



Housing
Registrar

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

Getting tenants involved

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1. Executive summary

Listening to your customer makes good business sense. They can tell you what works and what does not work.

Our research, undertaken by the Community Housing Federation of Victoria (CHFV), shows that:

- agencies get tenant feedback in many different ways;
- seeking tenants' views leads to better services;
- tenant participation and involvement is evolving and increasing across the sector;
- there is no one size fits all approach;
- as a regulator we will not be presumptive in our requirements;
- making the effort to listen to your tenants and engage in a meaningful and consistent way leads to improvements in service delivery;
- it need not be expensive – it's the willingness to engage and listen that counts; and
- we have examples of good practices but look to the more mature sectors such as the UK.

2. Introduction

The Housing Registrar has developed this good practice guide to assist boards and senior managers of registered housing agencies to involve and represent tenant views when making business decisions to build better communities and improve services.

The push for tenant participation comes from the reasonable expectation that housing services and policies meet tenants' needs and preferences within the resources available. This helps inform decisions about improving service delivery and providing value for money.

The Housing Registrar engaged CHFV to undertake a survey on tenant participation programs conducted by Victorian housing agencies. CHFV received responses from 22 of the 41 registered housing agencies and identified current practices in tenant involvement across the sector. These findings are depicted throughout this document.

- section 3 looks at the role of the Registrar of Housing Agencies and why this good practice guide has been written.
- section 4 looks at the background to tenant participation, some definitions and benefits to agencies and tenants.
- section 5 discusses examples of tenant participation from the very active forms of co-operatives, through board and sub-committee membership to surveys and other ways to elicit feedback from tenants.
- section 6 gives some advice to implementing a tenant participation program.
- section 7 explores some barriers to participation.
- section 8 provides an insight to interstate and overseas experiences.

For affordable housing managers, seeking and acting on tenants' views makes good business sense and reduces the risk that products and services delivered do not meet tenant needs.

Tenant participation practices are diverse and this good practice guide is not exhaustive in the types or ways to implement a tenant participation program. Ultimately, tenants are individuals and will have preferences as to how and when they want to contribute ideas and feedback to the agency.

3. The role of the Housing Registrar

The Registrar of Housing Agencies (the Registrar) is a body corporate created by a 2005 amendment to the *Housing Act 1983* to register and regulate rental housing agencies. The Registrar monitors registered housing agencies' compliance against seven Performance Standards:

- governance;
- management of the agency;
- financial viability;
- probity;
- risk management;
- tenancy management; and
- housing management and maintenance.

The tenancy management Performance Standard assumes a level of tenant participation, stating that the agency must provide effective tenancy management. Aspects of tenancy management considered in the Performance Standard are:

- allocations and accessibility;
- affordability of rents;
- client service; and
- client participation.

Client participation is a key aspect of tenancy management and the Registrar needs to be assured that *the agency has appropriate participation processes for all tenants*¹.

This guide provides information and practical advice and may be of interest to agencies if they wish to increase tenant involvement in housing related services. It is not exhaustive but provides an insight into what is currently occurring in the sector and elsewhere. The aim is to trigger consideration by agencies as to how they can improve their current practices and thus provide a better, integrated service to their tenants.

The examples at the end of the document are of agencies and tenants working together to directly influence decision making, enhance participation and improve the lives of the community.

4. Background

There are several definitions that would cover tenant involvement. Most of these use the words involvement and participation interchangeably. The Tenancy management Performance Standard in part VIII of the *Housing Act 1983* states that an agency must:

1. have operational policies and practices that are responsive to the needs of the local community and are based on an inclusive approach to tenant participation.
2. assist and allow clients to make informed choices about their housing.
3. actively consult with tenants on issues that affect their housing, including development and monitoring of its policies on tenancy management, access, allocation of housing and asset management.

¹ Performance Standards for Registered Housing Agencies, Housing Registrar, 2006

This clearly differentiates between tenant involvement and other tenant, social or community activity and allows tenants to have the opportunity to determine the level of involvement they want to have in the agency's operations.

Tenant participation is not an end in itself, but rather a means to improve services and performance.

4.1 What is tenant participation?

Tenant participation is the sharing of information, ideas and decision making by agencies with tenants. It is a range of:

- techniques;
- approaches;
- mechanisms;
- attitudes; and
- commitments.

It requires a culture of mutual trust, respect and partnership between the tenant and agency at all levels working together for better housing conditions and services. Mutual trust can be built by including tenants in social or communal activities, but this is not in itself tenant participation.

Social activities may be a pre-requisite for tenant participation to occur. They build trust and confidence amongst tenants and between tenants and the agency. This can be invaluable in helping develop the conditions that may lead to tenant participation at a later stage.

The provision of information by an agency to its tenants in itself does not constitute participation but is a necessary basis for tenants to make informed decisions and have effective input.

Tenant participation requires open and frank discussion, whereby tenants and agencies have an interest in reaching mutually satisfactory outcomes. An open and constructive relationship takes time to develop but is the most positive working relationship for tenants and agencies.

Co-operatives are unique because the co-operative ethos requires the agency to be run by, and for, its members. Co-operatives need to develop training opportunities for members to become comfortable with taking on the roles of directors, board and/or committee members.

A key benefit of tenant participation for agencies is sustainable tenancies, based on mutual satisfaction of agencies and tenants. Tenant turnover, rents outstanding, vacancies and other measures of tenant dissatisfaction are costly. Tenant participation provides relevant information on an agency's services from its most affected stakeholders. It is a continuous process where information, ideas and power are shared.

The benefits of tenant participation may not be immediately evident, but will evolve as effective communication, involvement and trust develop. Benefits can include:

- better service delivery and improved value for money;
- better communication between staff and tenants;
- informed and knowledgeable tenants who have the skills and confidence to influence decisions;
- staff and tenants being more aware of each other's perspectives and organisational and financial limitations; and
- breaking down misunderstandings, removing mistrust and building mutual respect and understanding.

4.2 Importance of tenant participation

Tenant participation can provide an agency with insight to the needs of its tenants and suggestions to improve services.

Tenants are not a homogeneous group. Demographics such as family type, age, ethnicity and mental and physical health affect the needs of tenants. Demographics change over time, and tenants' needs and expectations reflect the changes. Agencies need a flexible tenant participation program to remain relevant into the future.

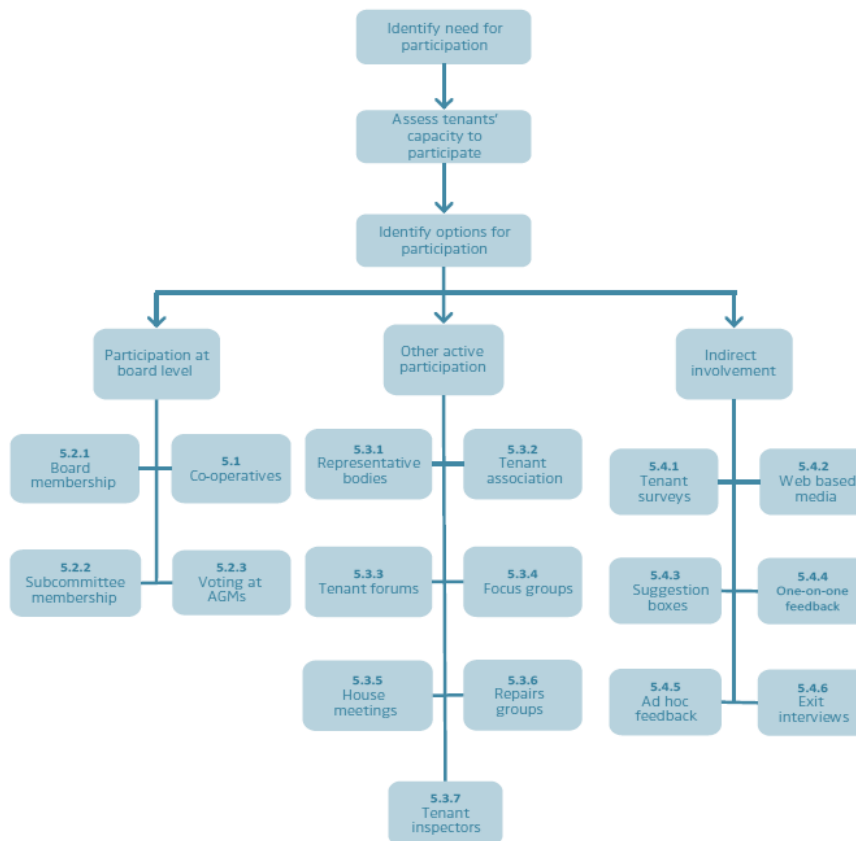
From living in an agency's properties, tenants know about the housing, location and facilities of where they live and can provide useful information about the services offered by agencies and opportunities for improvement.

Tenants, like most of us, want a say in decisions that affect them and their housing situation. They can give agencies feedback on their performance and opportunities to improve services and outcomes to meet tenants' needs.

5. Forms of tenant participation

The level of influence that tenants have on the agency's operations depends on their level of involvement. Involvement can vary from active participation by making decisions at board level to not being involved at all, with several steps in between. The following flow chart lists a potential process to use to prepare for tenant participation. The lower two-thirds of the flow chart shows the sections of the report that relate to specific forms of participation an agency may wish to implement.

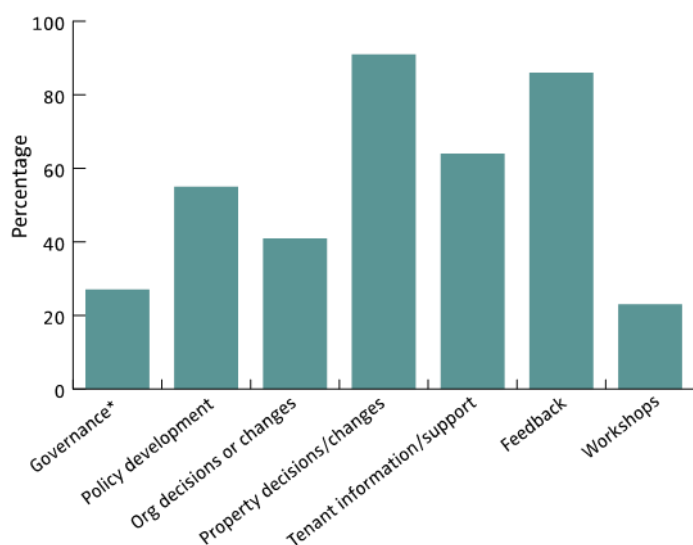
Potential process for implementing tenant participation



This section reviews the various forms of tenant participation. The list is not exhaustive but highlights the way that tenant participation has been implemented in Victoria, interstate and overseas. Traditional participation has been mainly through membership of Tenants and Residents Associations and formal tenant meetings. Some agencies have involved tenants in less formal ways, allowing tenants and residents to participate as much or as little as they wish. Tenant profile, geography, history, size and other factors have an influence in determining an agency's approach to tenant participation.

The practices identified in the Victorian sector are illustrated in the graph below.

Opportunities for tenants to participate



* A further 14 per cent of respondents are planning for tenant participation in governance in the future.

In addition to the above tenant participation activities, the most successful tenant support activities were identified by CHFV as:

- training and development of members to participate as board or committee members;
- regular meetings or forums; and
- social meals programs – allowing tenants to interact and to informally make their views known in a safe environment.

Housing providers develop various methods by which tenants can become involved in the agency's decision-making. Many use a tenant survey to assess how best to involve tenants in the agency's decision-making.

5.1 Co-operatives

The philosophy behind rental housing co-operatives is that tenants jointly govern and manage their housing agency. Every tenant is a member of the co-operative and they are all eligible to both stand for election to the board and vote in elections. Most, and often all, board members of co-operatives are tenant members, with some agencies having independent directors, usually appointed by the board based on skill requirements.

As co-operatives increase in size, tenant members not on the board can feel less involved in decision-making. In this case the co-operative must seek ways to ensure involvement and commitment.

Example

SouthEast Housing Co-operative has seven elected tenant directors and two independent directors appointed by the Board. Staff report to the General Manager and the General Manager reports to the Board.

The organisation's policies clearly state that the Board will 'operate on the basis of a clear distinction between the role of the board and the role of the General Manager'.

Common Equity Housing Limited (CEHL) operates under a mixed co-operative model. CEHL, a company limited by guarantee, owns housing that is managed locally by over a 100 Common Equity Rental Co-operatives (CERCs).

Example

In the CERC model, the housing is managed by a local co-operative, and members carry out of all the tasks associated with managing the housing, including financial administration, collecting rent, arranging house maintenance, selecting new tenant members and keeping all associated records.

All members assist with these day-to-day tasks, and benefit through reduced costs, local control and self-management, and opportunities to develop skills. Continued tenancy of a CERC home may depend on the tenant member's continued participation in CERC activities.

All properties in the CERC Program are owned by an overarching body, CEHL which provides asset management including property upgrades, training and resourcing of the co-operatives, negotiating and servicing of loans, and is responsible for program administration, including ensuring program directives are met, and reporting to government.

Of the 11-person CEHL board, five directors (including the Chair) are from the CERC members.

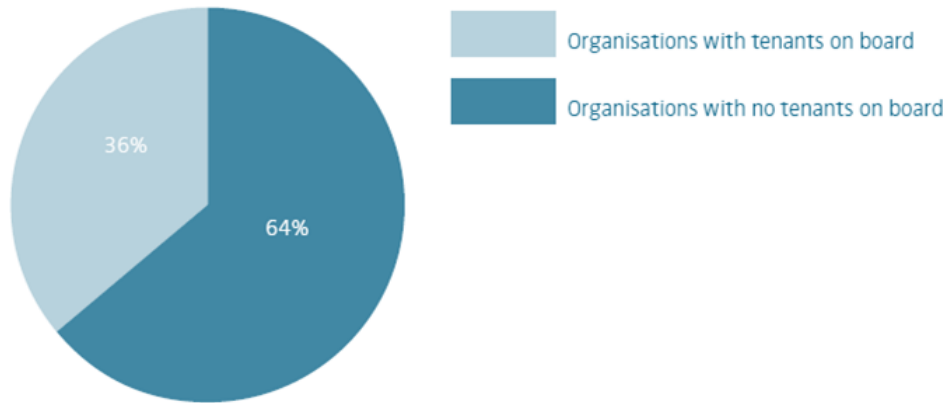
5.2 Tenant participation through the board

- Tenants can be involved at a number of levels of board operations, including:
- being elected or appointed members of the board or committee of management;
- representation on sub-committees; and
- a member electing the board at the Annual General Meeting.

5.2.1 Tenants on the board

Tenant representation on boards is illustrated below, and is expressed as percentages of agencies that responded to the survey.

Boards



Tenants can bring a practical perspective from living in the agency's housing that can result in better informed and more effective decision-making.

Openly elected tenant board members

The rules of a number of agencies allow tenants to nominate for, and be elected to, the board at the Annual General Meeting. They compete against other members of the agency at the election and can end up comprising a sizeable part of the board. Agencies that encourage tenants to nominate for open board positions often appoint independent or technical experts to a number of nominated board positions to give balanced and specialist advice.

Example

South Port Community Housing Group (South Port) is an incorporated association that runs 15 rooming houses and blocks of self-contained units in South Melbourne and Port Melbourne, with over 200 tenants. Since its inception 29 years ago, it has strongly encouraged its tenants to become members of the association and to stand for the committee of management. As a result there has always been substantial tenant representation on the committee. There are currently three tenants on the nine-member committee.

South Port has policies to assist in dealing with issues that may arise. There is a policy that the committee 'contains a majority of independent committee members, i.e. those with no financial or commercial relationship with the group such as customer or supplier of goods or services'. Another policy states that tenant members of the committee 'may participate in discussions about decisions that have financial implications for them but are required to abstain from voting on these matters' and that they 'may not participate in committee tasks whereby conflict could cause complications, e.g. staff selection; annual appraisal of manager'.

South Port's active tenant participation has meant that on many occasions decisions of the Committee have been modified by input from the tenant members. For instance a proposed contract to change locking systems on the rooming houses from keyed locks to swipe cards was modified to include provision for after-hours access if tenants are locked out. A decision to exempt Newstart recipients from a rent rise was reversed after tenants on the Committee pointed out that the resultant rise in Rent Assistance would make the increase relatively small for tenants themselves.

Elected tenant positions

Agencies can reserve a fixed number of board positions for tenants and encourage tenants to nominate for these. By doing this, the agency can maintain a balance of skills and interests, but still provide tenants a voice in the boardroom.

When a tenant is elected, some may consider whether a tenant director is an individual member of the board or represents the tenant body of the agency. From a legal perspective, once someone becomes a director of a company, they are legally obliged to act only in the interests of the agency. However, it is human nature for tenants that elect tenant members to perceive them as nominees, representing collective tenant views.

A tenant committee member of an incorporated association may act as a tenant representative for all tenants of the agency. If this is so, the agency needs to ensure that it supports the tenant representative to canvas wider tenant views on issues that come before the committee and report back to the tenant group.

5.2.2 Tenants on board sub-committees

Larger agencies that deal with more complex issues of financial management and project development may wish to appoint members to board positions based on skills and experience. In such cases tenants can be encouraged to serve on board sub-committees to provide information and views for decision-making. This allows the tenant to deal with matters about which they have knowledge, while not being involved with all issues facing the agency. Committees may include, but are not limited to, maintenance sub-committees, tenancy committees.

5.2.3 Tenants with voting rights

In each of the above methods tenants are eligible to be part of the Board or Committee of Management. In each case they are also eligible to be ordinary members of the agency (mandatory in the case of co-operatives). As such they can choose which candidates (tenant or otherwise) they wish to have on their governing body.

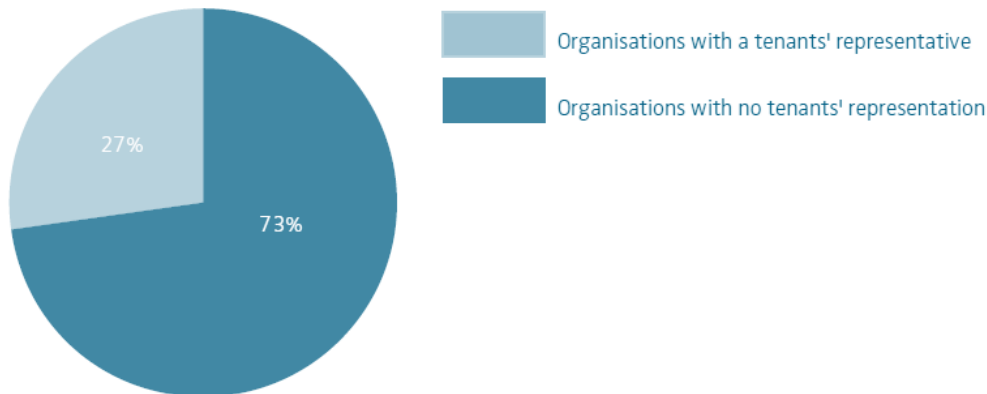
Some housing agencies are companies that do not have members as such, but sometimes the board of the company is the elected board of a separate community group which is elected by the membership. Where this is not the case other methods of tenant participation, as listed in the following sections will have to be pursued.

5.3 Other forms of active participation

5.3.1 Tenant representative bodies

Another method of tenant participation is to have tenants as members of formal bodies that advise the board. This does not entail tenants having the powers and responsibilities of being a board member, but it does give them a formal role in the decision-making process.

Tenants' Representative Body



The establishment of tenant advisory bodies such as a reference group, a tenants' forum, or a sub-committee of the main board is particularly important for large agencies or those whose properties are widespread or have a diverse population. Tenants are voted to serve on these bodies, or nominated by the agency.

In contrast to the more informal customer-based approaches, these advisory bodies have a documented, regular and on-going role. They do not have the final decision-making power, though the agency will need to explain if it decides not to follow the advisory bodies' recommendations. Tenant advisory bodies are encouraged to communicate directly with tenants, possibly through local tenant groups if the agency's properties are wide spread across the State. Their work must be reported through newsletters, and published in the agency's annual report.

Example

Active Property Services Management (APSM) manages long-term housing for people with disabilities and other low-income groups in a variety of housing programs. Their properties are located in Melbourne and throughout regional Victoria. They have a Tenant Reference Group (TRG) which meets at least quarterly. Membership is open to all tenants. Interest in the TRGs is generated through APSM's newsletter, on their website and by flyers. In order to make sure all programs and the country regions are represented APSM staff will approach some individual tenants to see if they want to participate in the TRG. APSM provides assistance for regional tenants to get to the meetings, allocating \$25,000 per year from its Community Capacity Building Funds to resource the TRG.

The TRG discusses topics suggested by APSM staff and matters brought up by tenants themselves. An important meeting is the one that discusses issues raised in the annual tenant survey. This is a very detailed survey and gives tenants a chance to raise concerns. Speed and quality of maintenance is a regular discussion point. The TRG's opinions are incorporated in the summary of the survey, which then goes to the Board, the Registrar and is included in the tenant newsletter.

The TRG raises ideas for social activities for all tenants and helps to organise them.

5.3.2 Tenant/resident associations

Residents' and tenants' associations (RTAs) vary considerably in size. Some RTAs form over a single issue that was important to the local neighbourhood; others have a strong social element of involvement in a number of aspects of operations. RTAs are often a way for tenants to discuss and tackle issues affecting them, arrange social events and build community spirit. They can also be used to provide support mechanisms, including training, mentoring and 'shadowing' to enable newer and less experienced tenants to learn from their peers.

Local tenant associations



An advantage of RTAs is that they can be seen by tenants as being more independent of the agency than advisory boards or forums even if the agency funds them. This can further encourage tenant involvement and make them feel their views are being presented without fear or favour. This can be an advantage for the agency too as they are being presented with a more honest picture of tenants' needs and aspirations. There is an onus on the agency to seriously consider issues raised by such groups or tenants will feel that their involvement is not worthwhile.

5.3.3 Tenant forums

These can be held on a regular basis and can either involve inviting the all tenants or the tenants in a certain region. Agenda items can be developed in advance or raised at the forum. Agencies need to be aware of issues like transport, accessibility and language difficulties and make provision for these to attract tenants to forums.

5.3.4 Focus groups

Focus groups are more suited to particular issues and are often held on a more ad-hoc basis. Issues that could lend themselves to a focus group are maintenance performance, construction of a new development or changes in direction for the agency. Members of the focus group could either be selected by the agency or elected by tenants in a particular region/rooming house/block of flats or housing type. Focus groups can be resource intensive and time consuming and peer pressure can lead to biased results. However it can lead to a thorough understanding of why tenants exhibit certain behaviours and what guides their choices and preferences.

5.3.5 House meetings

Rooming houses and blocks of self-contained flats are high density housing arrangements, where residents share space and may have many shared concerns about the management of their accommodation. This lends itself to regular 'house meetings' where residents can raise issues with their housing managers.

Example

St Kilda Community Housing Ltd (St KCH) runs 20 rooming houses or blocks of self-contained units in the inner southern suburbs. They conduct two regular house meetings in each house each year.

The level of participation varies considerably from one house to another. Many residents prefer to deal with their housing managers one-on-one regarding issues. Sometimes particular residents with grievances have dominated meetings, deterring other residents from coming again. Tenants who work cannot attend the daytime meetings.

The conversion of old-style rooming houses to self-contained apartments and the consequent reduction in shared space has led to a reduction in the sense of community in the buildings and less interest in house meetings. House meetings seem to work better in the smaller rooming houses with a greater sense of community.

House meetings are important to St KCH as they provide a direct opportunity for residents to discuss issues with both their housing manager and also the General Manager. An example of how a house meeting affected St KCH's decision making was a particular house that expressed major concerns about security of the building. The housing staff and residents worked on a solution that involved installation of a security camera on the front door and conversion of a number of downstairs external doors to exit only. This resulted in a much greater sense of safety and well-being for the residents who had raised this at the house meeting.

5.3.6 Repairs/maintenance group

This is a group of tenants who work with the repairs/maintenance team to look at the improving the way repairs can be reported, actioned and carried out. They monitor performance statistics and suggest areas for improvements.

5.3.7 Tenant inspectors

Scrutiny should be a high priority for agencies. Tenants play a vital role here because they can provide insight and understanding based on their day-to-day experiences. Agencies can utilise tenant inspectors as part of this process.

The role of tenant inspectors is to look at a part of the service and highlight what is good and suggest recommendations for improvement. A tenant inspector can look more closely at the service by using different methods such as surveys, mystery shopping or interviewing tenants or staff.

They can look at various aspects of service delivery and make suggestions for improvement. Tenant inspectors could also be teamed up with staff to visit tenants and inspect the services. The tenants will then assess whether services are in need of improvement and help promote good service.

5.4 Indirect involvement

Many tenants are reluctant to have a direct role in decision-making. Feedback options can include surveys, social media, suggestion boxes, and exit interviews, and can be verbal or written.

5.4.1 Surveys

Registered housing agencies in Victoria are required to survey their tenants at least every two years as part of their registration criteria. Many agencies send out detailed surveys and conduct tenant surveys annually or more frequently. It is important to avoid 'survey fatigue' by centrally managing surveys and focusing on specific issues requiring customer feedback.

Example

St Kilda Community Housing Ltd (St KCH) conducts a detailed survey of their tenants every two years. A sample survey is provided in Appendix 2. An example of the effect on the group's practices is that a survey had a number of tenants suggesting a newsletter for tenants. As a result St KCH successfully applied for funding from Port Phillip City Council to get this project started and it is now self-funded and an ongoing asset for both tenants and the organisation.

5.4.2 Use of web-based media

Social media is becoming the most popular method of communication in society and some agencies have explored this. Barriers to this becoming more widespread include lack of access to personal computers by tenants on low incomes, and lack of knowledge or confidence in using them. This may however be a way to engage 'hard to reach' younger people, people with disabilities and minority groups. The use of social media can assist to identify future website development.

5.4.3 Suggestion boxes

Suggestion boxes can be located at the agency's office or within larger accommodation areas such as a rooming house or block of units. They could also be located at a neutral venue such as a different community agency or a shop or other business.

Example

SouthEast Housing Co-operative regularly uses the Co-op website to inform members of participative opportunities and encourage participation e.g. providing feedback on the test web site. They have also started a Co-op blog. Tenants can send posts to the blog, which is moderated by an administrator. It is too early to tell how well this will work but it certainly has the potential to be a useful way for tenants to contribute information and suggestions to the Co-operative.

5.4.4 One-on-one verbal feedback

Some individuals may be reluctant to join in meetings and unwilling or unable to take part in written communications such as surveys. Housing workers can get their input during the course of dealing with them about other matters by asking how they are going in their housing and what complaints or suggestions for improvements they might have. This method could be time consuming and resource intensive. On the other hand it minimises the incidence of partially completed questionnaires and yields a higher response rate. The interviewer is also able to clarify questions if needed as well as explain rationale.

5.4.5 Incorporating feedback into everyday activities

Feedback can be gathered by incorporating procedures into everyday activities. Maintenance is an activity that lends itself to this approach. A phone call to the tenant after completion or a form that they can fill out and return can be incorporated into standard maintenance procedures. This method is good for capturing timely satisfaction of the specific process and can have a high response rate. The responses can be compiled and help to build up a picture of the quality and/or shortcomings of maintenance work.

5.4.6 Exit interviews or forms

An interview or exit form at the end of a tenancy can often provide useful insights for the agency. Tenants may be prepared to be more open and honest at the end of a tenancy.

6. How to introduce tenant participation

In many instances, a range of engagement techniques will be required to involve tenants. A technique may have to be adapted to suit particular circumstances. No single engagement technique will suit every situation. Some techniques are:

- encourage tenant engagement, volunteering and social inclusion to assist tenants play a role in their tenancies and communities and reduce isolation;
- provide opportunities for tenants to be involved in policy, planning and project development activities;
- provide opportunities for tenants to increase their independence and self-development to become job-ready, employed and socially engaged;
- voluntary board members need to be prepared to learn to network effectively, access resources to be skilled negotiators and to be approachable to residents;
- the agency and tenants need to strike a balance between improving housing management and engaging in initiatives which address tenants' wider needs; and
- the parties need to create a steady flow of projects to capture tenants' imaginations and meet local needs, so that tenants continue to play an active part in developing the community as a whole even after resolution of their own issues are complete.

6.1 How do tenants want to be involved?

The challenge for an agency is to understand what interests its tenants and how they want to participate.

The graph below shows that maintenance, security/safety, rents and neighbourhood issues are the most common topics of interest for tenant participation activities across agencies.

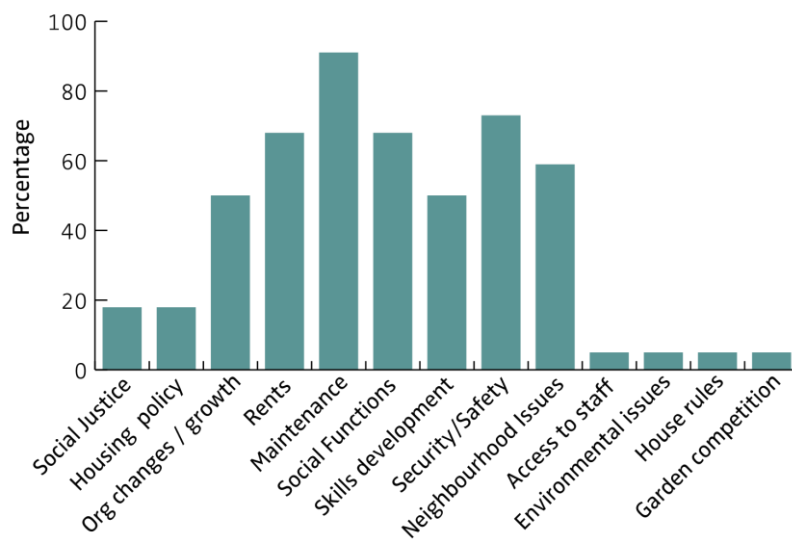
These results will vary across different housing providers and tenant profiles. A good first step in developing a tenant participation strategy would be for a housing provider to find out how their own tenants want to be involved.

This could be done several ways:

- a one-off survey of all tenants outlining the various options for becoming involved and asking which interested them;
- use the regular tenant survey to include the various questions around becoming involved and level of interest; or
- outline options for new tenants to become involved, gauge interest and preferred methods, at the start of the new tenancy.

The results of this research, combined with the agency's own requirements should form the basis of a tenant participation strategy. Having decided on the tenant participation strategy, the provider can choose how to encourage participation. A number of possibilities follow.

Tenants interests by organisation



6.2 Encourage participation at sign-up

The process of a new tenant signing up for a property is an ideal time to encourage them to become involved in tenant participation. It is an opportunity to advise them of the various participation options available and to record which, if any, interests them.

Example

Yarra Community Housing (YCH) routinely informs new tenants of the opportunity to become individual members and participate in regular Members' Forums and the Annual General Meeting.

Over 100 Yarra tenants became individual members and can meet quarterly to discuss a range of issues and attend the AGM.

6.3 Use social events to encourage participation

Many agencies use social events or social inclusion projects to encourage tenant participation to minimise social isolation. While tenants are attending functions, the agency can promote the benefits of getting involved in decision making or get one-on-one feedback about the provider's services.

Agencies can combine social activities with tenant participation events. The social event can encourage tenants to be present at events they may not normally have attended such as a house meeting or a forum on a specific issue. Some agencies combine their AGM and their tenants' Christmas party in order to maximise participation by tenants.

6.4 Tenant newsletters

Newsletters are a good medium for advising tenants about participation activities and encourage them to take part. They can be used to promote upcoming AGMs or tenant association meetings or forums to be held on particular issues. They can also contain questionnaires or surveys on a particular upcoming issue or have a suggestion box form that tenants could fill out and lodge anonymously.

6.5 Tenant liaison officer

Some larger agencies have a specific staff position dedicated to obtaining tenants' views and helping them to participate in decision making. This ensures that tenant participation is part of an agency's practices because it is built into the staffing structure.

Example

Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) has a specific position of Tenancy Liaison Team Manager. The job description includes 'engage tenants in developing effective incentive programs and develop a tenancy representative committee across Victoria to act as the collective voice and interface with AHV and clients' and 'ensure tenants have input into and can influence procedures, processes and documents which are developed in a culturally appropriate manner to ensure communication is clear and effective'.

Agencies might not have a full-time tenant participation officer but might make facilitating tenant participation a portion of the role of one staff member.

Of the Victorian housing groups surveyed 23 per cent have a designated staff member responsible for promoting tenant participation.

6.6 Assistance to participate

Tenants may require help to participate for a wide variety of reasons. It is important that providers assist their tenants, who are mostly on low incomes, if tenant participation is to represent real input to the agency and not just tokenism. Assistance could include:

- help with transport. Most tenants are on low incomes and do not own cars. Housing associations and providers have properties and tenants spread across the state. Assistance with transport can help tenants to attend tenant participation events;

Example

Active Property Services Management has a tenant reference group which meets at least four times a year. They supply train tickets for regional tenants to get to the meetings.

- involving regional tenants by bringing the consultations to them through regional forums or meetings, and by adding feedback sessions when staff are in the area for another reason such as planning or maintenance;
- ensuring accessibility for tenants with mobility problems, language difficulties, hearing-impaired tenants;
- assisting tenants with literacy, language or vision problems in filling out surveys, questionnaires and feedback forms;
- providing child care facilities so parents with young children are able to be involved in meetings and forums; and
- providing training for tenants once they are involved in more demanding tenant participation roles such as sitting on a Board or running a Tenants Association or Tenant Advisory Board.

Advertising that all of the assistance above is available when promoting tenant participation.

Of the housing agencies surveyed, 32 per cent provided financial or in-kind assistance to tenant representative groups.

6.7 Incentives to participate

The chances of successfully attracting tenants to be involved in the agencies are greatly enhanced by offering incentives for them to do so. There are a number of ways to do this:

- combine tenant participation events with social events.

Example

St Kilda Community Housing Ltd have 20 rooming houses or blocks of self-contained units in which to run two regular house meetings each year. They combine the house meeting for each house with a Pizza Night, which is both a social activity and an information session designed to keep the residents informed about critical safety issues such as fire services. This results in one activity serving three different functions: – social activity for the tenants, information sharing by the agency, and the tenant participation process of the house meeting. This increases attendance for house meetings because of the attraction of food and social activity.

- pay attendance fees for participating in meetings. For instance tenant board directors could be paid for attendance at meetings or ordinary tenants could be paid to attend general forums or consultations on specific issues. This can often be best done through providing a rent rebate or discount on one rent payment;

Example

South Port Community Housing Group holds a general Forum every year for tenants to bring ideas, suggestions for future directions, complaints, and so forth. Each tenant who attends is paid \$20 for doing so. This results in better attendances than would otherwise be expected.

- run door prizes or raffles in conjunction with meetings and forums to attract attendance. Prizes could include rent discounts, donated goods or goods purchased by the agency; and
- provide food at meetings and forums.

6.8 Ensure participation is engaging and meaningful

Agencies need to be clear about why they engage tenants in decision-making. A half-hearted approach to consultation and participation will be short-lived and ultimately destructive to the agency-tenant relationship.

Tenants involved in tenant participation activities need to believe that their involvement has achieved something positive. Agencies should use newsletters or mail-outs to indicate how tenants' views are incorporated into decisions they have made. Meetings should be followed up by clear paths of action showing how tenants' concerns or suggestions are addressed.

It is vital for tenants to be kept engaged through a steady flow of projects to capture tenants' minds and meet local needs. Tenants can continue to play an active part in developing the agency and the community it serves even after their own issues have been addressed.

6.9 Tenant involvement

A high percentage of current tenant involvement revolves around social activities, for example:

- social meals programs (e.g. pizza nights);
- Christmas dinners or parties; or
- recreational activities (e.g. zoo, pool, go-carting and other activities).

The survey response from agencies varies in accordance with agency's structure and the types of engagement:

- more than half report tenant involvement activities are affordable or that the benefits outweigh the costs, citing the value of volunteer roles held by tenants, as well as reductions in arrears and maintenance costs;
- where tenant participation activities were reported to cause difficulty, those most often related to staff costs, including after-hours attendances, travel costs and accommodation. Significant costs were also identified in relation to postage; and
- those agencies offering large events or engaging external contractors were most likely to view their current tenant participation costs as unaffordable.

7. Other considerations

7.1 Barriers to tenant participation

Not all tenants can or want to participate in activities. However agencies must ensure that tenants are given the opportunity to participate at the level they want to, in a manner that suits them.

Barriers can relate to:

- personal situation, (e.g. age, mobility, health, communication difficulties/impairment);
- family situation (e.g. young families, single parent families);
- cultural influence (e.g. language difficulties, ethnic/indigenous customs); and/or
- other issues (e.g. time constraints, education levels, geographical location, attitude/apathy toward involvement, insufficient information about the meetings/people attending/values).

Agencies will need to ensure that they have in place strategies and mechanisms to ensure the barriers to participation are addressed.

7.2 Getting ready for tenants on the board

Prior to deciding to install tenants on the board, agencies must consider a number of issues, including:

- understanding the role of tenant director – an understanding of the role of the director, e.g. as tenant representative or as individual director. Corporations law requires that directors act in the best interest of the agency;
- conflict of interest – brought about by the competing roles of customer and director. The agency should ensure that tenant directors understand their obligations related to probity and conflict of interest. They should be able to identify issues from which they should be excused, especially around tenants' housing (e.g. rent arrears, inter-tenant disputes), or when considering rent increases;
- relationship with staff and other tenants – board membership comes with a level of prestige, and can influence tenant members' relationships with and attitudes toward staff and other tenants. This issue must be dealt with in the agency's policies otherwise agency and even industrial strife can occur; and
- additional training – tenant directors are not usually appointed to a board for their skills and experience and can require more training than members that have served on a number of boards. The agency must spend time and money on training new board members in the business of the agency, meeting procedures, funding and reporting requirements and the other technical and managerial issues that they may face.

Agencies need to assess the impact of the above issues and have policies and practices to deal with them if they arise.

7.3 Financial implications of tenant participation

Most instances of tenant participation involve some cost to the agency, to the tenant or both.

Agencies should be up front about the real cost of participation. If tenants are aware of the costs involved and the impact these may have on rents or efficiency, they will be able to make decisions about the necessity or the benefit of identified matters that require improvement. If participation opportunities are embarked upon without proper tenant input, the agency could waste time and money on activities that may or may not be supported by tenants.

Agencies who track their expenditure on activities are in a good position to make informed decisions about the continuity of activities. Activities that are organised and resourced for a small number of users or use a high percentage of staff time could be costly. However, costs can sometimes be offset by improved outcomes in the form of lowered vandalism, lower maintenance costs, sustained tenancies and low rent loss.

The amount of time invested in training and support of tenants must also be taken into account to ensure success of projects. Costs that need to be considered are:

- salaries (including on-costs);
- funding (if necessary) of the tenant group;
- tenant training;
- conferences/events;
- newsletters;
- other literature (e.g. handbooks, brochures);
- transport or other measures for hard to reach tenants; and
- activities.

Tenants should be made aware that participation could involve costs to them in time, travel costs and baby-sitting/carer costs. The agency may be able to subsidise some of these costs.

8. Successful case studies

Examples of good practice by Victorian housing providers have been included throughout this document. The following examples are drawn from local, interstate and international research. They demonstrate a range of ways and different levels at which tenant participation can occur. They can help agencies to consider what has worked and can provide ideas on how to deal with issues.

Australia

Yarra Community Housing (YCH)

YCH has chosen to involve its tenants in the design of any new developments and renovations. It believes that through “involving tenants in the design process these innovative housing types, can actually reflect the expressed needs and preferences of the people who will be living in them. There is the potential for much needed innovation without the risk of experts designing some radical but totally inappropriate house solutions for people they have never consulted. At 660 Elizabeth Street, the agency held workshops with key stakeholders (architects, builders, YCH staff and tenants) to discuss the general design and look and feel of the building. The design process has also been followed up recently with a post-occupancy survey of tenants to evaluate the overall design and amenity of the areas inside the units, outside the units, and the areas surrounding the overall property. The survey feedback will be used to drive improvements in building design and functionality in the future.

Bridge Housing (NSW)

The provider launched a series of Tenant Workshops to seek feedback on issues concerning tenants. Tenants were invited to a working lunch meeting to discuss aspects of the previous year's survey – what worked and what did not. Participants viewed the current survey and provided feedback that was used to fine tune the survey and make it more user friendly before it was sent to all households. Bridge Housing also set up a Tenants Advisory Group (TAG) to provide a conduit between tenants and the provider – a forum for the provider to consult with tenants on key issues and seek feedback on proposed changes which could affect them.

The TAG meets regularly and its Chairperson attends two of the provider's board meetings each year and reports back to the TAG via the newsletter.

Because the Australian social housing sector is comparatively new, there are limited examples we can draw on. However, the affordable/social housing sector has operated in Great Britain for several decades and we can draw on several examples of opportunities.

Great Britain

Great Places Housing Group (GPHG)

GPHG operates across a wide geographical area managing more than 15,000 homes in 31 different local authority areas in Manchester, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Merseyside. When it consolidated its different agencies into one structure it created a customer involvement structure with a customer involvement strategy. This had the aim of ensuring that all customers had the same opportunities to influence the design and delivery of services provided in their homes and neighbourhoods at a level that suited them. GPHG has a corporate planning event each year – which includes senior staff and tenants – at which feedback from the customer involvement strategy is central to the discussions and informs the coming year's corporate priorities and objectives.

East Lothian Council

The Council published a Tenant Participation Guidance Manual to assist tenants access local resources. The manual explains tenant participation in East Lothian.

In Scotland, tenant participation is a legislative requirement of the *Housing (Scotland) Act 2011*. The Tenant Participation Guidance Manual is a comprehensive document outlining the strategies used in that local council area, with a particular focus on tenant participation in housing policy conditions and related services.

The Riverside Group (European Urban Knowledge Network)

This provider set up a steering committee of staff and tenants to explore the idea of young people participating as committee members or taking on a formal role in a youth forum.

This decision was taken because the group believed that young people:

- are the tenants of tomorrow and need to be engaged today;
- should be involved in decision making and give them opportunities for a voice; and
- had little presence in tenant participation opportunities.

Riverside developed promotional presentations, produced storyboards documenting the journey and created documents and reports that were available to tenants and resident groups to use in their own community based schemes. The project was innovative and worked towards change. It had a loose framework and attempted to respond to young people's needs, requests and aspirations. The opportunities provided young people with the chance to develop and have a sense of ownership and inclusion within their local area. Their ideas and visions for a better community were considered and included in services. Their enthusiasm and interest helped them to remain involved in their local community. The program importantly helped build leadership skills, strong character and increased self-confidence. The youth involved designed their own community projects and put them into action.

James Nisbet Street Housing Co-operative

Sustainable housing design

The Co-operative inherited 200 tenement dwellings. The amenities within the local area were basic with some public transport links. Car parking was well below planning guidelines. A decision was made to renovate the stock, exploiting passive solar gain where possible and adapting layouts to form a more suitable housing mix. A major aspect of the renovation was the close relationship between the housing management team, architects and existing tenants. As a result tenants had a strong sense of 'owning' the area and property they lived in.

An initial social survey was carried out to find out tenant requirements and aspirations and a new housing mix designed to accommodate these. Every household was interviewed individually by the architects using models and plans and offered choices on a range of aspects. A tenants committee met fortnightly with the design team to progress design ideas. Meetings were also arranged with groups of tenants from each communal close to determine communal finishes. Private garden areas were created at ground level to encourage tenants to maintain the landscaping.

Right to Manage scheme (UK)

The 1960s Bloomsbury Estate in Birmingham was transformed by the tenants themselves, through using their Right to Manage. The tenant-led management board set a local 'Bloomsbury Standard' for improvement to homes that exceeded the Decent Homes Standard. They also rebuilt a number of homes and a new Lottery-funded leisure complex. Since taking responsibility for the estate, the Board has boosted rent arrears recovery and saved £750,000 over five years through better productivity.

Tenants took up management of Childwall Valley Estate, South Liverpool, in response to the council's 'emergency repairs only' policy. They demolished the unpopular high rise blocks in the area to make way for new homes. Demand for properties on the estate now far exceeds supply. Tenants worked with the police and Citizens Advice Bureau to reduce anti-social behavior. Community wardens now work with local young people.

Elmbridge Housing Trust UK

The Elmbridge Housing Trust developed a 'Menu of Involvement' that details program activities and expected level of time commitment for tenants who want to be involved. Activities range from membership on a Service User Panel with a time commitment of up to two hours bi-monthly, to participation in one-off events like Community Action days. Incentives such as refreshments, assistance with travel and childcare costs are available to tenants who actively participate.

The provider also set up two opportunities for tenants to have input into decision making about issues that affect their tenancies.

- (a) Through the 'Reading Panel', tenants draft housing association communication materials, including proposed policies to ensure they are suitable and understandable for a wider tenant audience. The panel consists of tenants who received training on reviewing documents and providing feedback. Feedback is via questionnaires.
- (b) Through the 'Online Panel', tenants have the opportunity to provide meaningful input to decision-making about tenancy issues through participation in surveys online. The surveys focus on different service issues such as grounds maintenance or complaints management.

Irwell Valley Housing Association

This provider introduced the Gold Service project to tackle problems with difficult to let housing and falling tenant satisfaction. Unlike most approaches which penalise 'problem tenants', the scheme rewards those who comply with their tenancy agreement. They receive small weekly cash bonuses, quicker repair service and discounts from local retailers. New tenant board members are mentored, provided with training and paid approx. \$10,000 per year. A resident's committee meets every two months and reviews the agency's policies providing feedback and recommendations for amendment.

Aldwych Housing Association

Aldwych Housing Association reorganised its board structure so that there is division between strategy at group level and has a clear focus on delivery of services at regional levels. The group board focuses on strategy and finance and does not have tenant representation.

It also set up two regions. Each region has an operational board which includes tenant representatives and a customer scrutiny panel with the objectives of holding the board to account and monitoring customer facing performance indicators. The tenants on the scrutiny panel are elected by ballot by all tenants in the region.

Gentoo

Gentoo has a community and customer involvement monitoring group, comprising between 20 and 30 tenants plus about 100 postal members who monitor all involvement to make sure it is effective. They work with staff to develop the involvement strategy, budgets and action plan. They also assess impacts to help plan for the future.

The Calico Academy

Calico Homes set up a training programme designed to build tenants' confidence and give them skills to influence the way the agency provides services to its tenants.

The nine-week course was developed through a customer steering group ensuring that formal content was exactly what the tenants wanted – simple two hours sessions. The course covered a range of services, such as repairs, investment, neighbourhoods and anti-social behaviour through to projects that provide job training and support to help people to live independently. Residents who graduated said they felt that they could 'take on anything'.

Calico Homes also operate in one of the most deprived areas of the UK. It's involvement strategy focuses not only on engaging tenants in feedback on services but on tackling issues around deprivation and creating opportunities for people to improve their lives. It set up a resident-led scrutiny panel with autonomy to select any area or service for review. A formal link to the board ensures that findings from this panel are acted upon.

Coastline Homes

Coastline designed and printed special certificates for tenants who completed one of their free training courses. It also offered an annual social event to all tenants and publically thanks involved tenants in its newsletter and other documents.

London Borough of Croydon – Beacon Council

With agreement from tenants, the Council undertook a major review of its resident involvement framework. It developed a Housing Sounding Board (HSB) which gave all residents a wide range of options on the issues they wish to become involved in and they can choose the level and method of involvement which suits them. This ranges from face to face surveys, internet & e- mail surveys, one off focus groups or conferences or attending exhibitions. Residents no longer have to attend regular meetings unless they wish to do so. HSB members have completed six surveys on topics such as future repairs and improvements priorities, satisfaction with services, arrangements for resident involvement, services for disabled tenants and the Council's web site. Many other members have attended focus groups on a wide range of issues including stock investment, housing department publicity and youth provision bids.

Further information on the many participation opportunities developed for tenants to choose from, can be found on the Croydon Council's website.

Key outcomes

- 750+ residents have joined the HSB;
- attendance at Panel meetings has increased by 23 per cent;
- tenant satisfaction with the overall landlord service has remained constantly high and stands at 74 per cent;
- tenant satisfaction with arrangements for resident participation has continued to increase to 74 per cent, one of the highest in London;
- membership of working groups has increased and they are now more representative;
- the number of tenants attending training courses has increased by 56 per cent; and
- a survey of the HSB showed that 94 per cent wished to retain Croydon Council as their landlord.

The Airport group

The Airport group is an informal alliance of 14 housing associations with approximately 400,000 tenants. One of the group's goals is to employ trained apprentices from within their tenant group. Starting with one apprenticeship per 100 staff in 2009, they now employ 4.5 apprentices per 100 staff. Over 50 of the 250 apprentices are in the traditional construction trades. The Airport group uses its considerable procurement power to promote the provision of jobs, placements and training for residents. It also uses its partnerships with contractors, suppliers and other agencies to further the opportunities available to its tenants. In 2011-12 their achievements were:

- 651 permanent jobs created;
- 84 people received one year's training;
- 166 people achieved formal qualifications;
- 1 097 people attended a short work-related course; and
- 170 new apprenticeships or existing apprenticeships safeguarded through the collective procurement programme in addition to the 250 who are directly employed.

9. The next step

Tenant participation can lead to benefits for the agency and their tenants. However, it is important to understand tenants preferences and experiences before developing a business case for using tenant views to shape services.

Many agencies have already expanded their tenant participation activities since registration. The next step might be for them to consider how efficient and effective these activities are and the impact on their business.

For others, it might be more of an internal focus. The embedding of tenant participation within the culture of the agency. Effective internal communication and engaged staff interacting with tenants will use the latter's views to drive tenant involvement through the agency and improve outcomes.

We acknowledge that this guide does not provide all the answers but it will help agencies to identify the right questions to ask. We recommend that all agencies conduct a review of their tenant participation in light of the contents of this guide.

Questions that agencies should consider are:

- how does our agency culture need to change?
- how can we be challenged and held to account by our tenants?
- what methods do we use to obtain our tenants' views?
- how do we respond to neighbourhood issues arising from tenant involvement?
- how do we assess the impact and cost of our tenant involvement?
- are our tenants given clear information about the costs of tenant involvement and of services in general?
- is this sufficient to help them make choices about approaches and services that deliver value for money?
- what training, support and incentives do/should we provide?

Most importantly agencies should publicise successes achieved as a result of tenant participation, e.g. savings in maintenance costs through asset inspections; reduction in rent arrears as a result of debt advice to tenants, increased number of tenancies maintained through tenant driven renovations/disability upgrades. These successes should be publicised in newsletters and on agency websites making it clear that they are the result of information collected from tenants.

Any tenant participation strategy should be monitored and a review held at least every three years. This will help agencies and tenants to determine:

- what progress has been made;
- if effective participation is taking place ;
- what if any, factors are limiting tenant participation;
- what needs to be changed or expanded;
- training and support needs; and
- the resources required.

Appendix 1 – St Kilda community housing tenant survey

Part 1: Some questions about you

1. Female Male Self-described

2. Age

21-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 66-75 75+

3. Income source (please circle):

DSP Age Pension Newstart Wages
Youth Allowance Superannuation Overseas pension Other

4. If you are on a pension or benefit can you say how long have you been on it?

.....
.....

5. Marital status (please circle):

Married Divorced Never Married De Facto Widow/Widower

6. Children:

Yes No

7. How often do you have contact with your family?

.....
.....

Part 2: Our services

1. Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the services provided by us? (please circle).

Very satisfied Fairly satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Fairly dissatisfied Very dissatisfied No opinion

2. If you are not satisfied, can you say why?

.....
.....
.....
.....

3. How satisfied are you that your views are being taken into account by us? (please circle)

Very satisfied Fairly satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Fairly dissatisfied Very dissatisfied No opinion

4. If you are not satisfied can you say why?

.....
.....

5. We currently provide a number of services for tenants. Can you please circle any of those that you have been involved with?

- Social Meals/Chat and Chew
- Photography Group
- Cricket Match
- Newsletter
- Dental services
- None of the above

6. Are there any services/activities that you would like us to provide in the future?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Part 3: How we communicate with you

1. Do you attend house meetings when they are called?

Yes No

2. If you don't attend can you tell us why?

.....
.....
.....

3. What issues would you like to have discussed at house meetings?

.....
.....
.....
.....

4. How would you prefer us to communicate with you? (please circle)

Email Regular newsletter House meetings
Individual meetings with housing managers Other (please state)

.....
.....

Part 4: Your housing

1. Do you have your name down on the public housing waiting list or with another community housing provider?

Yes No

2. If you answered no, would you like us to help you put your name on the list?

Yes No

(If you answer Yes, please contact the office for help at 102 St Kilda Road, St Kilda or call 9534 1809)

3. How satisfied are you with your accommodation with us? (please circle)

Very satisfied Fairly satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Fairly dissatisfied Very dissatisfied No opinion

4. If you are not satisfied, could you say why?

.....
.....
.....

5. If you are not satisfied, what do you think we can do to improve the situation?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Part 5: Maintenance

1. Generally, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way we deal with repairs and maintenance?
(please circle)

Very satisfied Fairly satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Fairly dissatisfied Very dissatisfied No opinion

2. If you are not satisfied can you say why?

.....
.....
.....

3. If you are not satisfied, how do you think we can improve our service?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Part 6: General comments

1. Do you have any other comments to make that would help us to improve the services we provide to you?

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.....
.....

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