

Social housing: social media?

> *John Stott and Tony Gilmour take a look at how the housing sector is using social media to reach audiences and break new ground.*

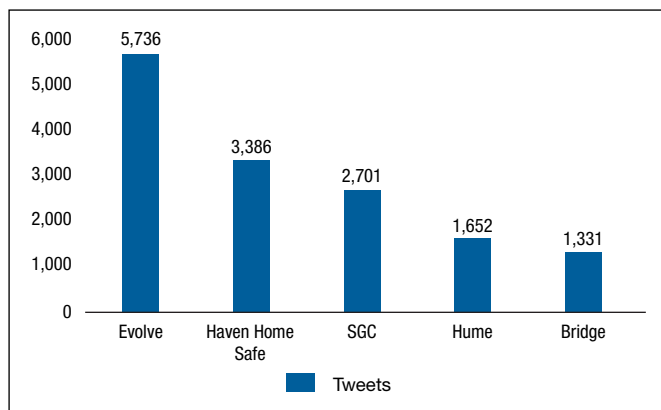
Social media is a powerful tool that has changed the face of the world. The American president causes global tidal waves with his controversial tweets and Kylie Jenner earns around \$1 million per sponsored Instagram post. So, what does this all mean for social housing landlords?

Community Housing and social media

Most large Australian community housing organisations managing over 2,000 tenancies use social media. But not all use social media to talk to stakeholders and tenants. Supporters argue the channels promote transparency and effective communication. Others may prefer to keep a lower profile.

• Twitter

Twitter is mainly used to communicate with fellow social housing landlords, banks, property developers, service providers, councils and consultants. This chart shows the top five organisational accounts in the sector, based on cumulative tweets to 31st December 2019.



The most active on Twitter is Evolve Housing in NSW, followed Haven; Home, Safe in Victoria, then SGCH (St George Community Housing) in NSW.

The two largest community housing organisations nationally by tenancies are Community Housing Limited and Compass Housing.

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HousingFirst is a Victorian housing association starting to use social media to communicate at the same rate as their NSW counterparts. The organisation communicates regularly on Twitter and is more active than Community Housing Ltd to date.

• Facebook

Most organisations have a Facebook page as part of their digital marketing, which can communicate values, events and key information.



Facebook pages need to be managed pro-actively by the housing provider to drive desired engagement and manage risks of inappropriate content from tenants, ex-tenants or ex-employees. Genuine grievances need attention, and company policies and procedures still apply.

The Facebook leaders are Evolve Housing and Haven; Home Safe. Evolve Housing’s page also lets tenants message their landlord by instant messaging about repairs, maintenance or other matters.

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Some housing managers have commented that most tenants have a mobile phone and a large number have Facebook accounts. Facebook’s top users are over 45, which is similar to the social housing audience. It follows then that this could be an effective way for landlords to communicate directly to their most important customers – tenants.

Most large community housing organisations have a Facebook presence, with some 2,000 followers. However, several large organisations – such as Unity Housing and Mission Australia Housing – do not use Facebook.

Some community housing organisations piggy-back off their umbrella brand to reach tenants alongside other customers, such as Anglicare SA (7,000-plus followers) and Junction Australia (4,500+ followers). Launch Housing has a large Facebook audience (nearly 10,000) and uses the channel to promote its larger mission of ending homelessness.

• Other social media channels

LinkedIn is the world’s business social network, aimed mainly at the corporate world and potential employees. Unsurprisingly, several of the largest community housing organisations engaging in complex cross-sector partnerships and funding – Community Housing Limited, Housing Choices Australia and SGCH – are the most active here. Some large providers have no LinkedIn presence at all, such as Unison Housing and Mission Australia Housing.



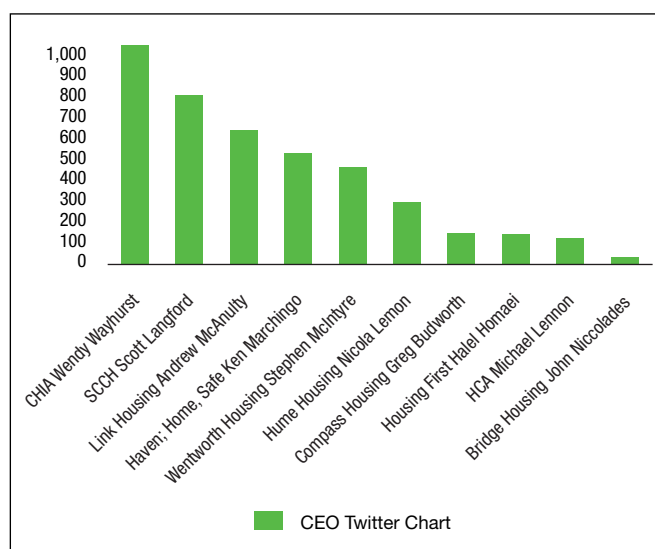
Instagram and YouTube are less used by the community housing sector, and only Evolve Housing has an Instagram account. SGCH, Compass Housing and Evolve Housing use YouTube to communicate tenants' stories in video. It will be interesting to monitor how these media are used in future.

CEOs, Networkers and Politicians

The CEO is brand ambassador for the organisation and strategic use of social media can be powerful when done well. Bridge Housing CEO John Nicolades publishes company news, annual reports and important employee news through his LinkedIn account to an audience of more than 1,000.

“ The CEO is brand ambassador for the organisation and strategic use of social media can be powerful when done well ”

Top of the CEO charts is Wendy Hayhurst from CHIA, the sector industry association. Wendy is a regular tweeter. Twitter is a perfect platform to share research articles, news for the CHIA and thought-provoking debates about the sector.



Landlord CEOs Scott Langford and Andrew McNulty are both passionate leaders and users of social media. There are two female landlord CEOs in the top 10 – Nicola Lemon from fast-growing Hume Housing in NSW and Haleh Homaei from Victoria's HousingFirst.

Is social media a game for younger people? On the contrary, older CEOs in our space are doing great work, and some younger leaders have yet to begin. Ideally, these women and men would start using Twitter soon so, when they are promoted, they already have a strong reserve of followers.

Politicians responsible for social housing use social media to promote their policies and messages to constituents and community stakeholders. NSW State Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services, Gareth Ward, has a high social media profile with 5,502 Twitter followers and 5,000 Facebook connections. He is known to regularly respond to people posting on his site, including tenants.

It is quieter at the Commonwealth level. Michael Sukkar is the Federal Minister for Housing and Assistant Treasurer, with just over 5,000 Twitter followers, and Assistant Housing Minister Luke Howarth has around 1,300 followers. These Commonwealth ministers don't use Facebook for political messaging.

Public housing landlords

Given the not-for-profit sector often forms cross-sectoral partnerships, raises bank finance and needs to keep local councils happy, it is easy to see the appeal of social media. It is also easier for the CEO of a community housing organisation to authorise a tweet than to get ministerial clearance.

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The public housing agency in NSW is one of the largest in the world. Their minister, Gareth Ward, is a prolific user of Twitter, less so with the agency itself. While the NSW Department of Family and Community Services has over 18,000 LinkedIn followers and nearly 25,000 Facebook followers. There is no dedicated Twitter account.

Victoria's Department of Health and Human Services has a higher and balanced social media presence across key channels. The Department of Housing and Public Works in Queensland also has a balanced reach but less than half the followers compared to Victoria.

“ New Zealand approaches are interesting ”

Smaller Australian states and territories have a modest presence, except South Australia and Tasmania. The number of tenants in public housing in these jurisdictions suggests communication happens via more traditional communications channels such as letters, websites, emails and newsletters.

New Zealand approaches are interesting. Public housing agency Housing NZ manage over 60,000 properties, making it a large Australasian social housing landlord. Their social media is extensive but private – their Twitter account is protected so only approved followers can see @housingnz's tweets. Their Facebook presence is a tenant forum that requires application.

Public housing agency	State	LinkedIn	Facebook	Twitter
Department of Family and Community Services	NSW	18,963	24,735	No Account
Department of Health & Human Services	Victoria	40,112	28,517	21,200
Department of Housing and Public Works	Queensland	3,379	5,230	11,486
Housing Authority	Western Australia	4,126	173	1,208
Housing Authority	South Australia	40	No Page	No Account
Housing and Community Services	ACT	No page	3,854	3,771
Housing Communities	Tasmania	No page	No page	No Account
Local Government, Housing and Community Development	Northern Territory	39	1,652	No Account
Housing New Zealand	N/A	8,134	6,496	Not known

Is it worth it?

Social media is a fast, comparatively affordable way to communicate to tenants and stakeholders. More traditional channels, like newsletters and press releases, are increasingly seen as old-fashioned, expensive and attract far less attention. Housing providers have to be where people are.

Social media also offers the opportunity for insights and feedback on customer services, in addition to more traditional participation approaches. It can be useful to reach tenants who do not attend traditional action groups due to work or family commitments.

“ Housing providers have to be where people are ”

Social media may also be effective as a communication tool during emergencies, such as the recent Australian bushfires (just remember not to rely only on this). Stakeholders are also important recipients (and donors) of information through social media. This should make business-focused social media, such as LinkedIn and Twitter, of interest to community housing organisations.

All organisations, including social housing landlords, need a strategic approach to social media. This also means implementing relevant controls that should form part of the organisation's entire communication and marketing strategy. Even a decision not to use social media needs to be made strategically.

There are real opportunities out there. Just take care – Donald Trump might be following you!



John Stott and **Tony Gilmour** lead the Housing Action Network, a group of consultants working with social and affordable housing landlords across Australia and New Zealand.

John (top) has a background in business, accounting and media (ask him about his past role with Neighbours)



Tony (bottom) has worked in finance, social housing management and renewal, and writes rather too many housing histories.

