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Social housing pathways by policy co-design: opportunities for tenant participation in system innovation in Australia

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Executive summary

Key points

- The Australian housing policy context is changing in response to rental and ownership crises, and growing waiting lists for access to social housing. Questions emerge about how, and to what extent, participatory methods can form part of the effective responses in a new policy landscape.
- Participatory policy methods are widely recognised as beneficial for effective policy design and development across a wide range of public policy realms internationally and, to a lesser extent, in Australia.
- The use of tenant participation in national housing policy is scant. However, some states and territories have created guidelines or suggestions for tenant participation in social housing or implemented their own programs in public housing and community housing.
- Challenges for tenant participation programs include resource investment of workforce and tenant capabilities for engagement in co-design processes, structural power issues, understanding reasons why tenants may not participate, and disagreement between tenants and housing providers on the purpose and extent of programs.
- Original analysis of data presented in this report suggests that participatory methods that engage with a wide range of potential housing assistance recipients, including but not limited to social housing sectors, will be most effective in future policy development decisions.

- **Establishment of a new Australian Housing Clearinghouse could facilitate lived experience participation in housing and homelessness policy development. This could enable information-sharing within and across organisations and sectors to support best practice nationally.**
- **Development and ongoing improvement of a National Housing and Homelessness Plan provides a significant opportunity for embedding a commitment to participatory methods in housing policy nationally, including social housing sector development.**
- **This project is part of the 'Inquiry into supporting pathways in a social housing system', which aims to identify opportunities for aligning assistance with people's housing aspirations, managing access for greater responsiveness, improving support within and out of social housing, and providing all stakeholders in the system – applicants, tenants, landlords, funders and the wider Australian public – with appropriate expectations and assurances about its outcomes.**

Key findings

Internationally, a shift toward inclusive policy design and decision making processes has emerged in response to increasingly complex public policy challenges and the dominance of systems thinking to address these. There is a relatively well-established understanding that system complexity requires viewpoints of multiple stakeholders (Blomkamp 2022).

- The inclusion of diverse voices within participatory methods to respond to complex problems is highly consistent with a systems thinking approach to public policy.
- The United Kingdom (UK) Government Policy Innovation Lab suggests that inclusion of lived experience and views of diverse stakeholders is important, as without wide understanding, policy may be less effective or well-targeted (Norman 2020).
- Transformative and actionable evidence-oriented policy approaches draw intensively on a range of expertise and inputs, including from professionally trained sectors as well as from wider publics (Loorbach 2010; van Kerkhoff and Lebel 2015).

Overall, the international literature on tenant participation finds mixed success regardless of the structure of the program or length of time such programs have been implemented. Four key observations can be summarised.

1. Having tenant participation as a key component of government regulation on social housing can be beneficial, as it mandates a standard of tenant participation programs. However, legislating tenant participation alone is not a guarantee of success.
2. Multiple studies found tenants and housing providers and officials had different ideas of what tenant participation should look like and what it should achieve (Foroughi 2017; Chaskin, Khare and Joseph 2012; Redmond and Norris 2007). This can lead to conflict between tenants and housing providers.
3. Tenant participation programs can be compromised by structural power issues between tenants and housing providers, which can limit tenant autonomy and also lead to conflict (Kruythoff 2008; Lee 2010).

4. Even when programs are successfully implemented, there is a need to consider the factors that motivate tenant participation and reasons why some tenants may not participate (Preece 2019; Lambourne and Jenkins 2020; McKee 2009).

In social housing contexts, tenant or resident participation in policy processes is the major form of participation. International literature demonstrates that tenant participation can cover a range of programs and levels of tenant involvement.

There is no current systematic evidence about the extent to which participatory policy methods are used in the Australian context. Findings from this research indicate there is high variability across state and territory jurisdictions, with only few states currently moving toward a commitment of in-depth policy co-design approaches as part of their policy processes. Some states and territories have current tenant participation programs or initiatives. Both New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) appear to have ongoing programs in their public housing, while South Australia (SA) and Tasmania held one-off consultation exercises to shape future housing policy (with the potential for Tasmania to include lived experience on an ongoing basis). In Victoria a raft of participatory methods are used with current social housing tenants. Advocacy and not for profit organisations also use participatory methods in variable ways across jurisdictions and sectors of the housing and homelessness system. However, tenant participation or broader lived experience consultation are not a key part of national housing policy and limited public information is available about such approaches.

Hence, regarding how we might understand levels of tenant participation in relation to aims and methods currently used in Australian social housing policy, we can conclude that most forms of participation are those which are “light touch”: involving information sharing or once-off consultation only. There is limited current commitment nationally toward more in-depth participatory policy making methods.

Table 1: Levels, aims and implementation methods of tenant participation (Redmond and Norris 2007: 189)

Levels of tenant participation	Aims	Typical methods and structures
Information	Information is provided to tenants on the housing service and the receipt of feedback from them	Newsletters; meetings; leaflets; tenant handbooks.
Consultation and dialogue	The views of tenants are sought and are taken into account in the making of decisions and the provision of services	Open meetings; questionnaires; tenant surveys; estate boards and forums.
Shared decision making or devolution	Tenants have voting rights or specific agreements over service provision which means that local authorities must act on their views	Estate agreements; delegation orders, estate boards; service agreements; estate action plans.
Tenant management	Tenants have full control and are thus autonomous in making decisions on the housing service	Estate management boards; Tenant management.

Source: Redmond and Norris 2007: 189

The analysis of the Australian Housing Aspirations (AHA) survey, while not initially designed for policy co-design, bears importance in comprehending the housing aspirations of not only social housing tenants but also individuals within very low and low-income households. This holds critical value, given that current approaches predominantly focus on measuring the satisfaction of social housing tenants. This approach fails to provide insights into the desired housing outcomes for individuals in both the short and long-term, essential for fostering feelings of safety, security and control within their homes. This gap is further bridged by encompassing other potentially vulnerable groups beyond social housing, enabling a more holistic examination of the housing system. This approach has the potential to offer assistance to those who may eventually find themselves on social housing wait lists. Notably, the qualitative aspect of this research underscores the existence of a similar inclusive approach focused on vulnerable groups in the Tasmanian Housing Strategy Lived Experience Consultation, which aimed to hear from people with experience of social housing, homelessness and housing stress.

Policy development options

Findings of this research were supported by a 'stress testing' approach within a policy workshop. In this forum, it was clear that there is considerable awareness in the Australian context of the potential value for increased participation in policy design processes by social housing tenants and other recipients of housing assistance. However, consistent with the desk-based review, there was also recognition that the extent to which participatory methods are used in housing policy and social housing policy is highly variable, tending towards very limited use beyond social housing satisfaction surveys. It was recognised that there is potential value in looking to homelessness and other supported housing sectors, as well as other fields of public policy, and international experience, for lessons about how participatory methods could be taken up in the Australian context.

Importantly, the Australian National Housing and Homelessness Plan, under development at the time of writing this research, presents a potentially new policy landscape in which participatory methods may become more embedded within policy making processes. For example, as part of the preliminary consultation process for the development of the national plan, there is a deep commitment to engagement with communities and individuals and population cohorts with lived experience of housing assistance and homelessness services. International best practice, as well as the recent development of a lived experience perspective of housing in the Tasmanian context, and our original analysis of Australian Housing Aspirations survey data presented in this research, indicate that ongoing commitment to wide-ranging engagement with the diversity of lived experience stakeholders across the housing system (including, but not limited to, social housing) may form a worthwhile feature of any national plan. This would require genuine commitment, resourcing, funding, workforce development and—most importantly—a commitment to ensuring the dignity and safety of participants within policy making processes.

Establishment of an Australian Housing Clearinghouse to facilitate national and international information sharing and best-practice development of practice and guidelines related to participatory policy methods is recommended based on findings of this research.

The study

The overarching question addressed by this project is:

Can tenant participation and policy co-design help transform Australia's straitened social housing sector into a system for socially supported housing pathways?

This question is addressed via three sub-questions, focused on development of an actionable evidenced-based pathway for policy innovation and development:

1. What is best practice participatory and policy co-design, and how can this inform housing policy design and innovation practice?

2. What are the housing outcome aspirations of social housing tenants, and very low and low-income households, what supports do they need to attain these, and what is their access to such supports?
3. What are the policy and practice implications of the research findings and how can these be actively developed within Australian social housing and housing assistance systems?

The project has been undertaken using a mixed method approach:

Conceptualisation and international and national review

The field of participatory policy-design methodologies is growing rapidly in response to recognising the value and outcomes of such approaches. The project includes a review of main approaches in participatory and co-design methods, and how these align with components of social housing and housing assistance, including but not limited to design, delivery, assessment and innovation. The review considers, for example, how various forms of participatory policy making align with social housing and housing assistance access, design and support types, and outcomes and outcomes frameworks.

Development of a social housing tenant housing aspirations evidence-base

Participatory policy making literature identifies well-targeted population surveys as a foundational component within inclusive policy making methodologies (Hyysalo and Hyysalo 2018).

In this research, data from the 2018 AHA Survey (N=7,343) (Stone, Rowley et al. 2020b) is analysed to develop an evidence-base of social housing tenants' and housing assistance recipients' housing aspirations, their self-identified support and housing assistance needs, and their access to such support. This nationwide secondary data analysis concentrates on short-term and long-term housing aspirations of social housing residents and respondents with very low and low incomes. The AHA Survey included multiple facets of housing and support needs and an aspirational housing pathways approach, including a dedicated focus on low-income Australians and Aboriginal perspectives (Stone, Rowley et al. 2020b).

For current social housing tenants and low and very low-income households with a range of demographic and identified eligibility characteristics, the analysis is designed around the key areas of housing aspirations outcomes, support, and assistance needed to attain these outcomes, and access to such supports, including impacts of support gaps:

- current, short and longer term housing aspirations (tenure, dwelling type, location, and similar)
- types of housing assistance and supports self-identified by survey participants as facilitating short and long-term housing aspirations
- impacts of support and non-support, and the nature and impact of support and assistance gaps.

Policy and practice workshop

Focusing on policy implications of the research, an online workshop was conducted in which preliminary findings of the research were presented to key policy and practice stakeholders, to support identification of actionable policy and practice development implications of the research. Preliminary findings of the research were provided prior to the workshop. Policy and practice participants' expertise assists to 'stress-test' policy design scenarios in which tenant and resident participation in policy co-design can be enhanced.

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