

UNISON HOUSING RESEARCH LAB

THINK PIECE 1/18



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Does tenure mix work?

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The Unison Housing Research Lab *Think Piece* series critically examines theories and evidence that are influential in the areas of social housing and homelessness, and that are pertinent to Unison's mission, policies and practice.

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Introduction

Tenure mix has become a ubiquitous feature of urban housing policy. Tenure mix policies come in a variety of forms and serve many purposes, but key among them is the promise of reducing neighbourhood problems by changing the mix of tenure in an area. By introducing different social groups into a defined urban space, tenure mix aims to improve economic and social opportunities for people who are disadvantaged.

Tenure mix is put forward as a solution for breaking up concentrations of poverty, particularly in areas where there is a considerable amount of social housing. It has been adopted and championed in one form or another in housing policy in Australia, North America, Europe, and the United Kingdom. Although tenure mix has achieved significant policy traction in many places, how effective is tenure mix as a tool to achieve better individual and neighbourhood outcomes? This paper addresses this question.

In our previous *Think Piece*, we discussed the history, theoretical foundation, and empirical evidence that have informed policy regarding ‘area effects’. We noted that neighbourhood renewal and tenure mix are viewed as practical and cost-effective ways of addressing concentrated and entrenched disadvantage. This *Think Piece* builds on the previous paper by examining how the negative effects of concentrated disadvantage might be mitigated through tenure mix policy.

To do this, we critically examine three aspects of tenure mix. First, we provide a brief historical overview of social housing in Australia so as to present a context for how the adoption and deployment of tenure mix has evolved. Second, we outline the concept of tenure mix and how it is applied in practice. And third, we explore the rationale for tenure mix to better understand why this is a preferred approach in contemporary social housing policy. In presenting these ideas, we examine the empirical evidence to assess the efficacy of tenure mix in relation to improving individual and neighbourhood outcomes.





The evolution of social housing in Australia

In Australia, social housing consists of public rental housing and community housing, State-owned and managed Indigenous housing, and community Indigenous housing. State and Territory governments are responsible for managing public rental housing (including Indigenous housing); community housing is administered by non-government organisations (such as Unison); and, Indigenous community housing is managed by specialist Indigenous organisations¹.

Social housing has been provided in some form since early in the twentieth century, but the foundation for the current system was established after World War 2 (Yates, 2013). At that time, Australia entered a period of sustained economic growth underpinned by the emergence of new industries and strong trade protection, and the Federal Government became a more active player in the housing market. In the mid-1940s, the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) led to significant investment in public housing construction by the Commonwealth and States. While policy support for home-ownership remained strong, between 1945 and 1955 public housing completions accounted for between 12 and 30 percent of all housing completions – a level of construction unrivalled since.

Social housing was often built near industrial centres and was initially made available to low and middle income working families for rent or purchase (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010). Indeed, Australia followed a *universalistic* model of housing according to which it is a public obligation to provide the population with quality housing that is affordable to all - a model that still operates in places such as The Netherlands and Sweden (Institute for the Study of Labor, Braga & Palvarini, 2013).

The 'Golden Age' of public housing ended in the 1970s when Australia, like many other advanced liberal democratic nations, shifted from a welfare-focused economy

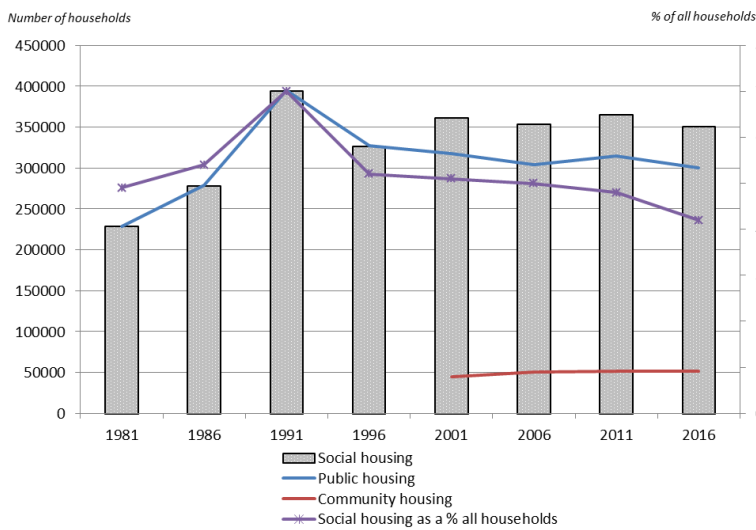
¹ Public Housing Authorities are increasingly contracting out tenancy and property management services to community housing organisations.



to one shaped by the principles of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism privileges the market economy and seeks to reduce State involvement in the marketplace. In this context, housing policy looked to the market to deliver housing according to the principles of supply and demand (Institute for the Study of Labor, Braga & Palvarini, 2013).

Neoliberalism confirmed home-ownership as the preferred and ‘natural’ tenure and reinforced existing tenure prejudices that treated renters as second class citizens. Indeed, there exists a hierarchy of tenure across society whereby owner-occupiers hold the greatest political power, followed by private renters, and finally social housing residents.² Given that this hierarchy is likely to be reproduced on mixed tenure sites, it is important that policy and practice allow for tenure prejudice and its possible corrosive impact on the development of functioning mixed tenure neighbourhoods.

Table 1: Social, community and public housing 1981-2016, as a proportion of all households



Source: AHURI <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/census-shows-falling-proportion-of-households-in-social-housing>

Neoliberalism has had a clear impact on social housing in other ways as well. The Commonwealth Government has progressively withdrawn support for the direct provision of social housing in favour of a system that shifted responsibility to community and not-for-profit organisations.

Comparing funding for social housing over time is difficult given that various agreements (CSHA and National Affordable Housing Agreement) cover different programs. However, other data capture the decline. Table 1 shows an overall decline in the amount of public housing, and that the proportion of Australian households who live in social housing has declined from 7 percent of all households

² Without any form of tenure, people experiencing homelessness represent the lowest point on this hierarchy.



in 1991 to 4.2 percent in 2016 (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2017). Not only has investment in new social housing failed to keep pace with a growing population, as existing stock ages, maintenance and refurbishment costs have also increased. Higher tenancy and asset management costs have further reduced funds available for construction of new social housing stock. Indeed, Figure 2 shows that apart from the spike resulting from the stimulus package, funding for dwellings has been on the decline ever since the mid-1970s (Groenhart & Burke, 2014).

Figure 2: Public sector dwelling commencements, annual, Australia, 1970–2011



Source: ABS 2011, *Dwelling Unit Commencements, Australia, Preliminary*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra

With less stock per capita and increasing demand for low-cost housing, policy makers moved towards a **residualist** social housing model whereby social housing is directed to those people considered to be the most vulnerable (Institute for the Study of Labor, Braga & Palvarini, 2013). The consequences of a shift to a *residualist* housing

model have been far-reaching. For instance, eligibility criteria have progressively tightened. Social housing is now allocated to people with multiple and complex needs – in Victoria, 84 percent of new housing is allocated to those in greatest need (Victorian Government 2017, p. 40). This tenancy population brings with it more complex and costly tenancy management issues; reduced turnover and rental incomes; and, increased stigmatisation of social housing. This situation is likely to be intensified with the impending implementation of the Victorian Housing Register through which social housing applications will be centrally assigned.

The residualisation of public housing and political reticence to adequately fund and support mechanisms to grow community housing as an alternative have

contributed to the spatial concentrations of disadvantage that policy makers now seek to rectify through policies such as neighbourhood renewal and tenure mix. The political ambivalence that resulted in a *residualist* model makes sustaining tenancies and building strong communities increasingly challenging for social housing providers because it reduces the control they have over selecting and matching tenants with the available accommodation. Moreover, public housing estates which were initially developed because of their proximity to work are often now located in areas where employment opportunities are limited.

What is tenure mix?

Tenure mix occurs when there is a range of tenure types co-located in a defined spatial environment. These may include social housing tenants, owner-occupiers, and private renters. The possible spatial environments are diverse. They may include housing estates, a block of properties, apartment complexes, or even floors in individual apartment buildings. The ratio of properties allocated for low-income earners on different sites also varies. In addition, there can be tenure mix variability within the same kind of social housing properties; that is, the tenants occupying a particular social housing site may have different incomes and income sources.

The push for tenure diversification is generally occurring through urban housing renewal projects. This often involves selling Government land to private developers who commit to including a percentage of social housing properties on the new housing site. It can also mean that existing public housing stock is sold to developers to incorporate owner-occupied and private rental properties, while also increasing the percentage of social housing units. In Victoria, this has been set at a minimum of 10 percent increase in social housing stock for which the Government has come under criticism for selling off valuable resources for a very modest increase in social housing, and for a lack of transparent processes (Palm, Whitzman & Raynor, 2018). Indeed, the State Government's recent plan to sell a number of



public housing estates around Melbourne was rejected by the Greens and the State opposition, although for quite different reasons.

The dispute surrounding the State Governments plans emphasise the highly political nature of tenure mix. Despite being presented as a means of addressing inequality, Jama and Shaw (in press) argue that the policy focus on mixed tenure estates disguises an agenda that favours the privatisation of valuable public land and the displacement of public tenants – an agenda that is not politically sellable. Instead, Jama and Shaw (in press, p. 31) contend that what is required is a ‘fully-funded state housing replacement program, partnering with non-profit housing associations [...] and focused on increasing the social housing stock’.

While the real reasons for tenure diversification are often clouded by commercial considerations from a policy and practice perspective, a lack of conceptual clarity is equally damaging. For instance, ‘tenure mix’ and ‘social mix’ are often used interchangeably. They are not the same thing. As noted, ‘tenure mix’ refers specifically to the make-up and balance of different tenures located on a designated site. ‘Social mix’ occurs when relationships are formed between people across a number of axes, for example, class, race, age, education, and ability. Social mix is a desired outcome of tenure mix, especially in relation to economic status, and therefore is a key factor to be examined when assessing the success of tenure mix policy.

Underpinning rationale for tenure mix

Tenure mix policy in Australia is founded on three tenets. **First is the idea that by redeveloping communities through altering the tenure mix, disadvantaged families and individuals will have increased social and economic opportunities.** Altering the tenure mix so that social housing tenants live among owner-occupiers and private renters (who have higher incomes) is aimed at creating ‘a new opportunity structure’ (Andersson, Bråmås & Holmqvist, 2010, p. 239). Policy



is premised on the idea that disadvantaged communities are segregated and this contributes to an array of social problems (Arthurson, 2010). Social problems associated with particular locations and areas are considered to restrict residents' opportunities for social and economic mobility. Adjusting the mix of tenures to reduce mono-tenured concentrations of social housing is presumed to increase social capital for residents through, what theorists such as Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) outline as, collective action and responsibility for an equitable and integrated society. Putnam, in particular, emphasises local communities as sites for reducing socio-economic inequalities and this vision of social capital has been influential in public policy - a prime example being the Victorian Government's Neighbourhood Renewal Initiative, launched in 2002, to ameliorate place-based disadvantage through community capacity building (Warr *et al.*, 2017).

The dispersal of disadvantaged people in environments that are shared with people who hold greater wealth and social capital is intended to activate social mobility. Changing the make-up of communities or neighbourhoods is hoped to enhance social outcomes through better access to employment opportunities, greater social connectivity, and increased civic participation. Connected to this is the aspiration that areas of concentrated disadvantage can be eradicated through tenure mix. Again, this is founded on the principle of area (or neighbourhood) effects. As discussed in our previous *Think Piece* on area effects, not only are disadvantaged neighbourhoods marked by the stigma of higher rates of crime and unemployment, and lower levels of education, an area's characteristics have an independent effect on residents' life outcomes. These neighbourhoods are characterised by inadequate health, education and community services; a deficiency of social networks to assist with employment opportunities; a lack of people who can 'model' appropriate mainstream behaviour; and postcode prejudice that stigmatises particular locations (Arthurson, 2004). Similarly, residents in mono-tenure public housing estates, which have historically been located in poorer neighbourhoods, have lower incomes, higher levels of unemployment, poorer mental and physical health, and poorer educational outcomes (Arthurson, 2004). The emphasis, then, is to change these locations from

‘within’ through tenure mix. This is in contrast to the US model, which favours poverty alleviation by changing urban environments through the dispersal of households to new areas, or ‘moving on’.

Redevelopment through tenure mix approaches can, however, have negative effects on neighbourhoods such as the breaking up of existing communities, relocating social problems to other areas, and reducing public housing supply (Arthurson, 2002). It is possible that, where relocation occurs, there is a depletion of social capital for minority communities through the disintegration of cultural heritage and reduction in community support (Tomlins, Johnson & Owen, 2002).

Second, the idea that while social housing provides places of residence for people who are disadvantaged, these sites are stigmatised because they are marked as places of digression from mainstream society (Briggs, Popkin & Goering, 2010). Changing the tenancy mix is seen as a way of reducing the associated stigma. This is particularly so for locations where there are micro-concentrations of public housing such as estates that house high-rise and walk-up flats. There has been a strong emphasis on creating tenure mix through regeneration strategies such as the redevelopment of public housing estates whereby private developers become involved with the redesign of buildings to incorporate privately owned properties alongside social housing. A key aim of the redesign of these buildings and the associated tenure mix is to diminish the stigma associated with these built environments.³ However, as we have seen, the engagement of private developers is a contentious political issue.

Nonetheless, there has been a concerted housing policy focus on the redevelopment of existing public housing estates to create new buildings that include mixed tenure residencies. There is some merit in the argument that locations can be destigmatised through redevelopment and regeneration. A North American study conducted in Chicago found that the changing of address and transformation of the surrounding environment can reduce the sense of stigma experienced by social

³ Issues pertaining to design and built environments of social housing will be discussed in the next *Think Piece* in this series.

housing tenants (McCormick, Joseph & Chaskin, 2012). However, this was accompanied by some social housing tenants feeling that they were subjected to new forms of onsite stigmatisation through increased and unequal monitoring of their behaviour (McCormick, Joseph & Chaskin, 2012). The redevelopment of existing sites to include a mix of tenures may have the desired effect of reducing or even removing any stigma from the site. Even so, redevelopment processes are rarely straightforward. Care must be taken so that any stigma is not transferred to other locations within social housing developments such as particular buildings or areas within the redevelopment site (Dunn, 2012).

Third, tenure mix is founded on the assumption that demand for new and better amenities will be created by the presence of wealthier households and this will result in the exertion of political and economic pressure on the Government to improve goods and services to the area (Joseph, 2006) such as schools, health services, and transport. Does this actually help to improve the lives of those who are disadvantaged? The changing of amenities assumes that the needs and desires of mixed tenure residents are equal. Gentrification has demonstrated that apparent improvements to environmental and commercial aspects can alienate those of lower socio-economic status who are unable to afford the new products and services that emerge. Moreover, some Government services are only available where a level of people meeting particular criteria occurs (for example, subsidies for schools with a set proportion of children attending from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds).

Furthermore, this raises concern that while tenure mix is presented as a way of addressing poverty, policy efforts that seek to change the distribution of households in urban environments according to income are a conscious move to alter class structures. This approach could certainly be viewed as an attempt to privilege a middle-class ideal of what constitutes appropriate urban environments, particularly if the physical and social environments, including the amenities that accompany gentrification, are aligned with middle-class tastes and aspirations. Based on research undertaken in France, Bacqué *et al.* (2011, p. 271) argue that

'[t]he rhetoric of social mix tends to make the middle classes the reference point for the "social bond", imposing their cultural and social norms within a logic of "integration" that actually maintains the class structure by positioning the working classes as outsiders.

This may also reflect neoliberal principles, which favour individual achievement and dismiss institutional class-based discrimination, with the pressure being placed on social housing tenants to assimilate with the changes to their environment rather than maintaining collective identities. Nevertheless, localised poverty and spatial discrimination clearly exists and needs to be addressed, and while these are issues that cannot solely be eliminated through area-based initiatives such as tenure mix, there is value in engaging with community and recognising the resources and opportunities they hold. As argued by Warr *et al.* (2017, p. 161), this must include strategies 'that aim to foster extra-local contact and networks among residents' while also challenging neoliberal conventions rather than accepting them as normal.

Social mix versus social harmony

While tenure mix is viewed as a mechanism to transition those living in social housing from circumstances of poverty and social disadvantage to greater integration with mainstream society, research indicates that increased social mobility and greater connectivity is contingent on many factors, of which tenure mix (and how this is constructed across different sites) is only one part. This makes it difficult to assess the proficiency of tenure mix to improve the life chances of disadvantaged people. Our reading of the literature reveals inconclusive results in both the attainment of social mix and the assumed accompanying benefits of mixed tenure (e.g. Arthurson, 2002, 2004; Bacqué *et al.*, 2011; Chaskin, Sichling & Joseph, 2013; Jama & Shaw, in press; Korsu, 2016; Levin, Arthurson & Ziersch, 2014).

At present, there is insufficient evidence to support the assumption that tenure mix increases social and economic opportunities for social housing tenants. While part of this reflects the relatively small number of empirical studies conducted in Australia, it also raises questions about what we expect from social housing. Given that people's lives are shaped by many forces such as country-of-origin, family structure, personal wealth, health, ability, and exposure to trauma, what is reasonable to expect from social housing? Unison residents, in particular, have often experienced extreme and sustained disadvantage that has affected their capacity to build effective social networks and engage with mainstream institutions. Rather than measuring the success of tenure mix through traditional social and economic measures, might we instead ask if tenants are peacefully cohabitating and are they satisfied with their built and area environments? Perhaps **social harmony** is a more realistic, relevant and, possibly, more desirable goal.

Research by Jama and Shaw (in press) conducted in Melbourne at the Carlton Housing Estate Redevelopment found that there was little interaction between residents of mixed tenancies. This can be partly explained through owner-occupiers engaging in most of their activities outside of the home whereas social housing tenants spend more time at home (Jama & Shaw, in press; Jupp, 1999). Further research on this site indicated that most public housing tenants on this estate were indifferent about the everyday experience of social interactions between people with different housing tenures although there were some who desired shared public spaces (Levin, Arthurson & Ziersch, 2014). Jama and Shaw (in press) argue that mutual respect was a greater requirement for social harmony than social mixing.

In the same vein, research evaluating mixed tenure sites in the United Kingdom twenty years after establishment found that, despite living on the same site, social mix did not increase - residents continued to socialise with people from the same socio-economic backgrounds (Allen *et al.*, 2005). Nor did the nature of social interactions between residents from different socio-economic backgrounds change over time; however, these interactions between residents had achieved an 'ordinariness' (Allen *et al.*, 2005). This suggests that social mix is not necessarily a



goal of those living in tenure mix environments. Instead, peaceful cohabitation may be what is desired.

Following Bourdieu (e.g., 1984, 1990), who has written extensively about how tastes and actions are produced (and limited) by social and historical contexts, it is unsurprising that residents remain in their social groups because class is a signifier of cultural and social preferences and tastes. To move outside one's social group can create personal tension and discomfort. More broadly, it can also be an aspiration imposed on people that aims to eliminate lower socio-economic class distinctions and identities rather than create a more equitable society. Dunn (2012, p. 102) argues that measuring social mix for success needs to move away from a focus on 'intimate, familiar interaction' and instead acknowledge that there is value in 'incidental, informal interaction'; or that even this might be too ambitious. Perhaps, success is simply 'harmonious co-location' (Dunn, 2012, p. 102). Ultimately, the definition of success needs to be 'open to dialogue, rather than the arbitrary imposition of a benchmark' (Dunn, 2012, p. 102).

Challenges for Unison: the importance of democratic processes

Tenure mix is built on the presumption that there will be a sharing of cultural and economic resources between residents at different points on the socio-economic ladder. While the evidence suggests the extent of such sharing might be limited, there is a clear need to include **democratic processes** that inform the functioning of social housing sites. Indeed, in some cases, tenure mix has been found to impact negatively on social housing tenants. McCormick, Joseph and Chaskin (2012, p. 297) discuss how tenure mix can result in 'a patronizing and unwelcoming social environment where [social housing tenants] feel judged as a group, resented for their presence, and have unequal relative access to power brokers and decision makers'. Likewise, many owner-occupiers view the social housing tenants as 'potential trouble





makers who do not hold mainstream norms and values' (McCormick, Joseph & Chaskin, 2012, p. 298). Furthermore, social housing tenants may seek to distance themselves from other social housing residents whose behaviours are attached to negative stereotypes (Khare, Joseph & Chaskin, 2015; McCormick, Joseph & Chaskin, 2012).

That tenure prejudice can shape the interactions that occur between residents of mixed tenancy sites highlights the need to inform prospective residents of all tenures about the implications of co-habitation and the importance of tolerance, working together to manage expectations, and social dynamics (McCormick, Joseph & Chaskin, 2012). This needs to be followed through to the post-occupancy stage through clear identification of responsibilities for stakeholders, such as property managers and service providers, for maintaining harmony and addressing the expected challenges (McCormick, Joseph & Chaskin, 2012). Additionally, democratic mechanisms that support all tenants' rights need to be accessible and representative of the diverse range of households that are co-located. Service providers, along with property managers and tenancy advisor groups, need to provide - and implement - inclusive and transparent processes. If democratic processes are alienating to those without the cultural capital to negotiate regulations and practices through collaborative processes, then this will likely maintain social exclusion and obstruct opportunities for social interactions that could improve social harmony.

Future research directions

A level of tenure mix automatically occurs in a spatial and socio-economic sense when different groups are co-located. However, as noted above, this does not necessarily result in increased opportunities for those who are disadvantaged. In fact, it can have the opposite effect. Thus, the aim of improving socio-economic conditions for highly disadvantaged people cannot solely be the responsibility of social housing programs. Broader attention must also be given by our key societal



institutions such as those that manage education, employment, criminal justice, and health. Nevertheless, further research is certainly needed to better understand the effects of tenure mix on disadvantaged and advantaged residents, and its impact on the broader neighbourhood.

It is equally important that we consider how we measure outcomes of tenure mix. Rather than approaching it through a question of success or failure, we think a deeper and more contextualised approach is needed. For example, what are people's perceptions of their environment and how do these change over time? Dunn (2012) suggests that rather than imposing a benchmark to measure social ties across classes in mixed tenure sites, it is more useful to examine the kinds of relationships that are being formed (and not formed). Following research by Rosenbaum *et al.* (1998) and Kleit (2005), Dunn (2012, p. 101) recommends investigating the following topics: 'residents' perceptions of social mix and the role of public spaces in facilitating positive social mix; attitudes of (in)tolerance for other socioeconomic and ethno-cultural groups; experiences of discrimination and social inclusion/exclusion; perceptions of safety; management of safety efforts; police effectiveness; overall satisfaction; neighbouring behaviours (watching children, having a meal, talking ten minutes, lending items, greeting on the street); the question of with whom these behaviours occur; social networks within the neighbourhood; and group membership within the neighbourhood'. Research also needs to look beyond tenure differences and examine other factors such as race, class and gender to understand different groups' experiences of 'tolerance, marginalization, and stigma in the context of changing material spatial practices' (Dunn, 2012, p.102).

Dunn (2012) further argues that there is little empirical evidence that the introduction of mixed tenure sites leads to an improvement in private and public services. Still, measuring the residents' perceptions of improvement, even if biased, would provide an indication of how they are experiencing the site and the neighbourhood. Another area to explore would be: do tenants have a sense of greater autonomy in their environments and a sense of meaningful contribution to

the democratic processes involved in living in mixed tenure environments? And, do they feel a part of the community? All of these questions and issues have guided our thinking during the development of the *Maximising Impact* longitudinal study being undertaken through the Unison Housing Research Lab.

Timelines for social and economic change also need to be realistic. It is important to review the impact of tenure mix policy on communities but this must be done with the knowledge that meaningful change may take generations to take effect. Nevertheless, it is still valuable to examine if disadvantage is being addressed and rectified in any way. As much as new and more nuanced measures are required, standard outcome measures such as education, employment, incarceration, exposure to violence, and provision of goods and services retain value.

Conclusion

A key challenge for social housing is to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable while at the same time preventing the concentration of poverty and social problems in specific locations (Bacqué *et al.*, 2011). If the aim is to provide better opportunities for poorer households then would it not be more effective to look at income and the distribution of resources more widely rather than expecting social change to occur primarily through housing proximity? Tenure mix alone cannot eradicate poverty. Instead, there needs to be a redistribution of wealth and improved structural support through institutions such as those managing health, education, employment, and income support.

Currently, the available empirical evidence does not sufficiently support the principle supposition that tenure diversification will result in socio-economic benefits and opportunities for disadvantaged communities. There are benefits for some, but equally for others the benefits are negligible and for some there are only new problems. Moreover, while variation in social housing sites makes it difficult to evaluate to the effectiveness of tenure mix policy, the sort of longitudinal research

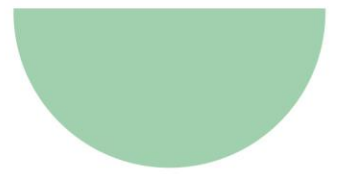
we are proposing in the ***Maximising Impact*** study can overcome some of these difficulties. Assessing the impact of tenure mix needs to take into account the specific contexts of different sites and how these impact on residents in positive and negative ways. This needs to involve critical engagement with the underlying principles of tenure mix and the implementation of rigorous empirical methodologies to review a range of experiences and expectations of all mixed tenure residents.

We feel ‘social harmony’ as an overarching concept offers a relevant and meaningful framework for Unison. It aligns with current policy trends but reflects a better understanding of the biographies of the people Unison works with, and the histories of places where they live.

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