

# Creating Community: Tenant and Staff Perceptions of Formal and Informal Processes in Mixed-tenure Community Housing

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Community Housing Providers (CHP) are often tasked with building strong and resilient communities. Community processes, such as creating a sense of belonging, are believed to be part of a solution to the disadvantage experienced by social housing tenants.<sup>1</sup> Research in this area has mainly looked at community participation. From this we know more about the barriers to or reasons for participation, but there are still many unknowns: How do CHPs and tenants foster community within mixed-tenure housing sites, and how does this contribute to tenant well-being? This article will address these questions.

The findings presented here are part of a larger ethnographic study that investigates the social life on two mixed-tenure community housing sites owned by Unison Housing. The sites are located in two Melbourne suburbs that have quite different socio-economic profiles. The research includes focus groups with nine place-managers (staff who manage tenancies and mixed-tenure sites), field observation, and 11 interviews with social and affordable tenants from the two research sites. Mixed-tenure sites are commonly made up of a mix of social renters mixed with private renters or owners. Many of Unisons' mixed-tenure sites, and the two investigated here, are unique in that the mix is made up of community housing tenants, often allocated from priority one of the Victorian Housing Register, and affordable housing tenants, who are employed but due to their low-incomes have difficulty accessing the private market.

## Place-managers

In the focus groups place-managers described community building primarily in terms of activities and events. Broadly, they approach this

in three ways; firstly, organised solely by staff, secondly, a combination of both staff and tenants, or lastly, organised predominantly by tenants. In the first approach, place-managers or a support service facilitate community events for tenants to attend. This kind of event is utilised when place-managers are attempting to engage with isolated tenants, to address a need identified by place-managers, and to help link tenants to the broader neighbourhood. Such activities include barbeques and house meetings.

Secondly, place-managers or support services facilitate events with input from tenants. This happens when tenants share an identified need

with staff, or when place-managers seek feedback from tenants on proposed plans. For example, a cooking program was started by a local support service after tenants raised a desire to learn how to use the kitchens in their units.

Finally, community events are facilitated by tenants with support from place-managers. This is when tenants identify a need and only require material or basic support from staff. Examples of this include a senior's walking group, or families starting a homework group for their children, using the communal space on site.

Place-managers reported that these types of community events





helped meet social needs, such as belonging and connection, and developed a sense of ownership. The place-managers also identified that community activities helped sustain tenancies; place-managers are able to build rapport with tenants which assisted in identifying and addressing tenancy issues.

### Tenants

Preliminary analysis of interviews with participants suggests that events and activities are valued, but that there are social dimensions beyond this. Formally organised activities by Unison were welcomed by participants. They said events such as barbeques were enjoyable, and some expressed wanting to see an increase in frequency of these events. However, more significant to the daily life of participants were the relationships that developed independently of formal activities.

For some participants, interactions with others are limited to greetings and small talk. Others reported greater connection with one another, spending time in one another's apartments, talking, yarning, and having coffee, sometimes for hours. On one site participants discussed utilising the communal space for

sharing food together and storytelling. Participants said this is also where they would look after each other's children. Many interactions were based around the challenges of their situations. For example, participants reported looking out for one another when knowing tenants lack family or other social supports, sharing resources such as lending one another tools or providing food for one another's pets when needed, and working together to improve issues on site by advocating to Unison.

Participants identified benefits to developing relationships with their neighbours. Tenants said it was good for their children, it creates a feeling of safety and respect, and addressed isolation. On both sites, participants valued becoming friends with people from different cultural backgrounds. One participant discussed how this had helped them become more open minded and compassionate, while others described this as creating greater social connectedness.

However, some participants expressed difficulties trusting those around them. Histories of trauma and violence, or negative interpersonal experiences on site were discussed in relation to this. For these participants,

professional relationships with either staff from Unison or the support agency were identified as being significant and adding value to their living experience.

### Summary

Both tenants and place-managers have identified the importance of social relationships between tenants, and between tenants and the organisation. However, there are distinct differences in community building between the role of place-manager compared to tenant; place-managers are restricted to the capacity of their position as staff, while tenants are more embedded within the social life. This difference is represented in the way they each make, and what they both perceive to gain, from community. Place-managers discussed this as primarily taking place in a formal, activity-based context. While this context was significant to some tenants, they also discussed informal, everyday interactions as being meaningful. Both tenants and staff identified that there were benefits derived from community processes, such as creating a sense of belonging and overcoming isolation. However, while staff saw formal community events as also helping to sustain tenancies, tenants regarded informal social processes as helping to meet material and social needs inherent to their situations.

Regardless, it is clear there is value in both formal and informal approaches to community building, and that this value extends to both the organisation and its tenants. The numerous perspectives presented here illustrate that there is complexity to community building processes and the social relationships and outcomes derived from this. The ethnographic research, that this small study is part of, will provide greater insights into these processes and outcomes to better understand how community housing providers can best facilitate community on their housing sites.

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### Endnote

1. Randolph B, Wood M, Holloway D, Buck B 2003, *The benefits of tenure diversification*, AHURI Positioning Paper No. 65, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/position-papers/65>.

