



Housing  
Registrar

December 2017

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

# Community Engagement Good Practice Guide

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## Background

The Registrar of Housing Agencies (the Registrar) was established in 2003 as a body corporate by changes to the *Housing Act 1983*. The Registrar is responsible for the registration and ongoing regulation of registered housing agencies. In particular the Registrar monitors the performance of registered housing agencies to ensure that performance standards are met at all times.

The community engagement performance standard was introduced in mid-2014 so that the Victorian regulatory framework better aligned with the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH). Registered agencies were assessed under the new performance standard from 1 July 2015.

## Purpose

This good practice guide provides information and case studies to clarify our regulatory expectations of registered agencies in order to meet the performance standard. It also provides registered agencies with a framework within which to place the activities that many of them are already undertaking in the area of community engagement.

The guide has two objectives:

- To ensure that registered housing agencies understand the performance requirements of the community engagement performance standard, including how the Registrar evaluates performance against the standard.
- To encourage agencies to take a proactive approach in developing community engagement plans based on their business needs.

Because there is no one way of 'doing' community engagement, this guide has been produced to assist registered agencies to develop a community engagement plan that best suits them and their tenants.

## The performance standard

The community engagement performance standard requires that the registered agency works in partnership with relevant organisations to promote community housing and to contribute to socially inclusive communities:

Performance requirements	Performance indicators
Promoting community housing to local organisations that work with potential residents, tenants or clients, and agencies	The registered agency engages with relevant organisations using appropriate communication tools to promote community housing and benefits of partnership
Contributing to place renewal and social inclusion partnerships and planning relevant to the agency's community housing activities	The registered agency works with others to maximise positive economic and social outcomes for tenants and the community through place renewal
	The registered agency works with others to maximise positive economic and social outcomes for tenants and the community through social inclusion

Registered housing agencies demonstrate compliance by having up-to-date copies of community engagement policies and procedures as well as a community engagement strategy or similar document that details how the agency works with other organisations to promote community housing. The regulator may also request other evidence such as newsletters, surveys and other marketing information, and details of partnership arrangements with support agencies and other service providers.

## DEFINITIONS

In this guide, **social inclusion** is defined as those activities that assist people to fully participate in social and economic life. These activities may include access to education, training and employment services. They may also include better connecting tenants into the local community.

**Place renewal** is more commonly referred to as **place making** or **neighbourhood renewal**. We have defined place renewal as strengthening the connections between people and the places they share. Place renewal activities may range from working with tenants and neighbours to improve local amenities, through to consulting with neighbours and prospective tenants on new developments and facilities.

There are some overlaps between community engagement and the performance requirements for supporting tenant and resident engagement under the tenant and housing services performance standard. However, a key difference between the two is that tenant engagement is concerned with ensuring that tenants have a voice within the registered agency while community engagement involves the registered agency engaging with the broader community in order to achieve social and economic outcomes for tenants.

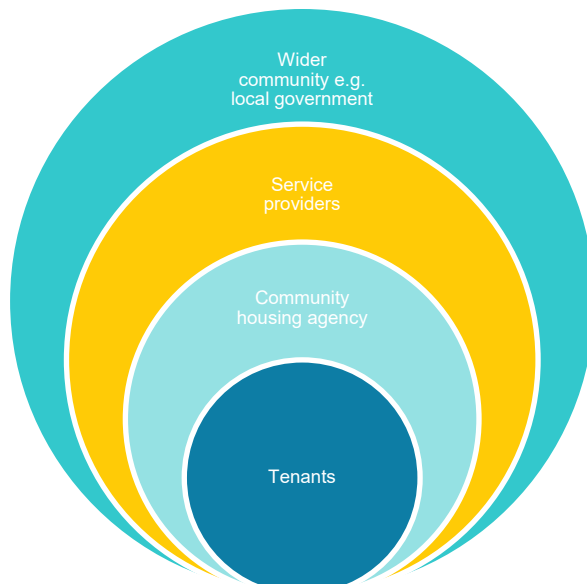
## What is community engagement?

While there are many definitions of community engagement, we have adopted the following practical approach:

- Community engagement refers to the broad range of activities and strategies registered agencies use in order to better connect their tenants to, and involve them in, their local communities. Community engagement provides local communities and other key stakeholders, such as service providers, philanthropic trusts, local and state government, funding bodies, as well as neighbours, with the opportunity to engage with the registered agency and their tenants through a variety of means.

In this definition, tenants and their interests are at the heart of any community engagement activity or strategy, as the following diagram illustrates.

### Key actors in the engagement process



In this diagram, **tenants** are placed at the centre of the community engagement process. The next level is the **registered agency** which acts as the bridge or facilitator between the needs of the tenants and the **service providers** who can meet those needs. It then goes beyond to **the wider community**, which can include neighbours but is broader and also includes philanthropic trusts, local businesses and local government.

Examples of better connecting tenants to their local community may involve an agency ensuring that every tenant not only has the information they need in order to engage in community-based activities but that they are also provided with the means to facilitate that engagement, such as through subsidies or small grants.

Examples of providing a range of stakeholders with the opportunity to engage with the registered agency may range from a small event such as inviting neighbours to an open house, to holding a local forum with guest speakers on issues that affect both tenants and the wider community.

Essentially, community engagement can be distilled down to all those activities and processes that are undertaken with the aim of bringing people together for a number of different purposes. One purpose may be to ensure that neighbours who might be affected by a new development are provided with information about the development and the prospective tenants in order to allay any concerns they may have.

Community engagement can therefore be a valuable educational tool enabling people to make decisions based upon evidence rather than emotion. This level of engagement may also involve neighbours as well as prospective tenants in the design of the project, or in the co-location of other desired community services, thereby empowering both groups.

A more straightforward example of community engagement would involve a registered agency establishing protocols with other service providers to ensure tenants receive the services they need in order to function better in society.

## Why community engagement?

Registered agencies will undertake community engagement activities for a variety of different reasons. These reasons include:

- improved social and economic outcomes for tenants leading to more stable tenancies;
- greater community understanding of the role community managed or owned housing plays as a fundamental building block in overcoming social and economic disadvantage; and
- registered agencies can be key businesses in their area, especially in rural areas, offering employment and other opportunities for local residents.

While a key driver for registered agencies will be working towards overcoming the social and economic disadvantage experienced by many of their tenants, community engagement also makes sound business sense. Community engagement activities may:

- attract funding – whether it is a local business providing goods and other services for specific events or a large philanthropic trust for a specific activity;
- produce more stable tenancies, which may result in fewer instances of rent arrears and fewer neighbour complaints;
- improve the amenity of local areas, leading to increased community integration and reduced levels of vandalism; and
- improve health and well-being thereby reducing the pressure on health services.

The table below lists some of the many benefits associated with community engagement.

## Potential benefits of community engagement for tenants, the community and the registered agency

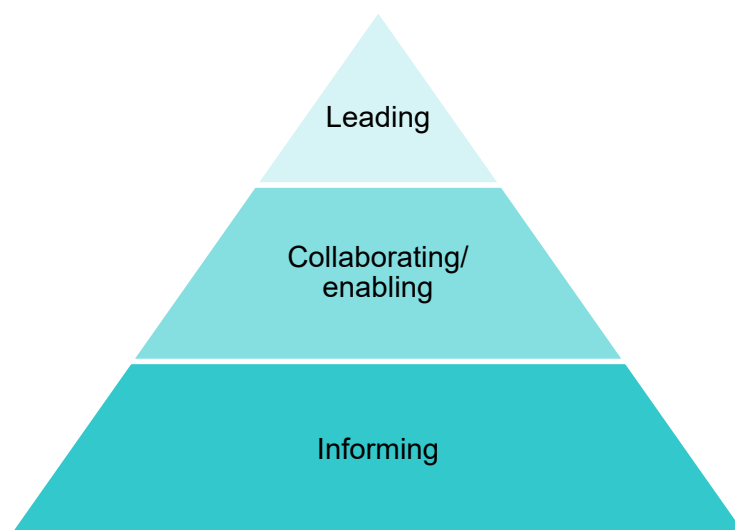
Tenant benefits	Community benefits	Agency benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased engagement and satisfaction.</li> <li>Improved community connectedness.</li> <li>Increased feeling of safety and confidence.</li> <li>Increased access to education, training and employment opportunities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased understanding of community housing.</li> <li>Greater community diversity and tolerance.</li> <li>Increased feeling of safety.</li> <li>Improved local amenity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved relationships with service partners, philanthropic trusts, local government and other key stakeholders.</li> <li>Fewer complaints.</li> <li>Enhanced capacity to innovate.</li> <li>Agency acceptance/adoption by the broader community</li> </ul>

## Community engagement in action

Registered agencies may already be undertaking community engagement activities, even if they have not been identified as such. In fact, a significant number of registered agencies were themselves created as a consequence of community engagement and advocacy around issues to do with housing rights and homelessness.

This guide will assist registered agencies to place those activities within a coherent framework in order to report against them in the self-assessment of performance against the performance standards.

### A typology of community engagement



In the diagram above, **informing** refers to activities undertaken by registered agencies that revolve around communication, such as developing supporter newsletters, or appearing regularly in local newspapers or advertising events on websites or through Facebook. They are also actions that can be used to inform or educate the wider community.

**Collaborating/enabling** refers to activities that the registered agency undertakes alone or in partnership with others that actively work to overcome the social exclusion of tenants and build strong linkages with the local community.

**Leading** refers to activities the registered housing agency is undertaking that are designed to influence service provision or government policy, or are activities that are breaking new ground such as research or the development of new programs.

## Case studies

The following case studies have come from registered agencies and are included to demonstrate the wide range of community engagement activities and events.

### Informing

#### Case study 1 – Promotion of community housing

In regional cities and towns, it is easy to overlook homeless people. They are less visible than in capital cities and the community may not understand the issues faced by people who are homeless.

In 2015 Rural Housing Network Limited (RHNL) (now trading as BeyondHousing) set about changing community attitudes. They invited some tenants, many of whom had experienced homelessness, to have a portrait photograph taken and talk about 'what home means to me'. The result is a series of beautiful images, set in people's houses and gardens, many with their children or pets.

The portraits formed the basis of an exhibition held in a vacant shop front in Wangaratta during Homelessness Prevention Week in 2015. They have been displayed in a public art space in Wodonga and at the agency's 2015 Annual General Meeting. They have also featured in the agency's annual reports and on its website. Most are now proudly displayed in RHNL's reception areas and interview rooms.

Rather than presenting negative images of homelessness, they show courage and resilience and give tenants a voice on the importance of home for everyone.

RHNL have also broadened community awareness of housing and homelessness issues in rural areas by presenting to the Rotary Club of Shepparton and at the Albury/Wodonga Trades and Labour Council's 'Politics in the Pub' event.

#### Case study 2 – Place renewal

In 2010 Yarra Community Housing (YCH), now Unison Community Housing, received Federal Government funding to redevelop seven of its rooming houses into self-contained units. This was seen by the agency as an opportunity to inform the wider community more broadly about community housing and the people living in the properties. A film was commissioned which showed the whole process of developing one of the properties from the early project design stage through to the residents moving back into their new units.

The film was put on YCH's website and provided a valuable educational tool for other agencies on the impact of place renewal on tenants, especially those who had been living in poor accommodation.

#### Case study 3 – Social inclusion

St Kilda Community Housing (SCH) learned from their tenants that those living on a Newstart Allowance (NSA) were struggling to afford everyday items. SCH also knew that the NSA payment was falling further behind pensions every year. This meant that people living on NSA were struggling to afford those activities that enabled them to fully participate in society.

SCH decided to hold a community forum with guest speakers to bring this matter to the attention of the wider community and also for key stakeholders to understand the constraints under which agencies were operating.

The outcome was a well-attended forum from all sections of the local community, many of whom gained valuable insight into community housing and its tenants. The forum was written up in the local newspaper ensuring the issue reached an even wider audience.

While the level of NSA has not been increased to the levels advocated for, SCH was able to raise local awareness of social exclusion among community housing tenants.



## Collaborating/enabling

### Case study 4 – Promotion of community housing

Servants Community Housing (Servants) is a small housing provider working in Boroondara. The agency determined that a small bus was needed to help transport the residents to a variety of different activities held out in the community and that many of their residents needed new bed linen and towels.

Over the years Servants has worked closely with local Rotary Clubs to develop a strong relationship in order to jointly address areas of need among the residents of Servants. Because of this longstanding relationship with the local Rotary Clubs, Servants was able to ask Rotary if they could help. The North Balwyn Rotary Club responded by raising the money to purchase a bus. At the same time, 200 sets of bed linen and towels were provided through the Rotary Donations In Kind Store in Footscray.

### Case study 5 – Place renewal

Both Port Phillip Housing Association (PPHA) and St Kilda Community Housing (SCH) had received phone calls from a neighbour regarding anti-social activities occurring in a laneway where both agencies have properties. The neighbour said that the laneway was very poorly lit and was encouraging drug dealing after dark. Tenants in both properties had also expressed safety fears.

The two agencies got together to explore solutions to the problems. They engaged the police, local government and other service providers in the area and held a roundtable to discuss the matter.

Both agencies said they were prepared to install/upgrade security cameras on their properties for the safety of their residents. The police agreed to patrol the area more frequently and the local government committed to look at enhancing the lighting in the area and to consider requests to clean the laneway up more generally.

### Case study 6 – Social inclusion

Active Community Housing (Active) is a specialist housing provider for people living with a disability. Active meets with its tenants regularly in order to gauge what activities they would like to be involved in.

Active has set aside a fund for the express purpose of enabling tenants to engage with a wide variety of activities, including educational, training and arts and crafts courses, such as TAFE certificates in administration or pottery and art classes.

As a consequence, many Active tenants are able to achieve high levels of social engagement.

## Leading

### Case study 7 – Promotion of community housing

Women's Property Initiatives (WPI) wanted to understand the impact that affordable homes have on the women and children they house. They believed it was important to show the economic and social value created and not just simply report on satisfaction, tenancy rates, expenses and revenue.

WPI therefore sought, and were successfully awarded, grants from two philanthropic trusts. The agency commissioned research to evaluate the Social Return on Investment from the secure and affordable housing they provide for women at risk of homelessness.

The final report demonstrated that for every \$1 invested in WPI housing \$11.07 of social value was created. This was through the improved physical and emotional well-being, personal safety, employment and social inclusion experienced by the tenants themselves as well as through savings to the Victorian and Federal Governments. WPI uses this demonstration of broader social value to confidently advocate for more community housing for women.

### Case study 8 – Place renewal

Port Phillip Housing Association (PPHA) completed the medium density Ashwood Chadstone Gateway Project development in 2013. The development was the largest undertaken by a housing association in Victoria, comprising 282 units, 72 of which were sold to private owners. The development replaced low density housing with a medium density development.

The local community had been angry about the planning process because it was fast-tracked by the Government. Consequently, PPHA created a Community Consultation Liaison Committee between neighbourhood houses, community groups, support agencies and local government. PPHA also commissioned a Social Impact Assessment over five years by K2 Planning – which, at the time of printing, has one year to run before the final report will be available.

The agency established an Ashwood office and a community development worker was employed to work with tenants and the wider community. Some of the projects undertaken include a public art project and a local social enterprise, Café Ed, run by Berrengara School. In addition, PPHA has developed strong partnerships with a range of other local community service providers.

Many of the local residents who initially opposed the development now see it has been good for the local community and more of them are attending activities run by PPHA.

### Case study 9 – Social inclusion

Launch Housing is a registered provider with a long history of working with homeless people. The agency was concerned that over 50 per cent of the young people they saw were not engaged in either education or employment. Through engagement with the Brotherhood of St Laurence and local TAFE colleges, Holmesglen and Kangan, the agency established two Youth Foyers based on the campuses of the two colleges.

The Youth Foyers combine affordable housing with education, training and employment services. Other services provided include life skills development, mental and physical health support, drug and alcohol services and mentoring.

While the evaluation of the program in Australia has yet to be completed, the evidence from overseas suggests that more than 75 per cent of participants who leave the program are engaged in employment or further education or both. This greatly increases their prospects of social engagement and a more positive future.

## Suggested elements for a community engagement plan

The development of a community engagement plan is an important tool for agencies as it will enable classification of all those myriad activities that agencies undertake into one coherent format. The following elements should be considered by agencies when developing their community engagement activities.

### WHY

First determine what the need is through:

- Tenant surveys
- Tenant advisory groups
- Day-to-day contact with tenants

### HOW

How does the need translate into an activity:

- Philanthropic grants
- Local businesses
- Internal resources

### WHO

Who are the key players involved apart from tenants and the agency:

- Other service providers
- Education and training providers

### WHEN

When will the activity take place:

- Specific time
- Ongoing project

### WHAT

What is or will be the benefit of the activity:

- More tenants engaged in work or training
- Greater community acceptance
- Improved health and well-being

## Appendix 1 – Community engagement activities matrix

The following matrix illustrates how the typology of community engagement can interact with the three performance indicators: promotion of community housing, place renewal, and social inclusion. The list of activities is for illustrative purposes only and is not intended to be exhaustive.

	Inform	Collaborate/enable	Lead
Promotion of community housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newsletters</li> <li>• Social media</li> <li>• Local media</li> <li>• Websites</li> <li>• Street parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protocols with local service providers</li> <li>• Fundraising activities with local service clubs</li> </ul>	Research e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Return on Investment studies</li> <li>• Advocacy forums</li> <li>• Newspaper articles/ research articles</li> </ul>
Place renewal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community meetings</li> <li>• Short films of developments</li> <li>• Open house days for new developments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community partnerships formed around specific neighbourhood issues</li> <li>• Community projects facilitated through partnerships e.g. community gardens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of community consultative meetings around major developments</li> <li>• Employment of community development workers</li> </ul>
Social inclusion	Connecting tenants with local activities	Working with philanthropics to facilitate access to adult learning and other courses	New 'wrap around' programs developed to combat social exclusion e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Foyers</li> <li>• Social enterprises</li> </ul>