

Time has come for higher standards in rental houses

The stars are aligning on rental housing standards.

Like many before me, I have long held a concern about the state of Dunedin's housing stock.

Dunedin houses were built on gold-mining wealth and in the prosperous postwar era. Back then power was either unreticulated or dirt cheap. Cheap power meant less insulation. Until the late '70s there was no formal requirement. Housing was generally built with little to keep warmth in and cold out.

Now the building code is more stringent. Most who have lived in a modern house don't want to go back. But too many have no choice. With low employment, spiralling power bills and the increasing cost of living, many families have to take whatever is on offer.

Despite generous incentives for insulation, some landlords have been slow to bring rentals up to a modern standard. This is bad for the families who live in them, and bad for the taxpayer. Preventable illness stops people working and is a drag on our health system.

Fortunately, appetites for tolerating poor housing are dwindling. A majority of responsible landlords have already insulated; others plan to. And members of landlords' associations are getting sick of slum-landlords giving their industry a bad name.

Having pushed for increased local support during my time on the Otago Community Trust, one of my early actions as a new MP was to explore the possibility of a private



MP'S VIEW

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member's Bill to make insulation standards compulsory in all homes. After progress behind the scenes, it became obvious that Labour leader David Shearer wanted to take the bull by the horns.

Alongside the fanfare for Labour's affordable housing policy was our less well-reported but important announcement that a Labour government would introduce a rule requiring all landlords to meet minimum insulation standards. The rule gives landlords five years to get up to scratch. No bureaucracy required. Thereafter, a house that doesn't meet healthy housing standards will be illegal to rent. Simple.

Last year as we shared judging of Dunedin's best and worst scarfie flats, Mayor Dave Cull and I discussed the prospect of taking a local Bill to Parliament to tackle the problem head on. Since then, students' associations have joined the call to arms. One way or another, landlords will soon have to declare they have met minimum standards before a rental agreement is signed. This is an idea whose time has come.