

# Building homes that work

Why does the industry treat the New Zealand Building Code as a performance target rather than trying to do better? A recent BRANZ-supported study explored this question.

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**NEW ZEALAND'S** new homes have attracted persistent but diverse criticism over the last decade.

## ***Is industry out of step with society?***

The price of new homes and problems of unaffordability have been at the centre of public as well as political anxiety. The concentration on production of dwellings in the highest quartiles of value has reduced housing access for lower-income households.

The divergence between dwelling and household size has been cited as indicative of a building and development industry out of step with New Zealand's ageing society.

The poor accessibility and functionality of typical new builds for an ageing population and for the many people living in the community with compromised mobility or other disabilities has also been a long-standing issue.

## ***Code was meant to raise standards***

A common thread has been the role of the Building Code in setting performance

standards, which many in the industry take as goals, rather than minimum expectations.

The Building Act 2004 and New Zealand Building Code were intended to provide a flexible framework that would allow the industry to achieve more. It removed the previous prescribed design-and-build rules and focused instead on performance.

## ***Research asked why Code not exceeded***

The 'doing better' research asked why the potential for doing better than Code has largely been unfulfilled. In particular, it asked whether the hesitancy to go beyond Code is related to a lack of evidence-based performance standards that have credibility beyond the minimum standards embedded in the Code.

The research focused on two aspects of dwelling performance as examples:

- Energy efficiency related to thermal performance.
- The functionality of residential buildings associated with accessibility.

In both areas, there is significant value to be generated by performance improvement. Furthermore, both areas have a long history of unmet consumer demand.

This dual focus immediately raises the scope and nature of the Code itself. While energy efficiency is included in the Building Act and is associated with performance standards in the Code, accessibility and functionality for private dwellings are excluded.

## ***Limited uptake when no minimum***

When a performance standard is not specified in the Code, the minimum is effectively zero. This depresses the building industry's take-up of accessibility standards such as those found in the Lifemark accreditation. The lack of requirements is also associated with low research investment into and research activity around net benefits, appropriate measurement and technical and product solutions.

There is limited published New Zealand research on issues of accessibility relative ➤