

One of the first questions asked of me when told I would be discussing this topic was do we have an active and participating community. I had to honestly answer No! If you consider the amount of social housing tenants we have in NSW the total participating would not even total 1%. Why is this?

Lets consider that 10% work full time and cannot participate to their full capacity that still leaves 89% still unaccounted for. Where are they? Why aren't they participating to help develop their communities or even the area in which they live such as estates? Is it the stigma of being a social housing tenant or being socially isolated. Is it not being accepted or dominated by others who partake in community activities or consultation. Is it the constant feeling of being let down by bureaucrats and the outcomes of projects being developed and not brought into fruition. These are some of the deterrents that have led us to believe that civic engagement in our communities needs to be re developed so that more people can and will want to participate.

Maybe we should look at those who do engage in activities within the community. We have many government agencies such as Community Services, Health, the Police and local government. We have teachers and schools working in the community and professional people who are doctors & lawyers. We have Tenant Resource Services across NSW who provide tenants with training and skills, and Lions clubs, Rotary clubs, various church groups, St Vincent de Paul, City Mission, and not to forget the relentless community work that the Salvation Army does. Why do these organizations get involved? If it's to help one person, one family, or the whole community, they feel the time spent to ease a bit of the burden is worth the while.

Why is it that it takes a time of crisis like the Menai Bush Fires, or the Wollongong floods, or even the devastation caused on that terrible night in April with the rain and hail storms in Sydney, before communities bond together to help? It doesn't matter whether they are rich or poor, public or private, when someone needs a hand people don't ask why, they just ask how.

So how come we can only get a handful of tenants, usually the same ones, to participate. Tenants need to know that to make a society strong and workable, it takes not just a few, but a few more. They have a right to participate, and they have a right to be involved in decision-making on anything that affects them and their community.

But again the question raised is how do we involve new people?

One of the ways that has helped solve some of these issues in Southern Sydney is the structure of the Regional Tenant Resource Service (RTRS). At local level there are two levels of participating. First at local group level, which consists of estates/building complexes, a street of cottages, or even an entire suburb. The second level of participating is at the Area Tenant Councils (ATC'S). Where delegates from the local groups attend bimonthly meetings and consult with the Department of Housing. There are also open forums held for all tenants to discuss relevant issues, with invited speakers to inform and help tenants to make decisions affecting their communities. But most importantly these forums are for people who do not belong to a local group because of social isolation or because their complex does not have an active tenant group. They are for any tenant, whether they live in Public Housing, Community Housing or Aboriginal Housing. If they want to get involved they can. The Area Tenant Council boards have positions available for Community and Aboriginal Housing and we need the other two groups of housing provider tenants to become further involved in decision-making.

We know that conducting consultation with many organisations, staff that work on estates, and tenants is vital, but the powers that be must be aware that more consultation should be held with tenants at the grass roots level. Tenants' perceptions of their needs and problems are not necessarily those of the workers or some organizations. This is not to say either are wrong - just that they look at things from different viewpoints.

We have to have agreement about the communities right to participate in decision-making, and it has to be meaningful with government agencies being prepared to share the decision making with tenants and communities. This has to be resourced and supported, and everyone has to be skilled up, both the community and the professionals managing the services. It's a different way of working to what people are used to, particularly government agencies and everyone has to be accountable for making it happen.

What we learned from our State tenant conference in April of this year, is that more local tenant involvement is wanted and perhaps demanded. Most issues affecting tenants' communities come from a local level and may not necessarily be Regional or State issues, so why can't they have the resources to discuss and develop the best solution for them at grass roots level, it is their community, not Regional or State issues but their own living environment.

Tenants need to learn to speak up for themselves, let them have their own voice, and not let others speak for them, especially if the one's speaking for them are not necessarily speaking for all involved and are speaking for personal gain only. Tenants can resolve their own problems if given the opportunity and the skills required.

We have many Aboriginal Land Councils that have worked successfully over the years. We have Community Housing, that works in different ways that we have never investigated and we need to include these groups of tenants more and more within not only tenant issues, but broader community issues as well.

The community as a whole need to resolve the issues that affect them, and we have to involve the private sector, and break down the stigma of social housing. Then we can truly measure the outcomes by community success, and not just by the public or private sector working separately to achieve their own outcomes. The benefits to the community bring in many opportunities. Working to achieve a common goal and working to achieve the outcomes required to engage a sustainable community. We need to find out where we are and where we want to go, it is no use chasing our tails on what if's, we need to form partnerships with the three housing providers, local government, the private sector, and most importantly with other people in the community.