Seniors go flatting in Tahunanui home

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Doreen Howat couldn't be happier in her new home. The 87-year-old and her flatmates have lived together in Tahunanui's new Abbeyfield since August.

The new $2.2 million 'seniors' flat' was officially opened on Saturday and is now home to 11 residents, aged from 64 to 88, and housekeeper Ruth Upson.

Nelson has embraced the Abbeyfield concept, with other homes in Stoke, Motueka and Golden Bay. It is the first time any Abbeyfield Society has built and operated a second house.

"We couldn't wish for anything better," Mrs Howat said. She had lived in Stoke before the move, and had been on her own since her husband died 15 years ago. A sunny, private courtyard, company, and excellent meals were the best things about Abbeyfield. `

Fellow housemate Neil Kruse was equally pleased with his comfortable "bloke's room".

Mr Kruse said he enjoyed having independence, but companionship when he wanted it.

"I get on with everyone fairly well. I could be a bit of a chatterbox I suppose."

He had recently moved from a large house in Auckland, and said there were about four other `Abbeyfielders' who were renting or had sold their homes to move there.

"There should be more places like this. How many other people are there who were like me, living in a huge big house by myself? There are now two families living in that house.

"To come into a place such as this as an elderly single person has to have huge advantages in opening up other houses for accommodation ... that's the housing market being better utilised."

At the opening, Abbeyfield Nelson chairman Barry Mills said success began with good people. "We had a lot of good people to make that success – contractors and especially the volunteers." He said it was wonderful that the residents could live in such a home at a cost less than superannuation.

Former Abbeyfield chairman JB Munro said Abbeyfield was an excellent example of the concept of "ageing in place": ensuring independence, privacy and companionship, dignity, involvement and helping others, a sense of security and a home for life.

All the new Abbeyfielders were so eager to move in that they had shifted all their belongings in on the same afternoon, he said.

"The whole lot wanted to be first ... I don't think there's any Abbeyfield anywhere in the world where all the residents arrived and took possession [at once]."

However, "the money flow was very light" and he urged the community to keep fundraising because there were more people "raring to go".

Housekeeper Ruth Upson said it was the best job she'd ever had. Residents helped with the vegetable gardens and pitched in where they could.

"They just all work together so well and it's just like living in your own home," she said.

"A lot of these people have lived on their own for a long time. They come here and now they're coming out of their shells."

Nelson MP Nick Smith, who also attended the opening, said with all the concern about healthcare for our ageing population, the worst thing he saw was loneliness.

"Abbeyfield's greatest strength is the companionship it offers."

Dr Smith said the "innovative" project had been successful due to "huge local community support" in donations of time, money and services.

Minister of Housing Phil Heatley, who also attended the opening, said Abbeyfield was a fine example of third-party providers working together with the Government.

A loan of $700,000 from Housing New Zealand had helped finance the home.