

TENANT & RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

Background

Community engagement refers to the broad range of activities and strategies registered community housing provider use in order to better connect their tenants to, and involve them in, their local communities.

Terminology

Tenants have signed a residential tenancy agreement and rent a property. They have a contractual relationship with a community housing provider.

Residents are members of a tenant household including the tenant, their partner or spouse, children or extended family members. Residents live in a property managed by a community housing provider and, aside from the tenant, indirectly receive its services.

Sometimes, resident views may be directly relevant to a community housing management issue. For example, if a community housing provider is planning to build a children's playground it might engage with the children who will be using the playground and their adult carers, instead of engaging only with tenants. There are also a number of situations where community housing residents may also interact directly with a community provider. For example, they may be an agent or carer for the tenant or they may pay their contribution to the rent directly to a community housing provider.

Legal and policy framework

REGISTRATION

The National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH) and NSW Local Scheme set expectations about the tenant and resident engagement in Performance Outcome 1 - Performance Requirement D. Under this Requirement, a community housing provider is expected to:

- Involve tenants or residents in the planning and delivery of housing services
- Promote opportunities for tenants and residents to be involved in their community
- Obtain feedback from tenants and residents on its services and consult with them on proposals that will affect them

In addition, tenant and resident engagement is central to:

- **Performance Outcome 1** - Performance Requirement G which expects community housing providers to engage with tenants and residents to measure satisfaction with services, show actions taken in response to tenant or resident feedback, and in the case of Tier 1 and 2 providers, conduct tenant or resident surveys at least once every two years.
- **Performance Outcome 2** - Performance Requirement C which expects community housing providers to measure tenant or resident satisfaction with maintenance services and property condition, and in the case of Tier 1 and 2 providers, conduct tenant or resident surveys at least once every two years

- **Performance Outcome 3:** Community Engagement which expects community housing providers to work in partnership with relevant organisations to promote community housing and contribute to socially inclusive communities. The NRSCH has published a Community Engagement Good Practice Guide. See the Useful Resources section below for a website link to this Guide.

NSW GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Community housing providers are expected to apply any government policies or program guidelines relating to eligibility, allocation and termination of housing assistance that are relevant to the housing assistance they provide.

The Aboriginal Housing Office *Housing Services Guidelines*, apply to the delivery of tenant and resident engagement by community housing providers contracted by the Aboriginal Housing Office. The Aboriginal Housing Office 'Provider Contract and Performance Management Framework' includes a requirement to report annually on tenant satisfaction to the Aboriginal Housing Office.

A website link to the *Housing Services Guidelines* is in the Resources for this topic.

Building your policies

1. WHAT DOES TENANT AND RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT INVOLVE?

The tenant and resident engagement activities expected of a community housing provider go beyond simple delivery of contractual rights and responsibilities under a residential tenancy agreement.

The concept of tenant and resident engagement is central to community housing provision. Community housing providers exist to provide housing and related services for very low, low and moderate income tenants and their households. Community housing providers cannot meet their organisational objectives and NRSCH regulatory requirement without engaging with tenants and residents about the way services are planned and delivered.

At a minimum, community housing providers are expected to:

- Involve tenants and residents in the planning and delivery of housing services
- Promote opportunities for tenants and residents to be involved in their community
- Obtain feedback from tenants and residents about its services
- Consult with tenants and residents on proposals that will affect them

In addition, community housing providers registered at Tier 1 and 2 are expected to:

- Survey tenants/residents at least once every two years and use the survey results to improve services
- Have formal structures or mechanisms that support engagement with tenants and residents such as a tenant representative forum or tenant positions on its Board

Tenant and resident engagement activities also support other aspects of providing community housing, for example:

- Designing culturally appropriate, person-centred or trauma informed services
- Supporting tenants to sustain their tenancy
- Building connections between the community housing organisation, its tenants and residents, and the broader community

1. EXPECTED FORMS OF TENANT AND RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

SATISFACTION SURVEY

It is good practice to for community housing providers of all Tiers to regularly survey tenants and residents to find out their views on the services they receive. Surveys are also a key way for community housing providers to establish they meet NRSCH customer satisfaction benchmarks for service delivery, property condition and property maintenance.

Some key considerations for tenant surveys are:

- **Accessibility** – the survey findings will shape future services, so it important to hear from as

many people as possible. This means choosing a survey method and format that is accessible to as many tenants and residents as possible, but still within the community housing provider's resources.

Larger community housing providers may consider making their surveys available in a range of ways, or even languages so its easy for all tenants and residents to participate. Smaller community housing providers may focus on a single, simple approach that is practical for the majority of its tenants and residents.

- **Low literacy** – many people have low literacy. Using simple, everyday, language in your survey will make it more accessible.
- **Resources** – It takes resources to design and promote a survey and then analyse the findings to identify systemic issues, make decisions about how to respond to the findings and communicate outcomes back to tenants and residents. It is best to decide how the whole process will be resourced before starting a tenant and resident survey.
- **Feedback** – having a transparent and systematic process for giving tenants and residents information about the survey findings and confirming actions that will be taken in response to the survey findings is very important. Tenants and residents will stop participating in surveys if they feel that nothing changes as a result.
- **Independence** – tenants and residents are more comfortable to give their honest opinions if an independent organisation is commissioned to conduct the survey and analyse its results. Tier 1 and 2 community housing providers are expected to involve an independent organisation when conducting tenant or resident surveys. Engaging an independent organisation to conduct tenant or resident surveys is recommended practice for all community housing providers.

FORMAL ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS

Community housing providers establish formal engagement structures so they can regularly and systematically engage interested tenants and residents in decisions about the planning and delivery of housing services.

Tenant and resident engagement mechanisms can take many forms. It is up to individual community housing providers to decide the approach that makes the most sense for their organisation. Some examples of possible approaches are:

- Including tenant representatives on the organisation's management committee/ board of management. This approach requires organisation as it must be reflected in the community housing provider's constitution
- Establishing a tenant advisory group comprised of tenants and residents representing different geographical locations or communities of interest that is consulted on all significant planning and service delivery decisions
- Holding regular, structured, consultative meetings or forums open to all tenants and residents
- Actively promoting complaint and appeal processes in order to pick up on areas of dissatisfaction
- Establishing tenant or resident working groups to provide input on specific topics or issues
- Convening tenant or resident neighbourhood groups

Tier 1 and 2 community housing providers are expected to document tenant and resident engagement planned for the year in their business plan.

2. OTHER APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT

Community housing providers can also supplement formal surveys and formal mechanisms with other approaches to tenant and resident engagement. Some examples include:

- Promoting information or opportunities for engagement through tenant or resident newsletters and social media pages

- Promoting local services that might interest tenants or residents through tenant or resident newsletters and social media pages
- Organising activities or outings
- Connecting tenants and residents to activities or services run by local organisations
- Negotiating opportunities for tenant and resident to participation in local community or cultural events
- Pop up (2 or 3 question) surveys on tenant/resident customer service experiences
- Circulating draft policies or plans for tenant/resident comment or input
- Holding formal engagement events to get tenant or resident views on important decisions such as significant policy changes, allocation of maintenance budgets, or the design of new property developments

3. CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TENANTS AND RESIDENTS

Some community housing providers have a commitment to tenant and resident engagement that goes beyond communication and consultation. For example, some community housing providers have an organisational mission to connect tenants and residents into a specific community, improve community life or enrich tenant or resident lives beyond housing.

These community housing providers allocate a more resources to engagement strategies so they can provide more significant opportunities for tenant and residents through access to education, training, employment or cultural learning. Some examples of these types of strategies are:

- Financially supporting tenants and residents to attend learning opportunities such as conferences, workshops, and community based training, or to participate in cultural activities
- Offering financial scholarships to assist with education or training costs, looking for work or the cost of starting a new job
- Partnerships with local employment, vocational training providers or social enterprises
- Negotiating maintenance contracts that include employment, apprentice or traineeship opportunities for tenants and residents
- Establishing their own social enterprises, such as maintenance or cleaning businesses, to train and then employ tenants and residents