

Oral Questions — Questions to Ministers

Question No. 2—Housing and Urban Development

2. Hon JUDITH COLLINS (National—Papakura) to the Minister of Housing and Urban Development: Is he confident that the proposals included in the reform of the Residential Tenancies Act 1986 discussion document will benefit both landlords and tenants?

Hon PHIL TWYFORD (Minister of Housing and Urban Development): Faakalofa lahi atu ki a mutolu oti. We are seeking feedback on how we strike a balance between providing tenants with security of tenure and allowing them to make their house a home while protecting the rights and interests of landlords. We need good landlords, and it's lucky for us that most landlords are good people trying to do the right thing and provide a professional service. Our policy is to set decent minimum standards for the 21st century that will professionalise the rental market and clean out the rogue operators at the bottom of the market who are undercutting good landlords and giving the whole industry a bad name.

Hon Judith Collins: Will proposals to end no-cause terminations and end fixed-term agreements make it almost impossible for a landlord to move on from a difficult tenant?

Hon PHIL TWYFORD: No, because we've made it very clear. We've heard landlords tell us that many of them rely on no-cause, 90-day terminations to get rid of rogue tenants and we've said to landlords in meetings all around the country that while we want to get rid of 90-day terminations because we don't believe in the 21st century it's justifiable for one party to be able to cancel a contract for something as important as someone's home without having to give any kind of justification, if we're going to do that, then we're going to try our best to find new ways that landlords can get rid of rogue tenants in a practical and timely way.

Hon Judith Collins: Will proposals to allow tenants to make modifications to properties mean that landlords will no longer be able to refuse a request from a tenant to modify a property?

Hon PHIL TWYFORD: Well, we haven't proposed that, but the current law that allows tenants to request the ability to make basic alterations and requires that landlords have to have a reasonable case for declining that request—we note that that doesn't appear to be working. The evidence from tenants all around the country is that they are, basically, too frightened in many cases to even request the opportunity to make simple or basic alterations. So our consultation document invites feedback from tenants and landlords about how we can make this work better so that tenants can paint a wall, put up a shelf, and make basic alterations that will allow them to make a house a home.

Kieran McAnulty: What effects will the Government's proposed changes to the Residential Tenancies Act have on families?

Hon PHIL TWYFORD: Insecure tenure can force families to continually move house. It's particularly tough on children when they have to keep changing schools. By ending no-cause terminations while ensuring that landlords can still get rid of rogue tenants and increasing the amount of notice a landlord must give tenants to terminate a tenancy, we hope to be able to provide families with a stable and secure home.

Hon Judith Collins: If, as he says, the proposal is to balance landlords' and tenants' rights, which proposals in this discussion document address any of the issues that landlords say that they are currently facing?

Hon PHIL TWYFORD: The requirement for landlords to be able to get rid of rogue tenants in a timely and workable way. Landlords tell us that the current Residential Tenancies Act does not allow them to get rid of tenants in a timely and workable way.

Hon Judith Collins: Is it the case that if these policies make it much more difficult and costly for people to rent out homes to tenants, people may simply just choose to, as he's told them to do, take their money elsewhere?

Hon PHIL TWYFORD: Well, I reject the member's premise that modern, decent, civilised tenancy laws that provide a balance between the responsibilities and obligations and rights of tenants and landlords is necessarily going to make renting a more difficult and costly thing. We don't accept that.

Kieran McAnulty: What other changes is the Government making to ensure families have warm, dry, and secure rental homes?

Hon PHIL TWYFORD: Well, we know that rental homes are more likely to be older and of poorer quality than owner-occupied homes. Approximately 2,000, or more than one-third, of rental properties have no insulation. Many are cold, damp, and mouldy, and cause respiratory illness, toxic reactions, and allergies that see more than 40,000 children bundled off to hospital every year. We do not accept that this is OK in the 21st century. The healthy homes guarantee standards, which we are now consulting on, will set minimum standards to ensure that families in this country have warm, dry homes.