or social housing demand continues to rise. Falling prices may improve access for some first-home buyers while reducing the wealth of existing owners, and national supply figures may conceal severe shortages in particular places.

The headline record therefore identifies numerous housing pressures but does not provide a consistent basis for determining whether New Zealand's overall housing position is improving or deteriorating. Stronger conclusions—and stronger political accountability—would require comparable measures of local housing need, affordability, infrastructure readiness, completed and occupied homes, net social housing supply, housing quality, and the number of people waiting for assistance.

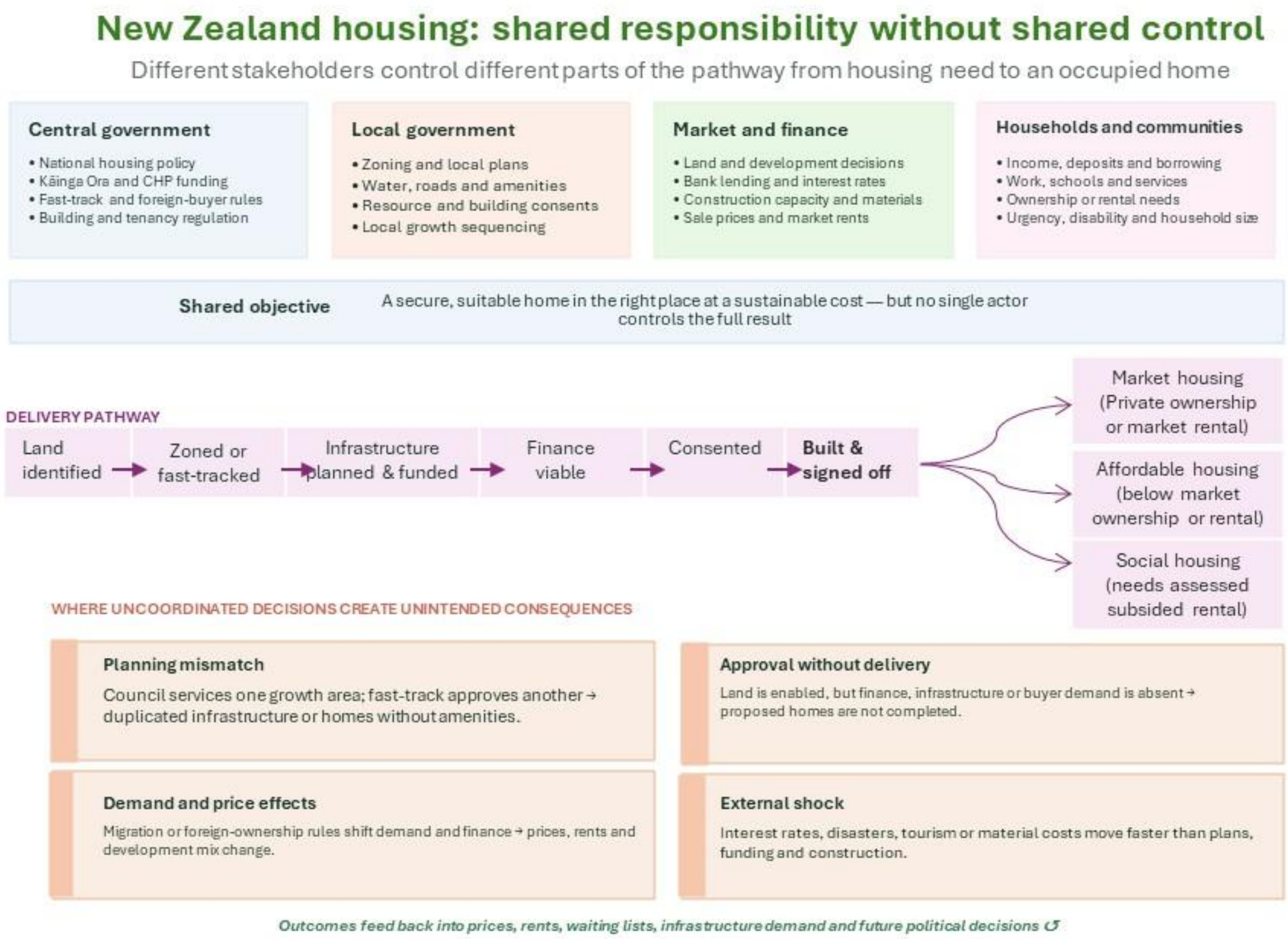
Without consistent measures, additional housing capacity can be reported as success even when it does not produce suitable, affordable and occupied homes in the places of greatest need.

3 Housing markets, need and delivery

The headline record most often returned to prices and values, rents and tenancy, public and social housing, homelessness, construction and first-home access. The emphasis changed over time. Construction and delivery were especially prominent in 2024, while homelessness and emergency housing became more visible in 2025. Rents remained a substantial strand throughout the period.

Planning, density, infrastructure and housing quality received less headline attention. This does not mean they were less important. It suggests that the stages connecting proposed supply with safe, serviced and occupied homes were less consistently visible than market movements, individual developments and immediate housing pressures.

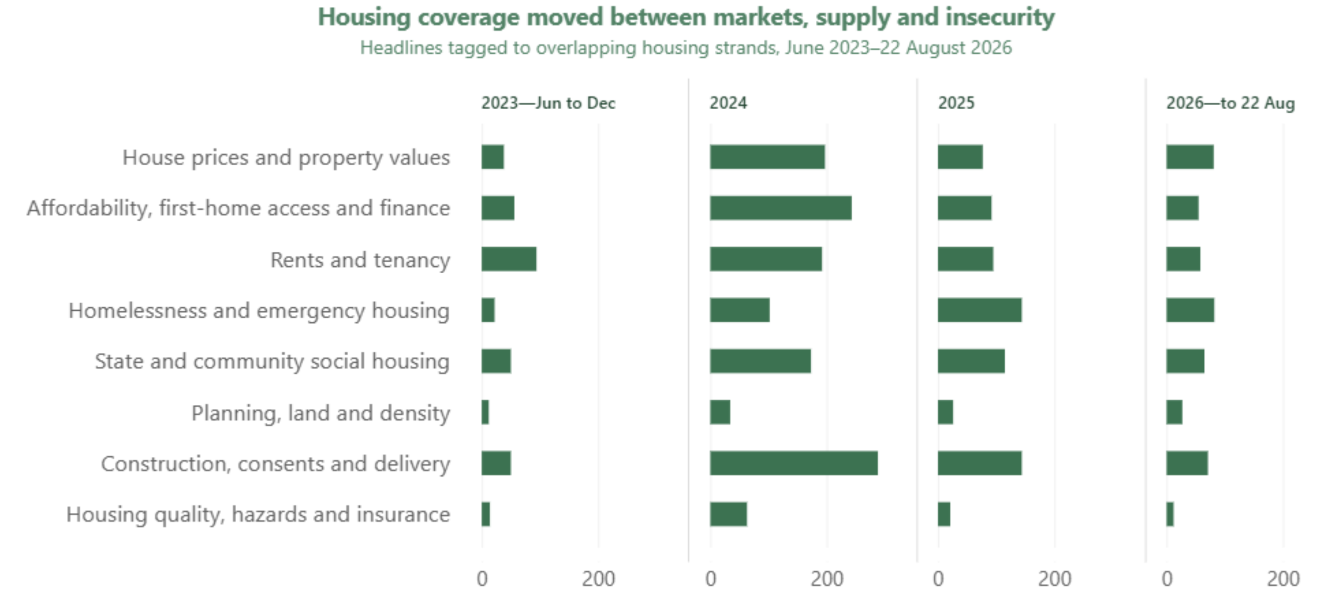
FIGURE 3



Housing delivery is divided among institutions controlling different parts of the system. Central government sets national policy and funding; councils control local planning, infrastructure and consenting; developers and financiers determine whether projects are commercially viable; and housing providers influence who ultimately receives or occupies the homes.

No single institution controls the complete pathway from identified land to an occupied home. Planning mismatches, unfunded infrastructure, commercial constraints and external shocks can interrupt delivery at any stage. This makes it difficult to determine who is accountable when shared housing objectives are not achieved.

FIGURE 4



Headlines may be tagged to more than one strand and should not be added together. The 2023 and 2026 periods are partial years.

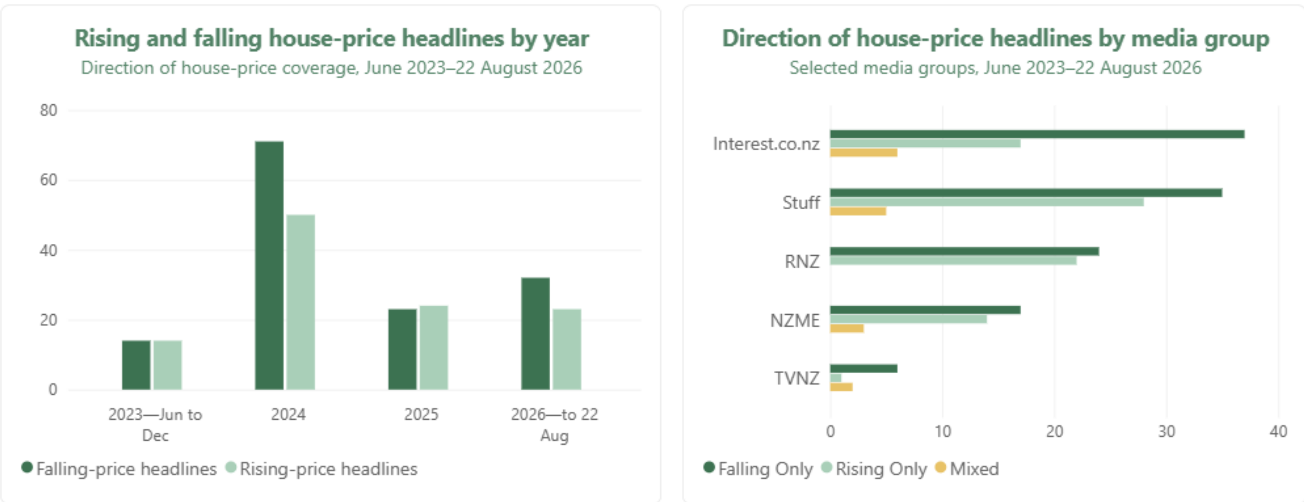
The graph shows what attracted headline attention, not whether any housing problem improved. Assessing progress requires continuity between the problem identified, the policy response, the homes delivered and the effect on households.

3.1 Housing markets, finance and access to ownership

3.1.1 What happened to house prices and values?

House-price coverage illustrates the competing expectations placed on housing. Falling or weakening prices received more headline attention than rising or recovering prices, particularly in 2024. The balance also differed among media groups: *Interest.co.nz* gave substantial and sustained attention to falling prices, Stuff produced the greatest volume among the general-news groups shown, and RNZ's coverage was almost evenly divided between rising and falling prices.

FIGURE 5 House-price coverage told different stories across time and media



Annual results show overlapping keyword tags: 17 headlines contain both rising and falling signals. Media-group results separate headlines into falling-only, rising-only and mixed categories. Figures measure headline attention and framing, not actual house-price movements. The 2023 and 2026 periods are partial years.

3.1.2 Did price movements improve affordability?

Falling prices improved opportunities for some first-home buyers, but the headline record did not show that housing became broadly affordable.

Only 24 falling-price headlines explicitly connected the market movement to a person, institution or wider consequence. Lower prices were presented as an opportunity for first-home buyers, but also as insufficient to make homes genuinely affordable, a loss of equity for recent purchasers, a risk for households selling after buying near the market peak and a possible constraint on construction and economic activity.

The contrasting headlines made this tension visible. Stuff reported in February 2024 that falling prices had not improved affordability, while RNZ reported in June that a market decline had wiped out a family's deposit. In July, RNZ reported that prices would need to fall a further 16% to become affordable. By August 2026, the *New Zealand Herald* was reporting both losses for purchasers who bought near the 2021 peak and a record market share for first-home buyers as prices retreated.

Lower prices and affordable prices are not the same. Affordability also depends on household income, deposit requirements and mortgage costs. The available coverage therefore supports a limited conclusion: falling prices helped some buyers enter the market but did not demonstrate that suitable housing had become affordable to most households seeking ownership.

3.1.3 What did mortgages and finance mean for access to ownership?

Lower house prices improved the opportunity to buy, but mortgage costs, deposits and lending rules continued to determine who could act on that opportunity.

The Official Cash Rate was an important influence. The Reserve Bank used the OCR to influence borrowing costs and inflation, while banks set the mortgage rates they offered to customers. Mortgage rates did not move automatically or by the same amount as the OCR because banks also considered wholesale funding costs, deposit rates, risk and competition.

The headline record made this relationship visible. A directional search identified:

- 32 housing headlines referring to the OCR, RBNZ or Reserve Bank
- 47 reporting bank mortgage-rate or lending decisions
- 41 explicitly referring to mortgage or home-loan rates
- 34 referring to deposits, LVRs, DTIs or other lending requirements.

During 2023, headlines repeatedly reported ANZ, ASB, BNZ, Kiwibank and Westpac increasing home-loan rates, with some advertised rates approaching 8%. Coverage also reported banks testing borrowers' ability to service loans at rates of approximately 8.75% to 9.5%.

During 2024, expectations of OCR reductions and changes in funding conditions were followed by cuts to mortgage rates. Some banks reduced fixed rates before the OCR began falling, while later headlines asked how far and how quickly home-loan rates would decline. Competition became more visible through reports of "mortgage wars", banks undercutting rivals, cashbacks and record levels of switching among mortgage holders.

The Reserve Bank also changed access through lending rules. Headlines followed the relaxation of loan-to-value restrictions, the introduction of debt-to-income limits from July 2024 and banks increasingly lending to first-home buyers with deposits below 20%. These changes expanded access for some households, but deposits and bank serviceability tests continued to exclude others.

The coverage therefore showed what the Reserve Bank and individual banks did: the OCR changed, lending restrictions were adjusted and banks raised or lowered advertised mortgage rates. It provided less scrutiny of whether banks passed on reductions in funding costs fully and promptly, how mortgage margins changed, or how much competition reduced the rates customers actually paid.

The answer is consequently mixed. **Affordability depended on the combined cost of the home and its finance—not the sale price alone.**

- **Lower prices and later mortgage-rate reductions helped some first-home buyers enter the market, particularly those able to use KiwiSaver, family assistance or low-deposit lending.**
- **Lower prices did not remove the underlying barriers faced by households lacking sufficient income, deposits or access to credit.**

3.1.4 Political expectations were divided

Political disagreement became unusually explicit. National's Housing Minister, Chris Bishop, was associated with efforts to reduce prices and to separate economic growth from house-price inflation. In August 2025, Stuff reported that Bishop wanted prices to fall while Prime Minister Christopher Luxon wanted them to rise. RNZ reported Luxon's preference for rising prices on the same day.

Labour argued in 2024 that affordability could improve if wages rose sufficiently without prices falling. In August 2026, Labour MP Helen White was reported to want prices to fall, showing that tension also existed within Labour's position.

These were not merely disagreements about market forecasts. They reflected competing ideas about what housing should achieve. **Rising prices may increase the wealth of existing owners, while falling prices may improve access for people excluded from ownership**. However, falling prices can also result in losses for recent purchasers and weaken the commercial case for new development.

3.2 How much housing is needed—and where?

3.2.1 Private-market housing

The 3,802 housing headlines do not yield a single settled estimate of how many additional homes New Zealand requires. A conservative keyword search identified 24 headlines referring to a housing shortage, shortfall, or insufficient supply, compared with 5 referring to a glut, surplus, or oversupply. Most concerned a particular location, population or type of housing rather than a single national deficit.

National estimates sometimes pointed in different directions. In March 2024, the *New Zealand Herald* reported Westpac's estimate that New Zealand needed 125,000 homes over five years to accommodate high migration. In September 2025, RNZ reported that construction had outpaced population growth in Auckland and Wellington, while a later 1News article challenged the wider national shortage narrative.

These claims may have been valid within their respective periods, places and definitions. "Housing need" can mean an overall shortage of dwellings, insufficient affordable rentals, inadequate public housing, a lack of homes in particular locations or a mismatch between available homes and the households requiring them.

Regional headlines reported shortages in Tauranga, Southland, Northland, Waikato, Rotorua, Wellington and Queenstown. However, the measures differed and were seldom followed over time.

Media content rarely specified whether subsequent construction reduced the reported shortage or merely increased the number of homes planned, consented or available at unaffordable prices.

3.2.2 Social housing provides a clearer accountability test

Social housing offers a more direct accountability test because government commitments and identified need can both be counted. In December 2023, 1News reported that the public-housing waiting list exceeded 25,000 households. In May 2024, it reported that funding released by ending the First Home

Grant would support 1,500 social homes. Later headlines recorded projects being cancelled, reduced or reconsidered. In July 2026, Stuff reported that 270 of those 1,500 homes had been built.

The 270 figure relates to that programme rather than all social housing delivered by the Government. Its importance lies in the continuity of the reporting: an announced commitment was revisited against completed delivery.

The accountability sequence is:

Identified need → government commitment → funded programme → net homes completed → suitable occupation → change in the original problem

Headlines made housing pressure and government activity visible but rarely connected every stage. Waiting lists, rezoning, consents, announcements and proposed developments frequently appeared as separate stories. Consequently, enabled capacity or announced supply could be presented as progress without demonstrating that suitable homes had reached the households experiencing need.

3.2.3 The geographic accountability gap

Housing need depends on population and household growth, but also on income, household size, age, disability, migration, dwelling condition, vacancy, replacement demand and the required mix of ownership, rental, public and supported housing.

National totals can conceal substantial regional differences. One area may have enough dwellings overall but lack affordable rentals or accessible homes. Another may have extensive zoned capacity but insufficient infrastructure or commercial demand to produce completed housing.

The media identified housing pressures in particular places and reported supply decisions elsewhere. What it rarely provided was a consistent comparison of how many homes each place needed, what types and tenures were required, what was delivered and whether delivery reduced the original pressure.

The Queenstown, Northland, Wellington and Auckland case studies illustrate why a single national housing number is insufficient.

3.3 Place-based case studies

3.3.1 Queenstown: development without sufficient workforce housing

The dataset contains 42 Queenstown-area housing headlines. Collectively, they present a place experiencing substantial development and investment while facing severe difficulty housing its workforce. Headlines described people living in cars, shacks and garages; rising rents and property values; worker shortages; demand for affordable housing; luxury sales; foreign buyers; visitor accommodation; and major proposed developments.

The coverage demonstrates the difference between additional dwellings and homes meeting local need. Visitor accommodation and luxury development can support investment and tourism while competing with long-term housing. A proposed 1,200-home Fast-track development may increase planning capacity without establishing the price, tenure, infrastructure readiness or eventual use of those homes.

Political accountability was limited. No headline named an individual politician or political party. Four explicitly referred to local government, while Fast-track coverage indirectly involved central government. The consequences were therefore more visible than responsibility or results.

Queenstown's unresolved question is whether approved development will produce secure and affordable workforce housing—and which institution will be accountable if it does not.

3.3.2 Northland: severe social need, reduced plans and completed delivery

The **22 Northland-area headlines concentrated on social housing**, homelessness and people unable to secure a basic home. They reported people living in cars, Kāinga Ora developments being reduced or placed on hold, alternative provision being announced, state properties being sold and continuing pressure on the waiting list.

The record also contained evidence of delivery. A 95-home Kāinga Ora development at Kauika Road in Whangārei was completed in June 2026 and expected to accommodate approximately 320 residents. However, this significant completion received limited visible national amplification.

Northland's coverage held central government and Kāinga Ora to account for reduced projects, asset sales and the continuing need.

What remained unresolved was the net result: whether completed and proposed homes outweighed cancellations, deferrals and sales, matched the locations and household types requiring assistance and reduced the waiting list.

3.3.3 Wellington: capacity, affordability and heritage

The **182 Wellington-area headlines offered apparently conflicting accounts of supply.** They referred to thousands of proposed fast-track homes, abundant land on which developers could not afford to build, construction outpacing population growth and a later claim that Wellington remained 17,400 homes short.

These claims may have measured different things: existing dwellings, future household growth, zoned capacity, commercially feasible development, infrastructure-ready land or affordable housing. Their apparent contradiction shows why "housing supply" requires a precise definition.

Coverage also followed disputes over heritage, character areas, density, the District Plan and ministerial intervention. Changing these rules may increase theoretical capacity near employment and services, but it does not ensure that development will be commercially feasible, supported by infrastructure or affordable. Ministers, the council, courts, and Kāinga Ora all came under scrutiny for particular decisions.

What remained under the radar was their combined effect on net additions of infrastructure-ready, financially feasible and affordable housing.

3.3.4 Auckland: central–local conflict within the largest housing system

Auckland was the most prominent geographic housing story, with 280 place-linked headlines. Coverage included prices, ownership, rents, homelessness, zoning, density, public housing, vacant Kāinga Ora land, building quality, flood exposure and Fast-track development.

The relationship between central and local government was particularly visible. Headlines followed disagreements between Mayor Wayne Brown and Housing Minister Chris Bishop over density, national planning requirements, intensification around train stations and the balance between existing urban areas and greenfield expansion.

Auckland's headlines also demonstrated that additional market capacity does not automatically address urgent housing need. They reported abandoned Kāinga Ora plans, potentially valuable state homes being sold, youth homelessness and an increase in visible homelessness.

Central and local government were held to account for their disputes and individual decisions. Less visible was whether planning changes, infrastructure investment, fast-track approvals and public-housing decisions collectively produced a net increase in safe, serviced and affordable homes.

3.4 Section findings: markets, need and delivery

- **What was done:**
  Central government, councils, housing agencies and developers changed planning settings, enabled development and delivered or proposed housing through different parts of the system.

- **What received scrutiny:**
  Headlines examined house prices, mortgage costs, planning disputes, social-housing decisions and individual developments. Responsibility became most visible when central and local government disagreed or projects were cancelled, delayed or sold.

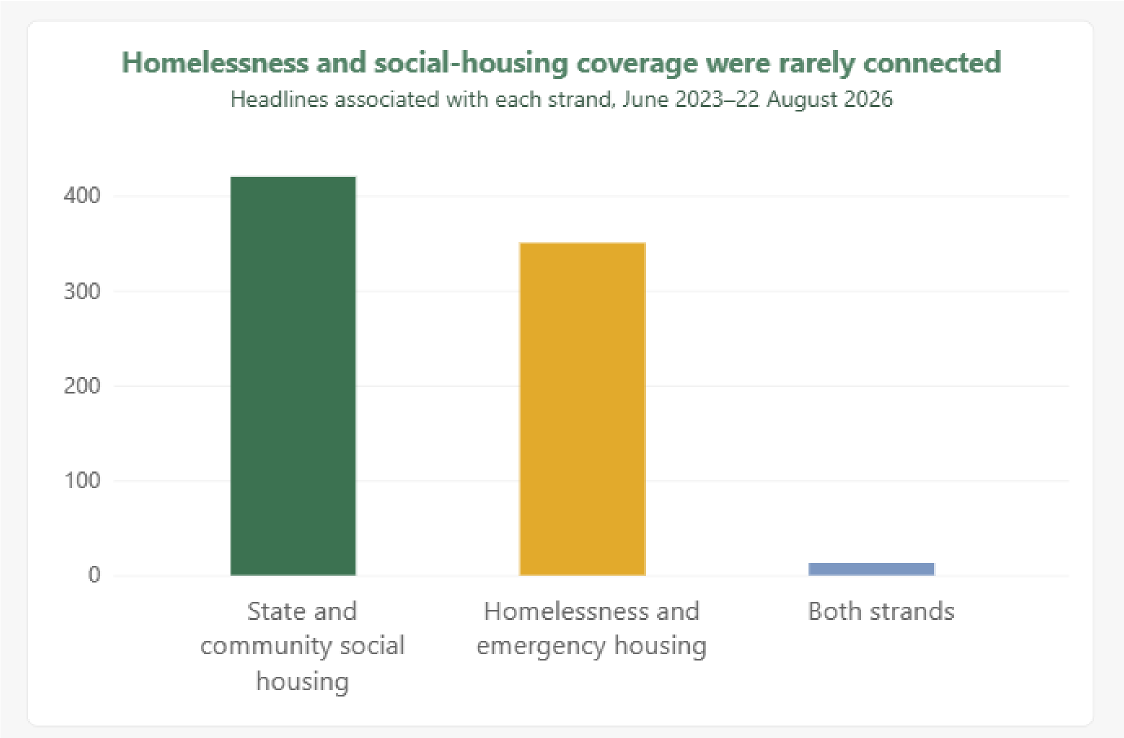
- **What remained under the radar:**
  Coverage rarely followed the complete pathway from identified need to occupied housing. It remained difficult to determine whether the combined decisions of government, councils and private providers produced a net increase in suitable and affordable homes in the places where they were needed.

4 Housing insecurity, homelessness and social housing

Housing insecurity extends beyond the number of dwellings available. It includes people without stable accommodation, households in emergency or transitional housing, applicants waiting for social housing and tenants whose homes are unsuitable, unaffordable or insecure.
A directional search identified ***757*** *unique headlines associated with homelessness and emergency housing or state and community social housing*. There were ***71*** *in the partial 2023 period, 283 in 2024,* ***257*** *in 2025 and* ***146*** *in 2026 to 22 August*. These are measures of headline attention rather than counts of affected people, homes or services.

Only 13 headlines were tagged for both homelessness or emergency housing and social-housing provision. Homelessness was often presented as an immediate human or community problem, while social housing was reported through government decisions, institutional performance and individual developments. Coverage less often connected the number and location of people requiring assistance with the homes available to accommodate them.

FIGURE 6



The first two strands overlap: 13 headlines were associated with both. The figures measure headline attention, not the number of people or homes affected.

Both housing insecurity and social-housing provision received substantial coverage, but only 13 headlines connected the two strands. Homelessness was commonly presented as an immediate human or community problem, while social housing was reported through government decisions, institutional performance and individual developments. Coverage less often examined whether the supply and location of social housing were reducing homelessness or the need for emergency accommodation.

4.1 What the record shows about housing insecurity

The record presents *housing insecurity as a progression rather than a single condition*; that is, households may face high rents, insecure tenancies or unsuitable homes before entering emergency accommodation, sharing overcrowded housing, living in vehicles or becoming visibly homeless. A stable exit depends on more than an available dwelling: the home must also be affordable, suitable and secure.

Headlines reported *rent pressure, emergency accommodation, Housing Register numbers, rough sleeping, people living in vehicles and the experiences of people unable to find permanent housing.* Other headlines covered social-housing construction, paused developments, property sales, tenancy management and changes to eligibility or rental policies.

These strands establish serious housing need but do ***not provide a consistent measure of its scale***. A decline in emergency housing use may reflect successful placement into permanent homes. It may also reflect tighter entry rules, movement into temporary private arrangements or displacement into less visible forms of homelessness.

- **The outcome of emergency housing cannot be assessed without knowing where people went and whether their subsequent housing remained stable.**

4.2 Homelessness and emergency housing

A directional search identified 350 headlines associated with homelessness, emergency or transitional housing, the Housing Register, rough sleeping or people living in vehicles. Coverage increased from 22 headlines in the partial 2023 period to 102 in 2024 and 144 in 2025. A further 82 appeared in 2026 to 22 August.

Homelessness carried a stronger sense of alarm than most other housing strands. Of the 350 headlines, 104 were classified as Alarm, 204 as Reporting, 24 as Analysis and 18 as Opinion. Headlines repeatedly made visible working people living in cars, rough sleepers exposed to severe weather, families moving between temporary accommodation and people living in makeshift camps.

Government policy was also visible. Coverage followed

- efforts to reduce reliance on emergency motels,
- changes to eligibility and enforcement, targets for moving households into other accommodation and
- proposals allowing authorities to direct/ 'move on' rough sleepers and beggars from public places.

Reduced emergency-housing use was frequently presented as an administrative achievement. Other headlines questioned whether it represented durable improvement. By 2026, reporting included increasing rough sleeping, pressure on charities and shelters, people living in vehicles and concern that tighter access and move-on rules were shifting people between systems rather than resolving their need for a home.

4.2.1 What drives homelessness and who the figures miss

Homelessness affects many groups; this report does not attempt to examine each separately. Children, women, Māori and people with complex mental-health or addiction needs are included where their experiences reveal something important about how homelessness is measured or addressed.

Children provide the clearest accountability test because the Government specifically reported that 1,000 fewer children were living in emergency accommodation. This created a need for destination data: information showing whether those leaving moved into lasting social, transitional or private housing, returned for assistance, or entered another form of housing insecurity.

4.2.2 Children and the accountability gap

Children made the accountability gap particularly visible. In August 2024, Stuff reported the Government's claim that 1,000 fewer children were living in emergency accommodation. RNZ reported doubts about whether those children were now in permanent homes, while subsequent Stuff headlines stated that the Government could not say where they had gone and that the Minister was not seeking further answers.

Later headlines reported growing child homelessness, children sleeping rough and families living in vehicles, but did not provide a consistent national count or establish whether these cases were connected to reduced access to emergency housing. The media therefore challenged the Government's measure of success, but the headline record did not resolve what happened to all the children no longer recorded in the system.

4.2.3 System gaps that headline totals do not show

Mental health was rarely connected explicitly to homelessness in the headline record. Of the 350 headlines associated with homelessness and emergency housing, only one directly referred to mental health: an RNZ report in November 2024 about distress and anxiety among Rotorua emergency-housing residents.

The 2026 MSD evaluation provided evidence that was largely absent from the headlines. It found that people remaining in emergency housing were increasingly likely to have complex mental-health or addiction needs. This indicates that accommodation alone may not provide lasting stability and that some people also require appropriate health, addiction and ongoing tenancy support.

Separate headlines exposed different measurement and access gaps. Coverage of women showed how homelessness can remain hidden through couch-surfing, unsafe relationships or exchanging sex for accommodation rather than appearing in street or motel counts. Coverage of Māori raised questions about disproportionate exposure to emergency-housing restrictions and homelessness.

These are distinct issues, but each shows why falling emergency-housing totals provide an incomplete measure of progress. A full assessment must consider who remains outside the figures, what barriers they face, what support they require and whether their alternative accommodation is safe and sustainable.

Government and media reporting made the fall in emergency-housing numbers visible, including a reported reduction of 1,000 children.

Media headlines asked where those children went, but neither the headline record nor published government figures provided a complete account of children who could no longer access the system or remained in other forms of housing insecurity.

The reported decline cannot be treated as an equivalent reduction in homelessness or wider housing insecurity.

4.3 State and community social housing

A directional search identified 420 headlines associated with public, state, social or community housing and Kāinga Ora. Coverage was highest in 2024, when the review of Kāinga Ora brought financial viability, governance and development decisions into sustained public view.

Headlines asked how many homes were required, whether developments were proceeding, why homes or purchased sites remained unused, whether properties should be retained or sold, how existing homes were maintained and whether delivery matched the places and household types experiencing the greatest need.

Community provision was considerably less visible than Kāinga Ora. Only 18 headlines explicitly used the term "community housing" or "community-housing provider", although this is a minimum because some providers were identified by name.

The distinction matters because governments can change who provides social housing without increasing total supply. A larger role for community or iwi providers is not, by itself, evidence of additional housing.

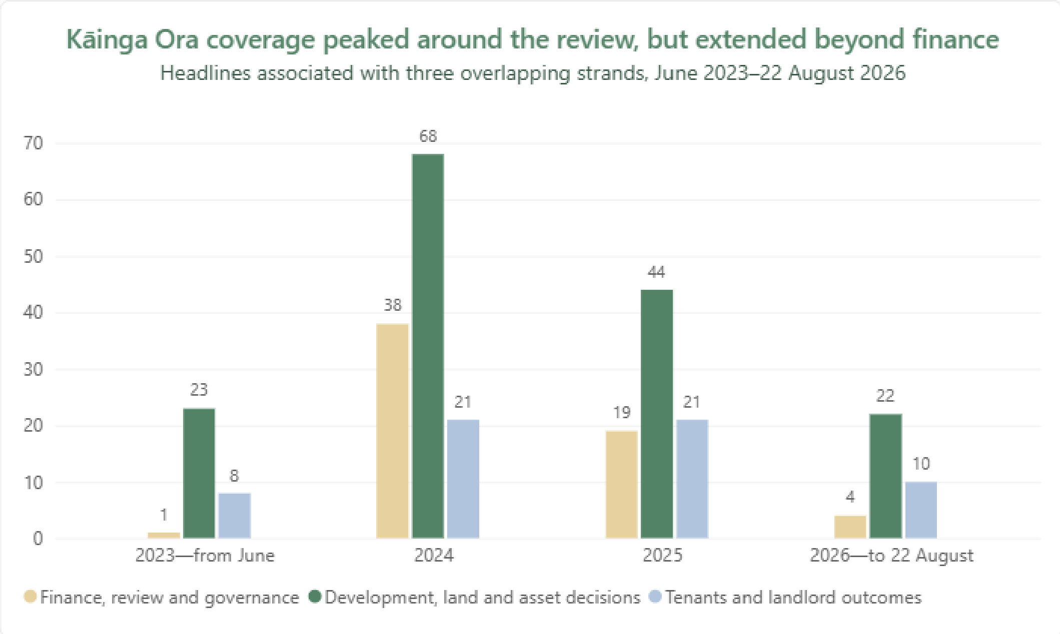
Accountability requires reporting how many net homes each provider delivers, when and where they are occupied and whether the funding model is sustainable.

4.4 Institutional case study: Kāinga Ora financial turnaround or housing delivery?

Kāinga Ora was one of the most visible housing institutions. Between June 2023 and 22 August 2026, 289 housing headlines referred to the agency: 35 in 2023, 138 in 2024, 80 in 2025 and 36 in 2026. Seventy-nine were government-linked.

NZME carried 88 Kāinga Ora headlines, Stuff 83 and RNZ 67. Most were conventional reporting: 241 were classified as Reporting, compared with 19 as Alarm, 15 as Analysis and 14 as Opinion. At least 36 raised institutional capability, 9 pressure, 5 governance, and 4 integrity. These should be treated as minimum counts because accountability coding is less complete in earlier data.

FIGURE 7



Headlines may be associated with more than one strand and should not be added together. The 2023 and 2026 periods are partial years. Counts measure headline attention, not Kāinga Ora's performance.

4.4.1 The Bill English-led review

The Government commissioned an independent review of Kāinga Ora in December 2023. Led by former prime minister Sir Bill English, it examined the agency's finances, procurement and asset management. Released on 20 May 2024, it concluded that Kāinga Ora was underperforming and would not be financially viable without significant savings and changes to its funding and financing.

Coverage concentrated sharply around the release. RNZ, Newshub, 1News, Stuff, NBR, BusinessDesk and *Interest.co.nz* **reported findings including that the agency was underperforming**, lacked transparency and required a turnaround.

The Government refreshed the board, appointed Simon Moutter as chair, imposed stronger financial expectations and directed Kāinga Ora to prepare a turnaround plan.

The review was also challenged. *The Spinoff* argued that it avoided the central questions of how many additional social homes were needed, how they would be funded and whether the proposed delivery model could provide them. The *New Zealand Herald* reported Kāinga Ora rejecting the conclusion that it was financially unsustainable, while Labour leader Chris Hipkins described the review as a political "hit job".

The financial diagnosis and political dispute became highly visible. The required scale and distribution of future social housing were less clearly defined.

4.4.2 From review to turnaround

The review followed reporting about vacant homes, paused developments, land purchases, construction costs and debt. RNZ reported that nearly 1,300 homes were on hold while the review proceeded.

In February 2025, the Government endorsed the Kāinga Ora turnaround plan. It proposed reducing losses and debt, improving procurement and portfolio management, selling selected properties and refocusing the agency on building, maintaining and managing social housing. The Government forecast that projected debt in 2027/28 would be approximately $1.8 billion lower than under the 2023 pre-election forecast.

The plan anticipated approximately 1,900–2,000 annual construction events from 2026/27, including around 1,500 new homes and 400 retrofits. These would be offset by redevelopment demolitions and the sale of approximately 900 homes a year. The Government's expectation was that the total number of Kāinga Ora social homes would not decline.

The measurable test is whether construction, renewal, demolition and sales produce that promised net result—and whether the homes are provided in the places and forms most needed.

4.4.3 What happened to delivery?

By June 2025, RNZ and Stuff reported that Kāinga Ora would halt more than 200 developments and sell vacant land. Subsequent headlines scrutinised individual decisions, including Wellington sites offered for sale, reduced Northland construction, the cancellation of an 81-unit New Lynn project, a Rotorua site offered for sale after $11 million had been spent and a $20 million Albany site listed after its proposed development was abandoned.

The record also contained evidence of completed delivery, although it received less national attention. In June 2026, the *Northern Advocate* reported that Kāinga Ora had completed a $75 million, 95-home development at Kauika Road in Whangārei for approximately 320 residents. It was described as the agency's largest social-housing development outside the main centres.

Critical coverage of institutional failure was warranted. However, the public picture remained incomplete without equivalent attention to completed delivery and its relationship to need.

4.4.4 What should Kāinga Ora be held accountable for?

Financial sustainability is a legitimate accountability test, but it is not Kāinga Ora's only purpose. Assessment must also consider the condition and use of its assets, homes promised and completed, net additions after demolitions and sales, regional alignment, tenant outcomes and changes in waiting lists, emergency housing and homelessness.

Headlines gave sustained attention to the review, financial viability, board changes, restructuring, unused assets and property sales. Tenant experiences also appeared in reports on rent arrears, disruptive behaviour, evictions, vacancies, and housing conditions. Coverage less often joined these strands together to establish whether stronger finances were producing better housing outcomes.

4.4.5 Housing security, not movement, is the outcome

The wider accountability question is not simply whether households leave emergency housing, move through transitional housing or vacate a social home for someone assessed as having greater need. It is whether they become and remain securely housed. A programme may meet its target while housing pressure is transferred elsewhere: an emergency-housing exit may lead to overcrowding or an insecure private tenancy, while moving a household from social housing may release a home but leave that household less secure. Where no suitable and affordable alternative exists, the household is not preventing the system from working; the lack of a housing option is. Housing outcomes should therefore be assessed across programmes and tenures, including whether people remain housed, whether they return to assistance and whether greater capacity in one part of the system reduces need elsewhere. This places responsibility not only on individual agencies but also on government stewardship of the connections among emergency, transitional, social, community, and private housing.

4.5 Section findings

- **What was done:**
  The Government reduced emergency-motel use, changed access and enforcement settings, reviewed Kāinga Ora and introduced a financial turnaround programme involving restructuring, construction, renewal and property sales.

- **What received scrutiny:**
  Ministers, the Government and Kāinga Ora were held to account for financial management, vacant homes, delayed and cancelled developments, unused land, asset sales and the treatment of tenants. Labour’s challenge to the English review also made political disagreement visible.

- **What remained under the radar:**
  Coverage did not consistently establish whether exits from emergency housing were durable, what happened to people denied assistance or whether the turnaround produced a net increase in suitable social homes. Completed regional delivery, community providers and the connection between stronger finances, tenant outcomes and reduced housing need received less sustained attention.

5 Planning, construction and housing delivery

Just as the experiences of groups reveal gaps in the response to homelessness, **different stages of the housing-delivery pathway expose weaknesses in planning, construction and accountability**.

Land may be enabled without infrastructure, approved projects may not be financially viable, faster consenting may reduce safeguards, and completed homes may remain unaffordable or exposed to natural hazards.

The headline record frequently reported progress at one stage without establishing whether safe, suitable and occupied housing was ultimately delivered. The principal points of vulnerability are summarised below.

Point of vulnerability	System gap exposed
Planning and Fast-track approval	Land can be rezoned or approved without funded infrastructure, finance or an agreed delivery date.
Divided central and local responsibility	The institution approving development may not fund or manage its infrastructure and long-term consequences.
Commercial feasibility	Permitted homes may not proceed when expected prices or rents cannot cover land, finance and construction costs.
Consenting and construction	Faster approval or rising consent numbers may be counted as progress before construction begins or homes are occupied.
Building standards and liability	Reduced inspection or unclear liability may transfer the cost of defects to owners and the public.
Natural hazards and insurance	New housing may create future insurance, adaptation and infrastructure costs when climate and hazard risks are unresolved.
Affordability and tenure	Completed homes may not be affordable or suitable for the households experiencing the greatest need.

The sections that follow examine how these vulnerabilities appeared in coverage of planning, infrastructure, Fast-track approvals, building standards and natural hazards.

5.1 Planning, land and density

The most sustained planning coverage appeared through Auckland and Wellington disputes. Elsewhere, including Christchurch, Hamilton, Nelson, Queenstown, Kāpiti, Ōrewa and Pegasus, coverage was generally tied to individual developments or council decisions.

Rezoning can remove a planning constraint, but it does not finance infrastructure or construction, determine commercial feasibility or establish the price and tenure of eventual homes.

The need for precise measures was particularly visible in Wellington, which was variously described as having thousands of Fast-track homes, abundant developable land, construction outpacing population growth and a shortage of 17,400 homes. These claims may have measured different things—planning capacity, commercially feasible supply, completed dwellings or projected need—but the distinctions were not always clear in the headlines.

Planning coverage made policy changes and disputes visible, but did not consistently establish how much newly permitted capacity became completed, occupied and affordable housing.

5.2 Infrastructure, divided responsibility and rate payer risk

Councils and council-controlled organisations commonly remain responsible for local roads and water, wastewater and stormwater networks, while the national Fast-track process determines whether qualifying projects can proceed. Councils may comment on applications, and approval panels may impose conditions intended to ensure that supporting infrastructure is or can be made adequate. These mechanisms do not, however, automatically produce agreement over who will fund, build, own, operate and eventually replace that infrastructure.

This creates a central–local coordination risk. A project may be referred and approved through the national process while the relevant council has not planned or funded the infrastructure required to service it. Initial works may be funded by the developer, but future operation, maintenance, renewal or network upgrades may still affect councils and ratepayers unless responsibility is settled through enforceable conditions, development contributions or infrastructure agreements.

The issue is therefore not simply whether councils were consulted. It is whether their infrastructure evidence affected the decision and whether approval was accompanied by a funded and enforceable servicing plan. Fast-track approval alone does not establish that these matters have been resolved or that ratepayers are protected from unplanned costs.

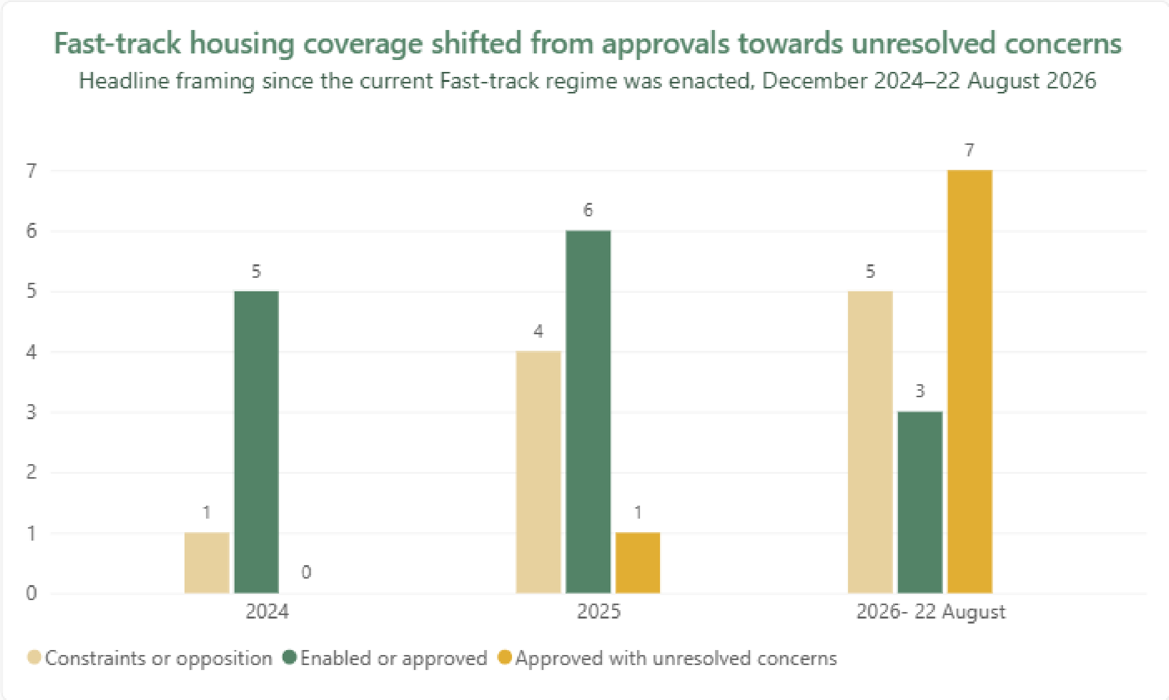
The constraints became most visible when developments were disputed. Headlines about Delmore near Ōrewa raised questions about wastewater arrangements, while mayors expressed concern about the infrastructure consequences of fast-tracked greenfield development. Similar tensions appeared in reporting about Queenstown and Pegasus.

Commercial feasibility creates another constraint. Developers must obtain finance and expect completed homes to cover land, consenting, infrastructure, construction and financing costs. Additional zoned capacity may therefore remain unused when projects are not commercially viable.

5.3 Fast-track housing: approval and unresolved concerns

The [1]Fast-track Approvals Act was enacted in December 2024, with applications able to be lodged from 7 February 2025. Its purpose is to facilitate projects considered to have significant regional or national benefits.

FIGURE 8



The Fast-track Approvals Act was enacted in December 2024 and opened for applications in February 2025. Headlines were assigned to one primary framing category.

In 2025, six residential Fast-track headlines emphasised housing enabled or approved, four concentrated on constraints or opposition and one reported approval with unresolved concerns. In 2026 to 22 August, three emphasised enablement or approval, compared with five focused on constraints or opposition and seven reporting approval alongside unresolved concerns.

The public narrative therefore shifted. Early coverage principally presented Fast-track as a way to enable development. Later headlines increasingly questioned whether infrastructure, hazards, local costs and community effects had been resolved.

Fast-track can shorten approval, but it does not itself coordinate central and local responsibilities, fund the required infrastructure or guarantee protection for ratepayers. The accountability test is whether each approval has an enforceable plan covering infrastructure funding, ownership, maintenance and future renewal—not simply whether the project was approved quickly.

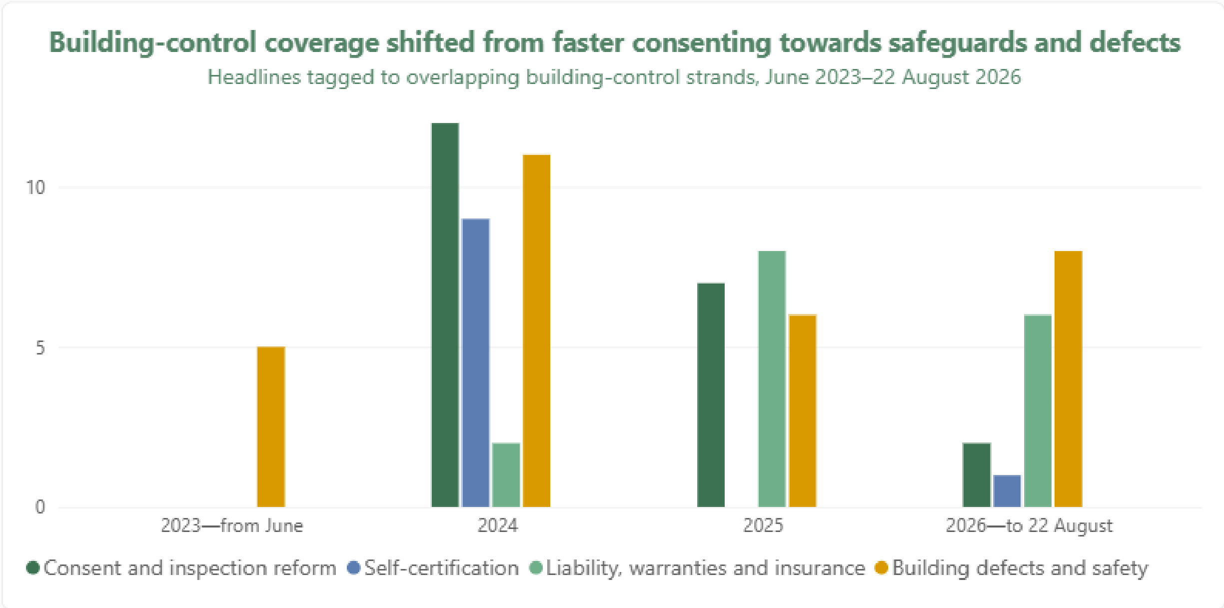
5.4 Building standards, self-certification and liability

Housing delivery is not complete when a dwelling is constructed. It must also meet appropriate safety, durability and performance standards.

[1] Fast-track Approvals Act 2024

Beginning in March 2024 and developed through 2025 and 2026, the Government's reform programme introduced remote-inspection targets and greater private involvement while progressing self-certification and changes to liability and warranty arrangements. The reforms were presented as a response to slow, fragmented and expensive processes, inconsistent council practices and repeated checks on standard residential work.

FIGURE 9



Categories may overlap and should not be added together. The 2023 and 2026 periods are partial years. Counts measure headline attention, not the incidence of building failures.

The headline record questioned whether reducing delays and costs could weaken protection for homeowners, tenants and future purchasers. New Zealand's leaky-building experience shaped this concern. In November 2023, *Newsroom* reported that removing consent requirements could weaken liability for defective homes. In October 2024, RNZ reported ministerial assurances that reform would not create another leaky-homes crisis, while other outlets questioned whether reduced oversight could transfer risk to occupants and owners.

Insurance also emerged as a potential constraint on self-certification. Coverage during 2025 and 2026 shifted towards liability, compulsory home warranties, professional-indemnity insurance and possible regulation of building organisations. Headlines questioned whether partial liability would leave purchasers exposed and whether additional warranty requirements would increase costs or exclude smaller builders.

A slow or duplicative system can delay construction and increase costs. However, reducing independent checks without effective auditing, warranties and insurance may transfer the cost of defects from builders and regulators to homeowners.

5.5 Natural hazards, climate adaptation and insurance

Development in exposed locations may increase supply in the short term while adding future insurance, infrastructure, adaptation and recovery costs. Restricting all development in potentially exposed areas may also constrain supply where risk could be reduced through design or protective infrastructure.

Climate adaptation appeared intermittently in headlines about flood-ready state housing, earthquake resilience, overheating, lower-emission construction and green-building requirements. However, risk was more commonly reported after flooding, through rising insurance costs or when a development was disputed.

In July and August 2024, coverage showed insurers moving towards property-specific risk assessment. *The Post* reported ASB's call for a public database showing the insurability of individual homes. RNZ reported Treasury data indicating that insurers were focusing more closely on flood-risk properties. *The Post* also reported IAG questioning whether owners in lower-risk areas should continue subsidising households in flood zones.

RNZ and *Interest.co.nz* reported estimates that more than 10,000 properties could eventually become uninsurable because of climate risks and coastal erosion. Loss of insurance can affect mortgages, property values and access to ownership, as well as creating pressure for publicly funded protection, relocation or compensation.

Headlines also questioned why housing continued to be consented or proposed in exposed locations. Examples included 1,415 Auckland homes reportedly consented on floodplains in the year following the 2023 floods and a proposed 660-home development on land described as presenting severe flood risk.

Responses included Auckland Council seeking to accelerate flood-protection work and the Natural Hazards Commission considering support for household resilience. However, coverage did not reveal a consistent national framework for deciding which properties should be protected, adapted, rebuilt, relocated or prevented from being developed.

5.6 Section findings

- **What was done:**
  The Government changed planning and building-control settings, introduced the fast-track regime and progressed remote inspections, private consenting and self-certification. Councils continued to make local planning decisions and invest in infrastructure and flood protection.

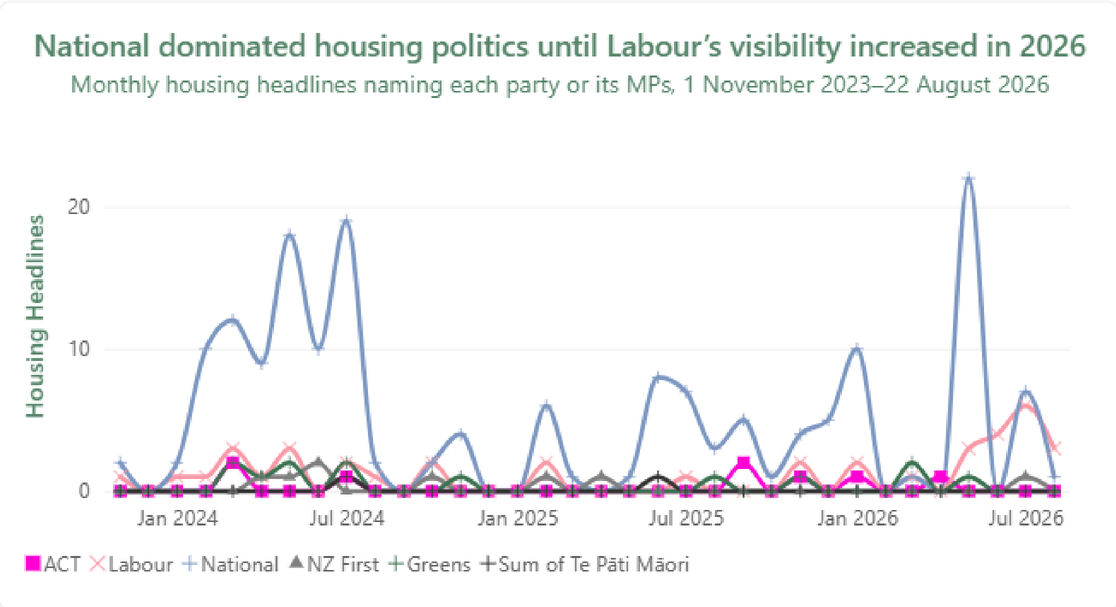
- **What received scrutiny:**
  Ministers, councils and developers were challenged over density, Fast-track approvals, infrastructure costs, flood-prone development, inspection reform, liability and the risk of repeating earlier building failures. Later Fast-track headlines increasingly questioned what would happen after approval.

- **What remained under the radar:**
  Coverage rarely followed homes permitted through rezoning, planning changes or Fast-track approval to determine whether they received infrastructure and finance, were constructed and occupied, or were affordable. It also did not establish whether new building safeguards would adequately protect owners or whether planning and climate-adaptation decisions were reducing long-term risk rather than transferring it to insurers, ratepayers and taxpayers.

6 Housing as a political contest

Housing coverage was politically uneven. National and its ministers dominated party-associated headlines for most of the period, reflecting both their responsibility for government policy and sustained debate over their reforms. Labour's visibility increased markedly in 2026 as housing became more openly contested ahead of the election. ACT, New Zealand First, the Greens and Te Pāti Māori appeared much less frequently.

FIGURE 10



Headlines may refer to more than one party. Counts measure political visibility in housing headlines, not the favourability or substance of coverage. August 2026 is a partial month.

The political contest centred on recognisable decisions rather than housing policy in the abstract.

These included:

- Kāinga Ora's performance, finances, restructuring and proposed property sales
- the removal of First Home Grants
- landlord interest deductibility and tenancy regulation
- whether house prices needed to fall to restore affordability
- density rules and central-government powers over councils
- emergency-housing targets and access restrictions
- the 2026 social-housing changes, including rent increases, reassessment and "move-on" provisions

Labour described the Bill English review of Kāinga Ora as a "political hit job" and increasingly challenged restrictions on emergency and social housing.

The Greens concentrated more heavily on renters, homelessness and landlord regulation.

ACT appeared in disputes over density, property rights and building regulation.

New Zealand First’s more limited coverage concerned foreign investment, granny flats and possible assistance for first-home buyers.

The peaks in the graph nevertheless measure political visibility, not the quality of the competing proposals. Headlines frequently reported announcements, criticism, and disagreement, but less often compared the parties against a common test: how many suitable and affordable homes their policies would produce, where those homes would be located, what infrastructure they would require, and who would pay.

- **What was done:**
  Parties advanced or defended different approaches to prices, taxation, social housing, planning, tenancy regulation and access to assistance.

- **What received scrutiny:**
  National’s housing reforms dominated political visibility, while Labour’s challenge became more prominent in 2026. Smaller parties were associated with issues but received much less sustained housing coverage.

- **What remained under the radar:**
  Headlines reported announcements, criticism and disagreement more often than they compared competing policies against a common delivery test.

The appropriate comparison is whether each party provides a funded and measurable pathway from housing need to suitable, affordable and lasting homes.

7 Conclusion

The headline record explains why housing remained prominent in New Zealand's public debate. It showed fluctuating prices and mortgage costs, pressure on renters, homelessness, contested social housing decisions, planning disputes, and repeated attempts to accelerate development. It also exposed disagreements about what success should mean: increasing supply, lowering prices, protecting household wealth, reducing emergency housing use, or improving access to ownership.

Additional government, legislative and evaluation material sharpened—but did not overturn—the headline findings. Government figures confirmed a substantial fall in emergency-housing use, while the 2026 MSD evaluation showed that recorded exits among people receiving support were generally sustained. However, the evaluation did not establish what happened to everyone who declined assistance, was excluded due to tighter eligibility criteria, or remained outside the system. The evidence therefore supports a reduction in recorded emergency housing use, but not an equivalent conclusion about homelessness or broader housing insecurity.

Other external information produced a similar result. Government announcements explained the rationale for planning, fast-track, and building-control reforms. Legislation provided mechanisms for consultation and infrastructure conditions. Yet neither announcements nor headlines consistently established whether approvals resulted in serviced, financed, completed, and affordable homes—or whether long-term infrastructure, defect, and climate risks remained with developers and regulators, or shifted to homeowners, insurers, councils, and the public.

The central weakness was therefore not an absence of policy activity. It was the difficulty of connecting identified need, government action and final outcomes. The system contained many decision-makers, many measures, and many announcements, but lacked a consistently visible line of accountability from the identified problem to the household ultimately housed.

Future scrutiny should concentrate on a small number of connected measures:

- local housing need by type, tenure and affordability;
- infrastructure-ready and commercially feasible supply rather than theoretical capacity alone;
- net homes completed and occupied, including social and supported housing;
- housing destinations and sustained outcomes after emergency assistance;
- the affordability of prices, deposits, rents and mortgage costs relative to incomes;
- defects, warranties, insurance and responsibility when buildings fail; and
- the long-term allocation of infrastructure and climate-related costs.

Media organisations have an important continuing role. Individual headlines successfully exposed human consequences, institutional disputes, delayed developments and unanswered questions. Stronger accountability will require following those stories over time: returning to commitments, distinguishing approvals from delivery and testing administrative achievements against household outcomes.

Political parties should be assessed against the same standard. The relevant question is not which party attracts the most housing headlines or announces the most homes. It is the proposals that form a credible and funded pathway from the identified need to safe, suitable and lasting housing—and make clear who is responsible if that pathway fails.

New Zealand does not lack housing announcements or measures of activity. What it still needs is continuity: between need and policy, between approval and delivery, and between people leaving one system and entering a secure home.

8 Appendix

8.1 What government figures establish about emergency-housing exits

Government announcements and media headlines reported a substantial decline in emergency-housing use. The number of households recorded in emergency housing fell from 3,141 in December 2023 to 591 in December 2024 and 426 by July 2026.*1

A Ministry of Social Development evaluation published in May 2026 provides evidence about people who engaged with emergency-housing support services and exited between August 2024 and November 2025. More than 99% remained out of emergency housing after 180 days, with 0.5% returning. At 180 days, 46% were in social housing, 24% were receiving the Accommodation Supplement and were likely to be renting privately, and 14% were in transitional housing.*2

The evaluation therefore provides substantial evidence that recorded exits among supported clients were generally sustained. However, it did not assess the effects of tighter eligibility rules or establish what happened to people who were declined assistance, became ineligible or did not enter the emergency-housing system. It also could not determine whether the policy changes caused the reported outcomes.

A search of the Social Herds headline dataset did not identify coverage of the May 2026 evaluation. The headline narrative therefore made the reduction in emergency-housing use visible without incorporating the later evidence about sustained exits. Neither the headline record nor published government figures established whether people unable to access emergency housing moved into rough sleeping, vehicles, overcrowding or unsupported temporary accommodation.

The evidence supports a narrower conclusion: emergency-housing use fell substantially and recorded exits among supported clients were generally sustained, but this does not establish that homelessness or wider housing insecurity fell by the same amount.

8.1.1 Sources

1. *New Zealand Government, *Emergency Housing Target Achieved Five Years Early*, 24 January 2025; Ministry of Social Development, *Monthly Housing Update—July 2026*.

2. *Ministry of Social Development, *"Just One Step at a Time": Emergency Housing Support Services Evaluation Final Report*, published 28 May 2026.

In the electronic report, hyperlink the titles:

- Emergency Housing Target Achieved Five Years Early
- Monthly Housing Update—July 2026
- Emergency Housing Support Services Evaluation