

About two years ago, at a friend's home in Raglan I came across a book by Marie Kondo, now a reality TV personality, intent on teaching us how to declutter and organise our drawers. I was immediately taken with her basic premise. If something doesn't give you joy, thank it for its time in your life and get rid of it, recycling it to friends, an opp shop, or a bin. The process accords with my feeling that a bit of gratitude doesn't go amiss. After all the very fact that I own things I can easily discard shows that I am more fortunate than many.

I came home and put Marie's ideas to practice over a couple of months. My husband looked askance, but I quickly reassured him that he continues to give me joy. His place in our home is secure.

Decisions about keeping or discarding ornaments or old clothes are not momentous ones, and I learnt to live with the regret caused by an over enthusiastic clean out of my wardrobe. But other decisions have much greater consequences and may create heartache and anxiety. As we age we may lose family, friends or neighbours, become frail, unable to keep up our garden, drive, or pay the mortgage. Such changes often mean our housing may no longer be fit for purpose now and in the years ahead.

There's a myriad of options: alterations to an existing home, homesharing, downsizing, subdividing sections, retirement villages, cohousing. The one thing we are advised against is jumping to solutions such as 'I can't drive so I need to move close to the shops.' Instead we might choose to share our home with someone who does drive or contribute to the running costs of a neighbour's car in return for lifts.

We also need to consider our changing lifestyle as we age. A friend carefully chose a home near a bus stop and park but, only after moving in, realised that there was very little sun. Sitting at home in the warmth of sunshine is a blessing as we get older and can no longer easily go out. Feeling too worn out to move again, she went without her beloved sun for over a decade.

There are so many factors to consider, and people without close family may find the process itself is a burden. It may seem simpler just to stay put, but the consequences of not making a decision can be severe. We may forgo maintenance or make do with uninsulated rooms or steps without rails, leading to illness or accident. At 85 my uncle remodeled his bathroom but discounted a suggestion he put in a wet area shower. "If I become disabled," he told me, "I'll go to a rest home". Yet at the end of his life, he had a strong desire to stay home and, in his last few months, had to make do with sponge baths.

We are fortunate to have an excellent toolkit to support seniors to make decisions around their housing needs. One of its architects, Bev James, while in Whakatāne to speak about cohousing, also shared way the toolkit was developed, through testing ideas with older people. Entitled “My Home, My Choices: Ngā Kete o te Whare” (<http://mychoices.goodhomes.co.nz>) the toolkit contains stories of others’ journeys and steps people through options, giving valuable information about each. The first set of cards helps people identify the issue, such as:

“I’d like more money for everyday living expenses.”

“The housework is getting too much for me”

“I’d like to reduce my risk of falls.”

“I’d like to feel more secure in my home and neighbourhood.”

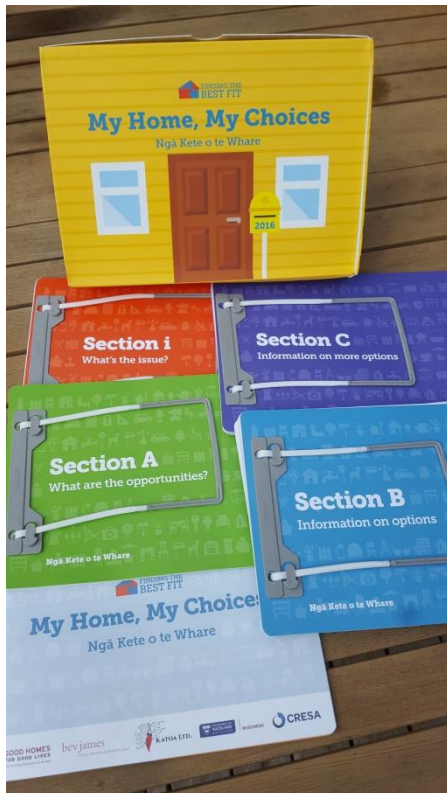
“I’d like more companionship.”

Once you identify your needs you move on to cards showing a variety of ways to meet them. Each opportunity, such as selling up and moving in with family, has another section exploring the pros and cons of that option.

I find my decisions are better made after sharing ideas with others. Eastern Bay Villages is looking to bring a small group of 4-5 people to work through this toolkit together. If you or someone you know is interested in exploring their future housing needs, then do get in touch.

One option, that of setting up a cohousing community, I described in an earlier column. A number of interested people are now meeting to look into this. Contact me if you want to join in.

Meanwhile it is never too soon to plan ahead, starting with conversations with family and friends. Change is hardest when urgent decisions are forced upon us. That’s when we may end up with regrets and consequences far worse than those of discarding the clothes we once liked.



Bev James