

Including social housing tenant voice in policy leads to better outcomes

Based on AHURI Final Report No. 418: Social housing pathways by policy co-design: opportunities for tenant participation in system innovation in Australia



What this research is about

This research examines the best-practice opportunities for increasing tenant participation in developing social housing and related housing assistance policies and programs in Australia.

The context of this research

Neither the provision of social housing stock, nor the delivery of dedicated social housing supports, has kept pace with the changing demands of tenants' needs and aspirations; with social housing clients increasingly presenting with more complex health, housing and social care needs, as well as significant histories of trauma and disadvantage. There is a need for urgent reform to build a social housing and housing assistance system that supports tenants and eligible applicants, including meeting needs of tenants through tenant involvement in program and policy design.

The key findings

Tenant participation in social housing programs is limited in Australia

Tenant participation is defined as 'the involvement of social housing tenants in the housing services provided by their landlords'. Participation models stem from the principle that those most affected by a policy decision, or other forms of organisational process and decision making, ought to be involved in the decision making process itself.

Despite gaining momentum, optimal forms and methods for supporting increased tenant participation within social housing and housing assistance systems remain relatively untested, and, in Australia, are comparatively limited. Little is known about how the design, provision and targeting of social housing and other forms of housing assistance might benefit from increased tenant inputs—nor, importantly, how housing outcomes, support and access within social housing pathways could be improved if increased tenant participation were to be facilitated.

Participation can lead to benefits for tenants

Active participation is claimed to help tenants to experience a heightened sense of ownership and autonomy over their living conditions, leading to increased satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging within their communities. This includes in community housing rental co-operatives. Moreover, tenant participation fosters the acquisition and development of valuable skills such as communication, negotiation and problem-solving, which can positively contribute to education, employment and societal engagement. This empowerment is particularly advantageous in the social housing sector as it plays a crucial role in providing housing for highly vulnerable groups. Enabling the acquisition of necessary skills through tenant participation may help social housing tenants to achieve their life goals and move to other housing as appropriate.

International awareness of importance of tenants in decision making

Internationally, there has been a shift toward inclusive policy design and decision making processes, which have emerged in response to increasingly complex public policy challenges. There is a relatively well-established understanding that system complexity requires viewpoints of multiple stakeholders and that evidence-based policy making is well supported by including diverse voices such as lived experience experts and advocates. International observations include:

- formal opportunities for tenant participation in social housing policy and practice improvement processes should always take place as part of organisation wide tenant and service user engagement activities
- tenant participation is most effective when conducted via transparent processes that may include formal role descriptions, recruitment and selection activities
- consideration should be given to remuneration, including explicit guidance on when individuals will or will not be paid for their contributions
- ongoing support for individuals involved in participatory processes is essential. This should include mentoring, debriefing and case management as appropriate.

In the UK tenant participation has been prevalent since the 1970s, and tenant participation is required by English and Scottish social housing legislation with two key forms of participation:

- tenants' associations that represent tenants in discussions with housing providers
- tenant management organisations that undertake tasks traditionally done by housing providers.

Further examples of tenant participation types including panels, consultations, decision making and governance.

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 are:

- 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
- tenants and housing providers and officials can have different ideas of what tenant participation should look like and what it should achieve. This can lead to conflict between tenants and housing providers

- 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
- there is a need to consider the factors that motivate tenant participation and reasons why some tenants may not participate.

Limited tenant participation in Australia

Although tenant participation does not feature heavily in national housing policy, nor in the bilateral agreements of the NHHA, there is considerable awareness in the Australian context of the potential value of increased participation by social housing tenants and other recipients of housing assistance in policy design processes. Some state and territory governments have developed guides that direct best practice examples and approaches for participation in public and community housing, and some governments have implemented tenant participation in their own housing services.

Publicly available information about the extent and modes of tenant participation across states and territories is currently extremely limited. Several jurisdictions including Victoria, NSW, Queensland and the ACT appear to have ongoing programs in their public housing, while SA and Tasmania held one-off consultation exercises to shape future housing policy. However, tenant participation or broader lived experience consultation are not a key part of national housing policy. There is understanding that social housing satisfaction surveys do not amount to participatory policy making and are limited in the extent they can actively inform policy development or policy innovation.

It is notable that best practice guides recommend regularly reviewing tenant participation programs. However, there is limited evidence of review or outcomes from both government and non-government sources, although the evaluation of these programs may be internal and not available to the public. A key finding of this research is that the ability for public and community housing services to improve their tenant participation programs could be enhanced by knowledge of what successes (or limitations) others have experienced. Transparency around tenant participation program outcomes could prove useful for building better programs in the future.

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.

Barriers to tenant participation

Organisational culture and broader public discourse can shape the way that people living with housing assistance and other forms of welfare can be perceived. In some cases, there can be an underlying belief that welfare recipients (such as social housing tenants) are not deserving of having a voice at the table. For policy co-design methods to work well, there must be respect and recognition of the expertise of all participants involved in the policy making process, which may require workforce training and changing cultural norms.

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Another significant aspect of culture that affects the uptake of participatory methods is that often key champions within organisations must take the lead to develop design processes. Such champions also require resources and support for co-design processes to be successful and sustainable.

There can also be problems obtaining a ‘representative’ sample of tenants in programs. For example, when tenants apply to participation programs through written online forms, the tenants who apply will be those fluent in English and articulate, rather than those with more complex challenges. It can also be the case that those with the most complex circumstances—who provide an important perspective—often cannot spare any time because they are in crisis.

Tenants may also strategically engage only when issues are important to them, which points to a need for a range of tenant participation opportunities.

Social housing organisations need resourcing and skills development

Policy co-design and other deep participatory policy making methods require organisational resourcing, skill development, funding and deep commitment to processes that take more time than usual within government departments, to be successful and sustainable.

As well as having a commitment to organisational culture that supports participatory design methods, it is essential that the outcomes of such processes form a genuine component of policy development within organisations. The way co-designed information is used is a critical component of this and there must be transparency around how information that has been co-developed is used in policy design and innovation. Participants must see and recognise their voice within outcomes of participatory processes, or alternatively, have a clear understanding as to why that may not be the case where this may not be possible.

The research findings indicate that recognition of the expertise and experience of service officers with frontline experience formed a valuable and rich wealth of information and expertise in itself, which could be brought to policy co-design processes.

A critical component for policy participatory methods to be successful and sustainable is investment of funding, workforce training, capability development and support for participants in processes, and information sharing.

Australian Housing Aspirations survey highlights tenants’ need for feelings of safety, security and control

The analysis of the Australian Housing Aspirations (AHA) survey shows the importance in comprehending the housing aspirations of not only social housing tenants but also individuals within very low and low-income households. This provides insights into the desired housing outcomes of individuals in both the short and long-term, essential for fostering feelings of safety, security and control within their homes. Understanding the unique needs and preferences of different cohorts is also crucial in ensuring that a diverse range of housing assistance provisions is developed.

What this research means for policy makers

A new Australian Housing Clearinghouse could be developed to facilitate cross-sector sharing of best-practice examples of participation methods; collation and analysis of case studies related to particular types of participation within policy and program design; and open sharing of practice guidelines and materials to facilitate safe and effective participation methods in mainstream housing policy making. Clearinghouse models have been proven to be effective in a range of policy and practice realms when resourced well; accessible to a wide range of stakeholders; and owned and managed by persons of direct relevance to the policy and practice field in question.

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Other specific findings include:

- a toolbox of participatory methods is needed for engagement across population cohorts with varied needs for housing assistance, to achieve different types of policy design inputs
- an ongoing commitment is necessary to resourcing, investing in, and training workforces, and building participant capability and supports for policy co-design
- there needs to be program evaluation to confirm what works well, under what conditions and for whom
- recognition of expertise of frontline staff is an important but untapped source of potential policy innovation expertise.

The Australian National Housing and Homelessness Plan presents a potential new policy landscape in which tenant participation may become more embedded within policy making processes. An ongoing commitment to wide-ranging engagement with the diversity of lived experience stakeholders across the housing system (including, but not limited to, social housing) 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.

Methodology

This research undertook an international and national review of policy co-design methodologies and best practice relevant to the social housing and housing assistance sectors; analysed Australian Housing Aspirations survey data to understand aspirational outcomes in social housing and related support systems; and led a policy and practice informant workshop to ‘stress-test’ findings.

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