

## TENANT PARTICIPATION:

# Community and public housing compared

> *With the continuing seismic shifts in the social sector, and the relentless rise of not-for-profit housing providers, Dr Tony Gilmour takes time to reflect on what this means for tenants.*

What do you call the people who live in social housing? No, this is not the opening phrase of a stand-up comedy routine. This seemingly simple question has caused all sorts of controversies when I've raised it with housing organisations. Some are happy to stick with 'tenants', others now have 'clients' (sounding like a rather up-scale hairdressers), the more trendy have 'residents' and the utterly radical have moved to 'customers'.

Battles over words normally suggest there are big issues at stake. If 'tenant' is traditional – perhaps hierarchical – then 'resident' is more inclusive covering low and moderate income households, and perhaps neighbouring private householders. 'Customers' is a misnomer as social housing tenants cannot normally shop around, such is the housing shortage, though it suggests you are valuing tenants through providing good customer service. Some housing providers operate 'mystery shopping', where researchers pretend to be potential tenants and score how quickly the phone was answered and whether the staff member was friendly (or not).

### What's new?

Without wishing to be too biased towards the community housing sector, much of the recent tenant participation innovation (in both words and deeds) has been as a result of that sector's growth. There is nothing inevitable about this. Both sectors operate in similar policy environments, house largely similar people and employ dedicated front-line housing staff and managers.

Part of the reason is the scale of organisations. Australasian public housing authorities are large, often with between 10,000 and 120,000 properties. By contrast, community housing providers have anything from a few hundred to a couple of thousand homes. It is easier to bring innovation into a smaller organisation, especially if you are operating in a region rather than across a whole state or country.

Public housing has for many years been starved of capital for new building, and on a strict diet in terms of property refurbishment and tenant services. Governments expect public housing to be reserved for high needs households, unlike the 'working poor' of the post-war years. Community housing providers do not have money to burn, though have recently been recipients of various new forms of funding. Some have semi-commercial activities, allowing cross-subsidisation.

### New arrivals, new ideas

Few can fail to notice the influx of the Brits, Dutch and other Europeans to our shores. The author of this article is just part of this mass migration: social housing 457 visas. Tenant participation is a mainstream activity in many countries, at every level, from neighbourhood activities to the boardroom table. Many of the innovations by community housing providers, such as tenant councils and community engagement, have their backgrounds in overseas practice.



On a more local approach, for some community housing groups, involving tenants is about defining their role in the world. In particular, it is about showing how different they are to 'the other' – i.e. public housing. Given they have 'community' in their name, they may as well place community at the heart of the activities.

I suspect there is also a degree of competition between housing providers as to who will have the best tenant participation policies. Which organisation will win the coveted AHI award in 2013? Even the most confirmed Marxist would have to grudgingly admit that this might just be an example of free market competition working in favour of ordinary people.

### The public good

Although some community housing CEOs may not be the first to admit it, governments have also played a role in encouraging tenant participation by the community sector. As a housing consultant, I can see an increasing trend that tenders for transferring homes from the public to the community housing require active community engagement. Recent transfers in Tasmania, Queensland, NSW and South Australia have all made explicit mention of tenant issues.

Whether it is to prevent a rebellion, or out of social concern, stock transfer now requires an elaborate menu of consultation, engagement and even occasional participation. Many are the times I have opined in bid documents about building social inclusion and empowering individuals. Community housing providers without a strong message and track record on tenant involvement need not apply for stock transfer.

Furthermore, despite a general critique of the tenant participation practices by public housing authorities, there have been a number of cases where innovation has taken place within the public sector. Estate renewal schemes in both Victoria and NSW have a strong involvement of tenants, even when there is no community housing provider in sight.

What is lacking over the last decade and a half is a strong tenant council system for public housing. Some structures remain, though they are pale versions of the bolder structures in the 1980s and 1990s. If you live in public housing, you are likely to have little chance to participate in decision-making, unless the bulldozers are coming to bring 'social mix' to your neighbourhood. Also, it is unlikely you will be able to prevent the scheme taking place; more likely, you'll just have a say in the implementation details.

## What's on the menu?

While most of the community housing groups I have spoken to recently believe tenant participation is a good thing, and are looking to introduce more participation over the next few years, there is a hazy view as to what it means. Rather like world peace, there is support for the concept rather than a clear-cut method for bringing it about.

Some of the items that might be served on the smorgasbord of tenant participation are shown in the box below:

### Social inclusion:

- Sausage sizzle, get to know the neighbours
- Newsletters (with tenant contributions?)
- Tenant outings, Christmas parties
- Community gardens

### Customer feedback:

- Surveys and customer feedback
- Social media

### Involvement in decisions:

- Local groups (by block, by region)
- Involvement in policies and procedures
- Tenant Council
- Tenant board members
- Tenant members (shareholders)

Some housing organisations see 'participation' as being a way of building social inclusion by bringing their tenants into activities that help break down barriers with the local community. From anecdotal evidence, these types of activity can be valuable. Building inclusive communities is a worthy goal. However, it is not quite the same as allowing tenants to run the housing organisation.

The second type of activities treats tenants as customers. How satisfied are they with services? How can we provide better quality products, and more highly than our competitor housing organisation next year? Again, this is a good approach. It allows services to be tailored to need, and establishes a professional relationship between housing provider and tenant. I'm just not too sure that this is what most people would consider to be 'tenant participation'.

The third category is more clearly about power and decision making. Tenants may be invited to neighbourhood meetings, asked for their opinion on various housing policies, be elected to a Tenant Council or even serve as a Board Director. The issues here are twofold: Do the tenants have the final say, or do they just advise? Are they allowed to make 'big decisions'?

## Power balance

From a recent survey of community housing providers, many CEOs were happy to hear tenants' views but the final decision remained with the Board. Most questions are along the lines of 'what colour door would you like' or 'where should we hold the tenant Christmas party'. I think it unlikely a community housing group would consult with existing tenants about merging with another organisation or bidding for a large stock transfer in a different state or country.

With all forms of 'tenant participation', it is important to look beyond just the words. There is little benefit in calling tenants 'customers' if you continue to treat them as feudal serfs.

Involvement in decision-making makes sense but what is the extent of the involvement? It can be a major problem if an organisation promises more than it intends to, or is capable of, delivering.

## The future

Although our 457 visa friends from overseas have brought good ideas to Australia (and I'm sure to New Zealand too on different visas), not all ideas translate as intended. In general, we have small social housing systems compared to total housing stock, and only a minority of our residents are working. Furthermore, many of our social housing properties are dispersed across vast geographical areas. We do not have so many of the 'council estates' so familiar to viewers of British TV.

Right-of-centre governments in Australia and New Zealand look unlikely to be major investors over the next few years in expanding the social housing stock. They will, however, be working on restructuring and redeveloping existing public housing. With this focus on concentrated estates, more tenant participation is likely, or at least some of the milder forms of tenant engagement.

There will probably be continuing innovation by community housing providers. Perhaps, as happened in Britain over the 2000s, this will be prompted in part by regulation. Most likely the forms of regulation will be modest, however – with a national regulatory framework in place in Australia – the mechanisms are ready to roll.

Most likely, we will see development of 21st century participation approaches. Unlike a collectivist approach, looking to all tenants (as in a trades union), there will be a more individualised approach. Some may attend meetings, others may express their issues through social media. Cynics may see this as 'divide and conquer', though it perhaps better reflects an age where fewer people are participating in civil society.

We seem to be moving to a patchwork quilt of social housing providers, with less very large organisations – though this may be a two-decade transition process. This will be reflected in more varied set of participation processes. To some extent, this already happens across the community housing sector.

Tenants renting from a leading-edge housing provider – perhaps in an housing estate slated for redevelopment – may have a wide set of participation choices. Others may be kept in their place and have to bring their own supplies to the sausage sizzle. Whatever new words we might devise to describe people living in social housing, my gut feeling is that some consistency of tenancy participation is on the horizon, and quality of service provision might be a good thing.



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Tony has worked with Professor Hal Pawson of the University of NSW over the last year on a project reviewing resident involvement in social housing. This joint research has been helped shape the ideas in this article.