

# MDH residents' perspectives on maintenance

BRANZ surveyed residents living in medium-density housing to find their experiences of property maintenance. They generally had greater uncertainty about how often maintenance is performed compared to occupants of stand-alone housing. A small proportion also indicated that components of their property are never maintained. Limited financial means, a lack of time and a lack of knowledge are key barriers to maintenance. In some cases, residents did not want to contact landlords or bodies corporate with maintenance issues.



**MAINTENANCE AND** building performance issues have mostly been studied from the perspectives of developers and bodies corporate. This potentially allows discussions around medium-density housing (MDH) maintenance to be dominated by individuals who have a different set of interests to those who actually live in MDH dwellings.

Understanding the barriers that residents see to maintenance may help BRANZ address gaps in knowledge for both unit owners and bodies corporate. This could lead to new resources that empower unit owners and bodies corporate to take better care of their properties. It may also help identify recurring

maintenance issues that could be addressed in future MDH design.

Maintenance here is defined as regular or routine building work to ensure that homes continue to be warm and weathertight and generally function effectively. It includes minor work (such as fixing leaking windows or washing down a home's external surfaces) and major capital works (such as replacing a roof or a lift) but excludes renovations just done to change appearances or suit personal tastes.

## Residents' survey

An online survey of MDH residents in Auckland, Tauranga, Wellington, Christchurch

and Queenstown carried out in mid-2019 achieved 257 responses. The MDH types included terraced houses, 2–4-storey attached houses (low-rise apartments) and apartment blocks up to 6 storeys. Residents of stand-alone housing were also surveyed, with their responses used as a baseline for comparison. Respondents were a mix of owner-occupiers and tenants (Figure 1).

Survey participants were asked to rate their home's overall condition, both inside and out, when they first moved in and then at the time they completed the survey from 1 = very poor to 5 = excellent. The data shows a general increase in the number of dwellings

considered in excellent or good condition between when participants moved into their home and now (Figure 2).

Residents were then asked whether any specific areas of their home currently needed maintenance (Figures 3 and 4). In general, residents of stand-alone housing believed that they had more areas of maintenance need than their MDH counterparts. This may be because the stand-alone houses were on average older than MDH homes and had suffered more wear and tear.

## Frequency of home maintenance

In the study, MDH residents had greater uncertainty than stand-alone house occupants regarding the frequency of home maintenance. As an example, almost 60% in low-rise or high-rise apartments were uncertain about the frequency of maintenance of their roof cladding, while among occupants of stand-alone houses, just 20% were unsure. This may reflect several possibilities:

- The higher proportion of renters in MDH may pay less attention to maintenance frequency than owners.
- Residents in MDH (whether owners or renters) may feel disengaged from body corporate decisions about maintenance, especially in larger complexes.
- MDH residents may be unaware of their body corporate's maintenance plan. They may be unaware that bodies corporate are legally obligated under the Unit Titles Act 2010 to establish and maintain a maintenance plan covering a period of at least 10 years.
- MDH residents had generally been living in their homes for less time than people in stand-alone housing and may know less about their home's maintenance history.

BRANZ Study Report SR444 *Residents' perspectives of maintaining medium-density housing* shows a series of bar charts of frequency of maintenance for various building features and different accommodation types. These are some results of interest:

- A proportion of respondents from each type of MDH indicated that certain features of their properties are never maintained. This figure is over 20% for some materials/elements such as floor coverings.
- Decks, gutters and spouting are much more likely to receive annual maintenance in stand-alone houses than MDH.
- Plumbing and electrical systems were more likely to receive annual maintenance in high-rise MDH than stand-alone houses.

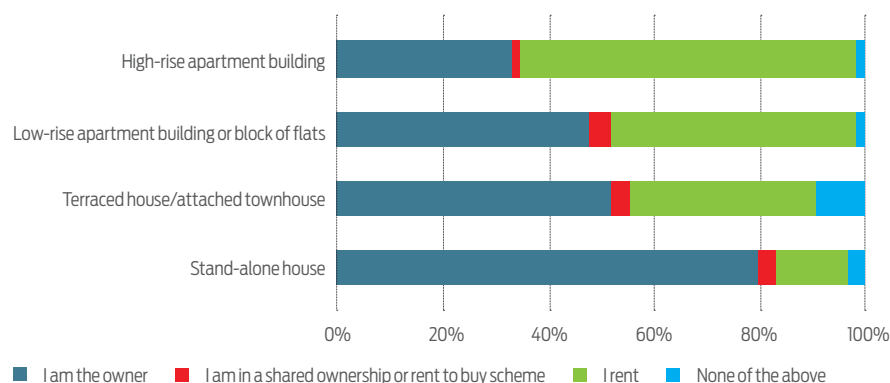


Figure 1. Respondents by housing type and ownership status.

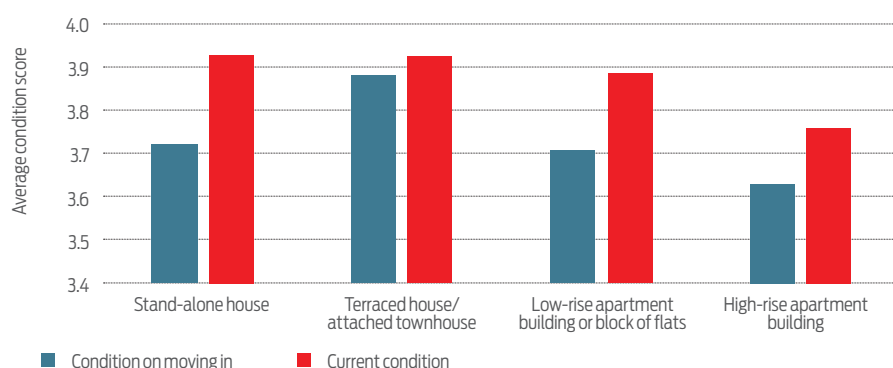


Figure 2. Participant assessment of the condition of their home (inside and out).

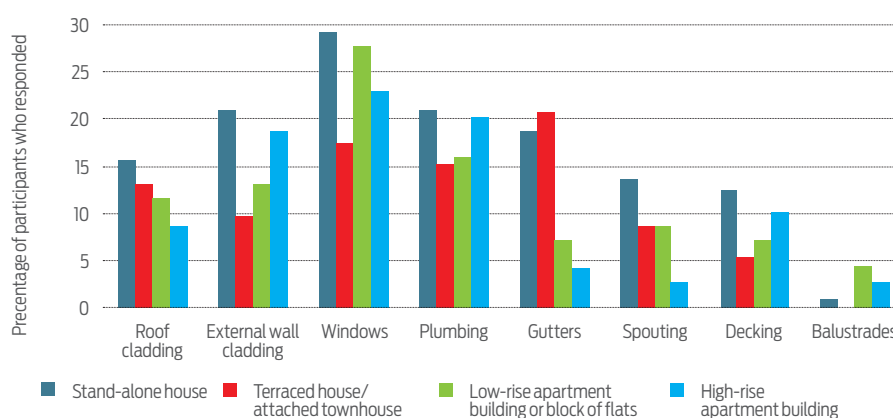


Figure 3. Percentage of participants reporting external housing components currently in need of maintenance.

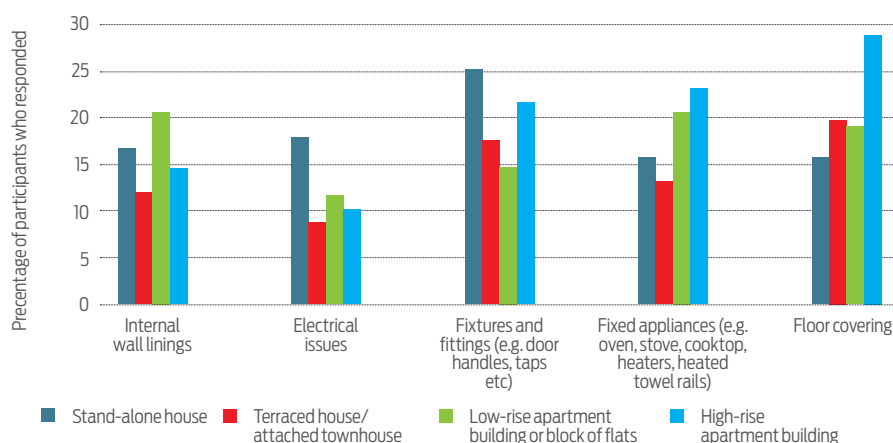


Figure 4. Percentage of participants reporting internal housing components currently in need of maintenance.

## Barriers to home maintenance

To understand barriers to maintenance, participants were asked “What stops you from maintaining your home?” (Figure 5).

Limited financial means was the main explanation, common for people across all types of housing. ‘Too busy’ and ‘lack of maintenance knowledge’ were also common explanations. ‘Lack of maintenance knowledge’ appears to disproportionately affect residents of MDH, however.

Almost one-quarter of participants (24%) chose ‘other’. Residents from stand-alone housing noted that difficulties finding a tradesperson was a common problem. Residents of MDH who chose ‘other’ typically mentioned accessibility (building height) and cost of health and safety requirements such as scaffolding. Several comments alluded to dysfunctional bodies corporate lacking the organisation to maintain shared building features.

## Residents’ perceptions of landlords and bodies corporate

Some residents of MDH have minimal autonomy around maintenance, either because they rent their dwelling or because many of their maintenance needs must be deferred to a body corporate. The Unit Titles Act gives landlords and bodies corporate specific decision-making powers beyond those of tenants.

When participants were asked whether they contact their landlord or body corporate straight away when maintenance is required, most (61%) stated that they do and that the landlord or body corporate are quick to respond.

Just over a quarter of all participants (27%) said that, when they contact their landlord or body corporate, they are slow to respond, while 12% (mostly MDH respondents) do not make contact out of fear of being evicted or because it would result in additional costs or be too much hassle.

Well over 60% of MDH residents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘My landlord or body corporate effectively maintains the building I live in’. The highest proportion of residents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this (40%) lived in stand-alone housing. This may indicate that bodies corporate are doing a better job of maintenance than individual landlords.

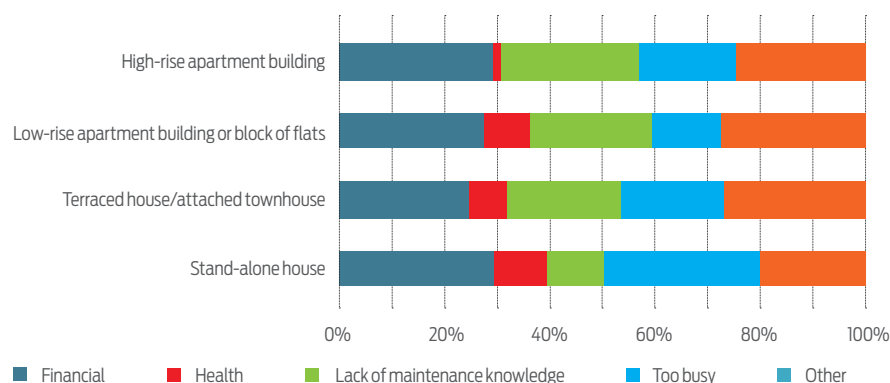


Figure 5. Barriers to home maintenance reported by participants.

Around 20% of MDH residents feels that they are unable to depend on others to adequately fulfil their maintenance duties.

Some tenants were concerned that raising maintenance issues with landlords could result in eviction (which would be illegal if it were carried out as a result of the request for maintenance) or bring about an increase in rent or body corporate fees. Landlords or bodies corporate may be unaware of maintenance issues if residents are reluctant to alert them to problems.

## Conclusion

A proportion of respondents from each type of MDH indicated that several components of their properties are never maintained. This indicates the influence of barriers to maintenance that are independent of housing type. Barriers include:

- limited financial means
- a lack of time
- a lack of maintenance knowledge
- reliance on landlords and bodies corporate who hold greater decision-making influence.
- uncertainty about maintenance frequency.

A lack of maintenance knowledge, accessibility issues relating to building height and uncertainty around maintenance frequency appear to affect residents of MDH more than occupants of stand-alone homes.

Compared to owner-occupiers within stand-alone housing, MDH residents appear to have less autonomy around maintenance decisions. For some owners, this is often because their maintenance needs relate to shared building features, which must be

deferred to a body corporate or body corporate manager who may not view maintenance requests with the same urgency.

This tension can be amplified for renters (who comprised over half of MDH occupants nationally in the 2018 Census) where both landlords and bodies corporate are involved in decisions. Ownership status is therefore important because it demonstrates degrees of responsibility for maintenance and the extent to which occupants rely on other parties for decisions about maintenance to be made.

## More information

- BRANZ Facts: Medium-density housing #1–14
- [www.mdh.org.nz](http://www.mdh.org.nz)
- Study Report SR444 *Residents’ perspectives of maintaining medium-density housing*
- Study Report SR386 *Maintenance and common repair issues in medium-density housing*

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