



“We want respect”

A discussion with social housing tenants about tenant outcomes

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Introduction

Shelter SA is the peak body for housing in South Australia advocating for safe and affordable housing for citizens living on low incomes. Shelter SA provides an independent and community-based voice regarding housing policy and systems to all levels of Government, the housing industry, the media and the general public.

On the 5th of December 2019 Shelter SA conducted a focus group with tenants of a community housing organisation to hear directly from them about their housing experiences. Shelter SA engages in discussions with tenants to ensure that tenant voices and experiences are heard at the policy level.

The focus group was designed to further the exploration of how to define social housing tenant outcomes as outlined in the Shelter SA Discussion Paper, “How are we being accountable to our tenants today?”¹ The Paper highlights the lack of a clear definition of positive tenant outcomes and meaningful tenant engagement. Our research revealed a lack of available data about how tenants are faring. The National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH) information about tenant outcomes and engagement is extremely limited, with asset management, financial solvency and business acumen being the main focus of reporting.

The key themes to emerge in our research for the original Discussion Paper include the following:

- There is no clear definition of good tenant outcomes.
- There is a huge variation in levels of tenant engagement that are practiced between different housing providers.
- Policies and procedures do not encompass the full range of the tenant experience from applicant, to tenant to ex-tenant.
- Tenants are an under-utilised resource.

Key Findings

- Tenants want to inform policy and practice within their landlord organisations.
- The most important housing outcomes for tenants are improvements in health, having a manageable budget, feelings of safety and community connection, access to education, employment opportunities and housing stability.
- Tenants see good tenant engagement as being actively involved in the governance, strategic planning and service delivery of their landlord organisations.

The tenants who attended the focus group were living in community housing but the information we collected spanned their entire housing journeys. The sample group is small, but the discussions and activities allowed us to gather deep, rich information about tenant perspectives of good tenant outcomes and engagement.

This paper outlines the methods and activities undertaken as part of the tenant focus group, summarises the findings of those activities and draws conclusions on the data gathered.

¹ <https://www.sheltersa.asn.au/publications/>

Methods

Participants were recruited with the assistance of a community housing provider. Nine tenants attended the focus group which was held on the 5th of December 2019 at the 19 on Green Community Centre, Brompton.

Participants were welcomed and the reason for the event explained. An outline of the Shelter SA work in policy, advocacy and research was provided. Tenants were informed of the recent discussion paper Shelter SA had published, the difficulties we experienced in accessing data in the preparation of the paper and in particular, in hearing the tenant voice in terms of poorly defined tenant outcomes and tenant engagement.

It was explained that Shelter SA wished to draw on the knowledge of the tenants by having them participate in four activities that explored their housing experiences. The emphasis of the exercises was to be on being positive and specific.

Tenants were invited to introduce themselves and say something about “what’s happening at your place?”. An introduction from each tenant revealed that they represented a range of backgrounds and experiences. Ages ranged from 17 to 65 years with 55% of participants being female and 45% male. There were people who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, living with disability or from a culturally and linguistically diverse background as part of the group as well as people with diverse health and housing situations.

The Activities

Activity 1: Housing Journeys

Participants were asked to draw a timeline of their “Housing Journey” from as far back as they could remember, to form the basis of a discussion. They were asked to note details of each stage of the journey such as:

- The housing provider (private/social)
- The type of housing
- How long they lived at that accommodation
- The reason for leaving the accommodation

This activity’s aim was to assist participants to reflect on their whole housing journey to differentiate their good and bad experiences. This activity formed the basis of the following activities as each person focussed on their best housing experience, regardless of landlord, housing type or length of tenure to explore the specifics of what made that experience positive in terms of tenant outcomes and engagement.

Activity 2: Aspects of the Housing Experience

Participants were asked to focus on the positive parts of their housing journeys and identify some specifics around what made that housing experience a good one. They were asked to think across the whole span of the housing experience – from being an applicant, then a tenant and then leaving the accommodation.

Participants wrote on sticky notes and placed them under the respective headings: applicant, tenant, post tenant.

Activity 3: Measuring Outcomes

Participants were given a questionnaire looking at the outcomes of having a good housing experience. Each person marked on a continuous line from “It got worse” through to “stayed the same” to “It got better” in response to the following questions:

Did you/your family’s

- health improve?
- fortnightly budget improve?
- feelings of being safe improve?
- feelings of being socially connected improve?
- feelings of being worried about your housing improve?
- employment or education opportunities improve?

There was then a discussion about whether these measures were good measures or whether there were other factors that needed to be included.

Activity 4: Tenant/Landlord Engagement

Participants were asked:

- What are positive ways that you have been involved with landlords?
- How would you like to be involved?

This was an open discussion and comments were written on a whiteboard under the headings:

Findings

Activity 1: Housing Journeys

Providers

Participants had experienced the full range of housing providers/landlords, including:

- Public housing
- Community housing
- Housing co-ops and associations
- Private rental
- Home ownership
- Emergency accommodation
- Couch surfing

Housing Types

Housing types included:

- Houses
- Townhouses
- Flats/Units
- Mobile homes
- Living in a car

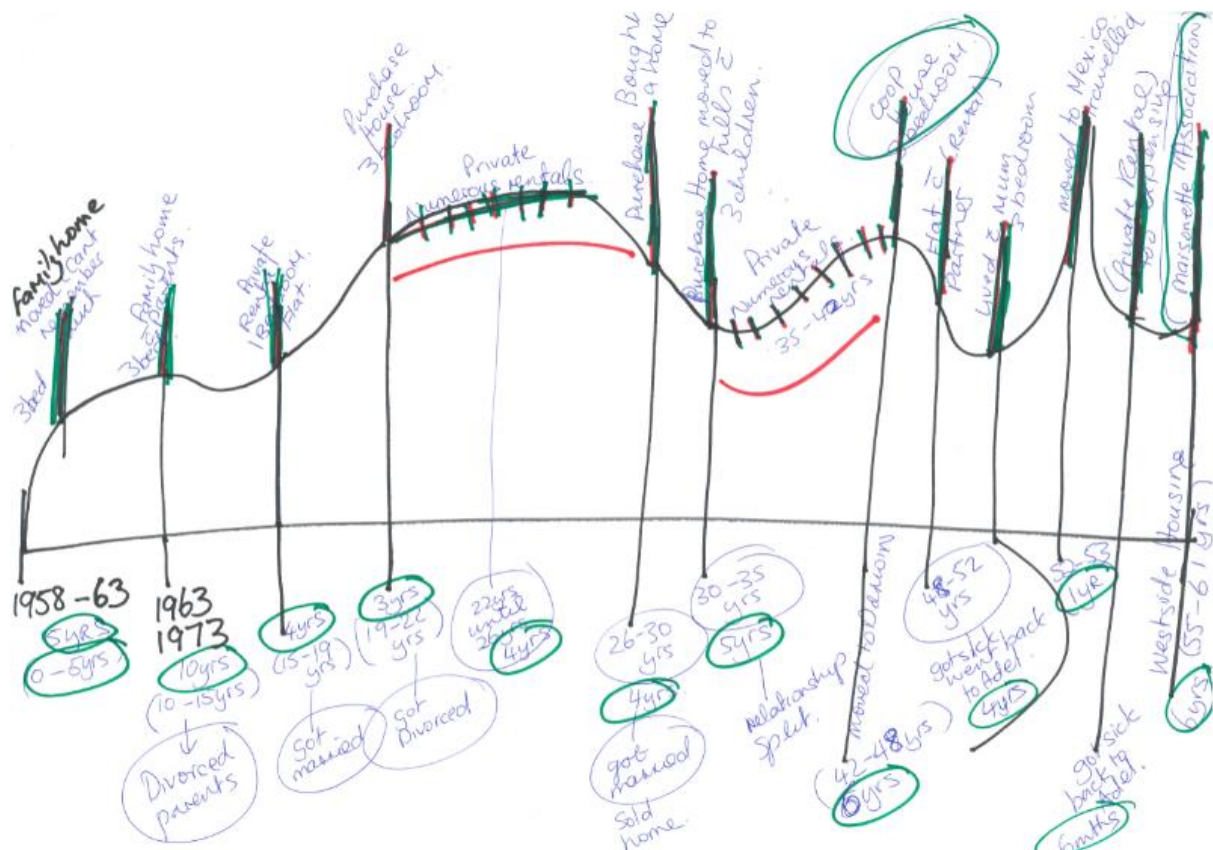


Figure 1: Participant's drawing of their housing journey

Length of Tenure

Participants' housing tenure varied from 6 months to 14 years, with one participant having the same housing provider, but different accommodation, for 17 years. One participant had experienced many blocks of one-year leases and another several blocks of 4-5-year leases.

Reasons for leaving accommodation

Participants' reasons for leaving accommodation were many and varied and included the following:

- The private rental was no longer available
- Rent became too expensive
- The accommodation was too small for the family/household
- Moved into home ownership
- Moved interstate or overseas
- Moved out of home ownership
- Became bankrupt
- Relationship breakdown
- Injury or illness
- Death of a partner or family member
- Became a refugee in country of origin

Activity 2: Aspects of the Housing Experience

Applying for Housing

Participants identified the following as important positive experiences/requirements when dealing with landlords as an applicant for housing:

- Open to 'age' groups (young), single parents, pet owners
- Displaying empathy, not patronising
- Agent was nice at inspection
- A support worker sent from heaven
- Open to new ideas
- Flexibility with rent and bond payment
- Help from friend to find and apply for rental

As an applicant, the attitude of the landlord was considered crucial and empathy, openness and flexibility were the most desirable qualities for a prospective landlord to possess (whether public, private or community based). Equally important was the need for good support to navigate the application process.

As a Tenant

Participants identified the following as important ingredients for a successful tenant/landlord experience:

- No Racism
- Be treated with respect
- Treat me like a human being (as a whole person)
- Having complaints taken seriously and knowing who to complain to
- Good communication between support worker and housing provider
- Basic understanding of health issues
- Safety, security, connections
- Tenancy treated separately from other personal issues
- Flexibility in housing affordability
- Good neighbour relationships are important
- Flexibility in regard to property management (when unwell understanding that I can't maintain the lawn)
- Swift response to maintenance issues
- Allow you to make minor 'personal' changes to home and garden
- Give plenty of notice for inspections
- Show appreciation for rent paid on time and looking after the property
- Maintenance done quickly
- No one tells me to move
- Landlords "open to pet owner"
- Nice people
- Freedom

One participant identified the importance of looking after the house and garden, reporting maintenance, and paying rent on time all of which contribute to a good relationship with the landlord.

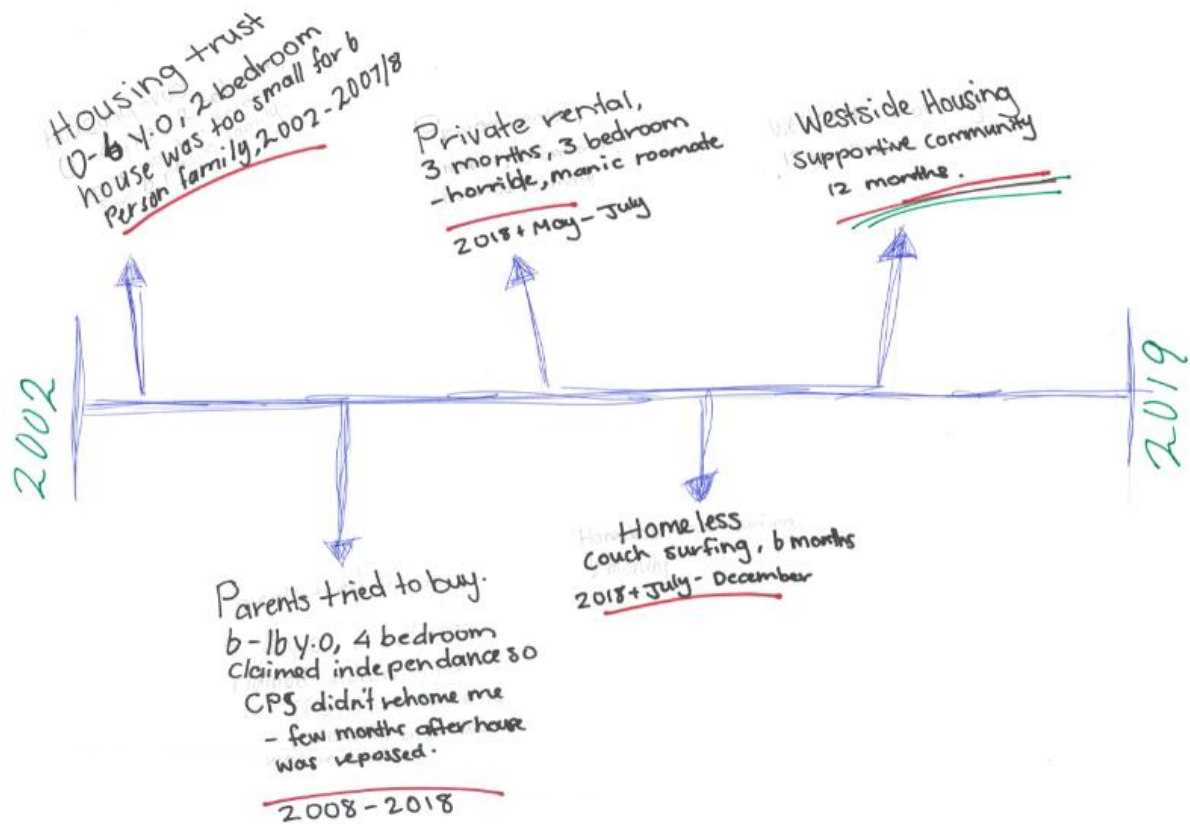


Figure 2: Participant's drawing of their housing journey

Post Tenant:

Participants identified the following as being important landlord qualities at the end of a tenancy:

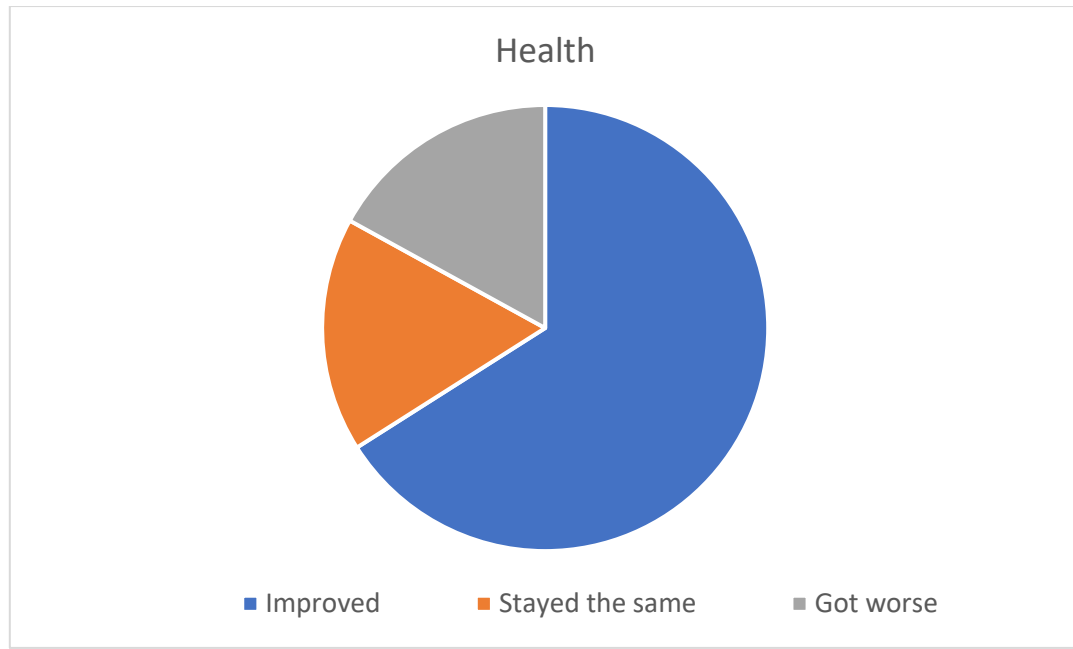
- Be reasonable at the final inspection
- Give a good reference when deserved
- Be open to renting again if a property becomes available and is needed

Activity 3: Measuring Outcomes

In the respondent's best housing experience:

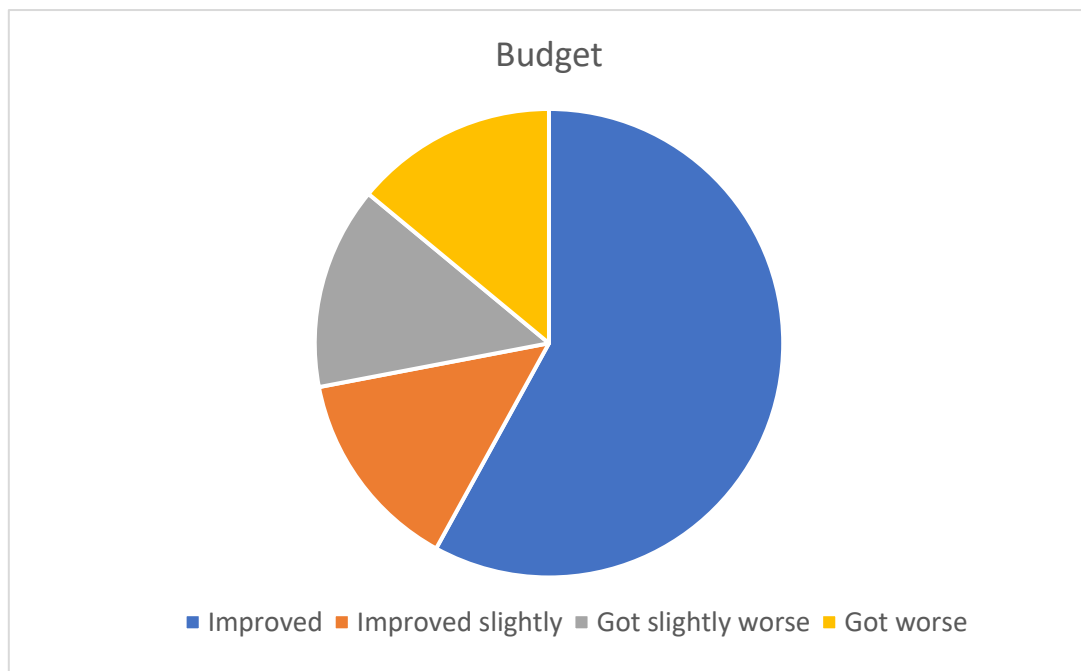
Question 1: Health

The majority of participants rated their health as improved during their best housing experience.



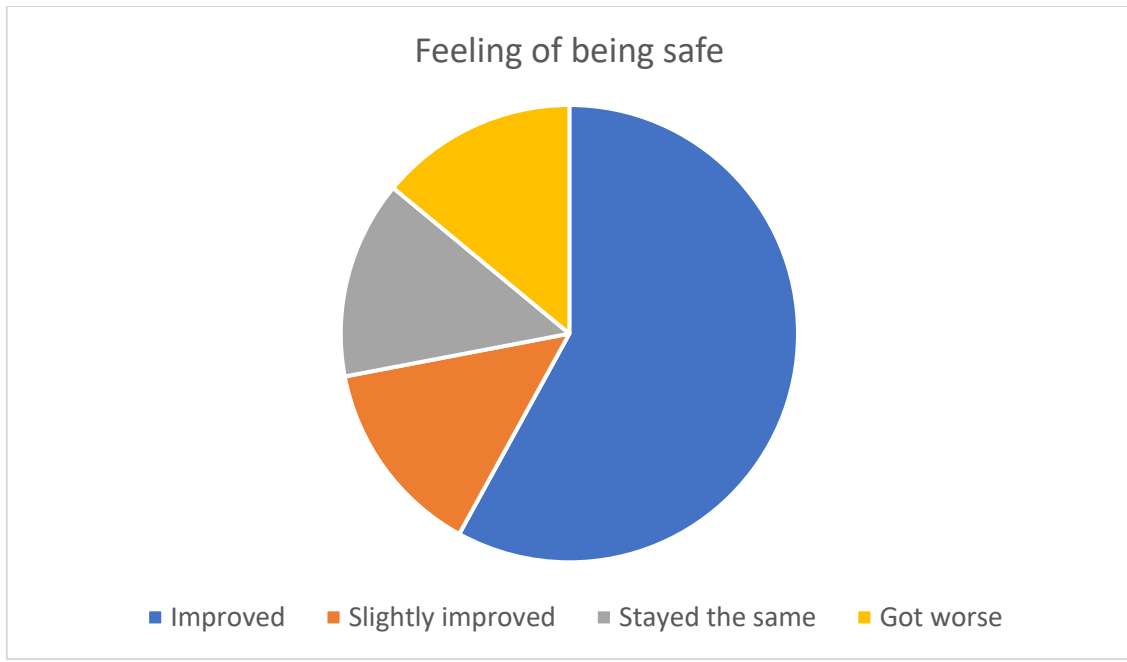
Question 2: Money

The majority of participants rated their ability to live within their fortnightly budget as improved in their best housing experience.



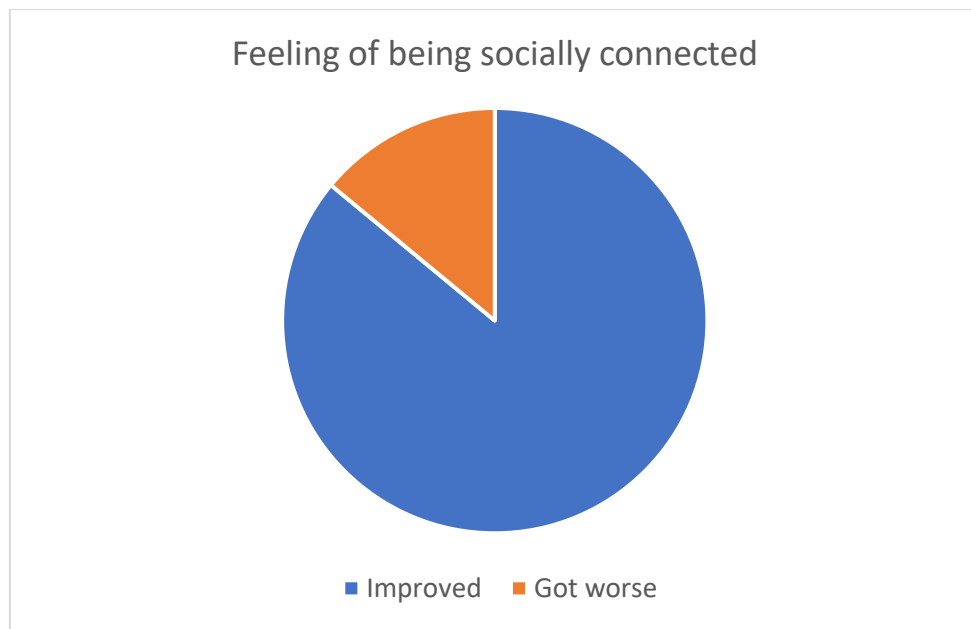
Question3: Safety

The majority of participants rated their safety as improved in their best housing experience.



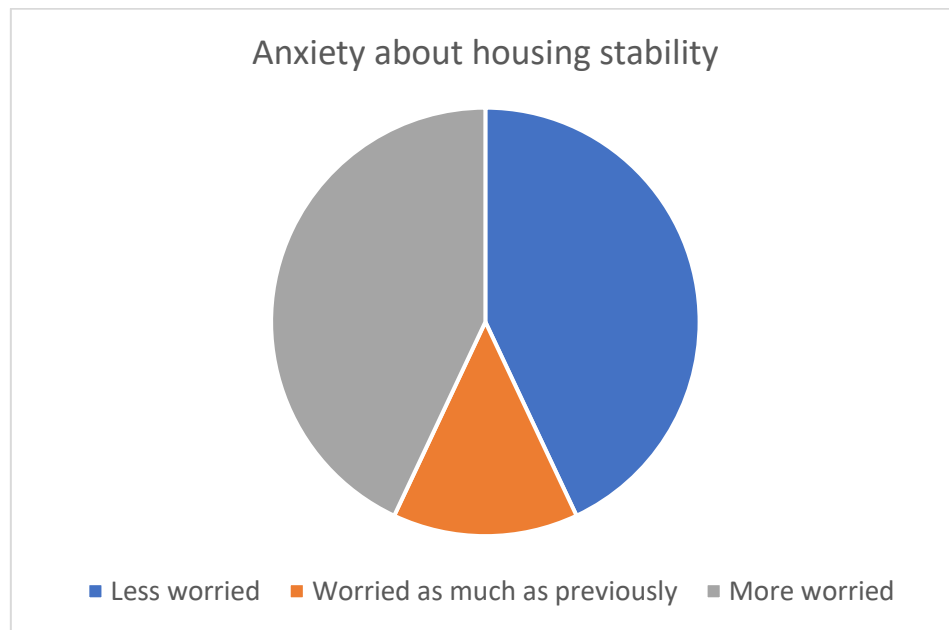
Question 4: Connection

The majority of participants rated themselves as being more socially connected in their best housing experience.



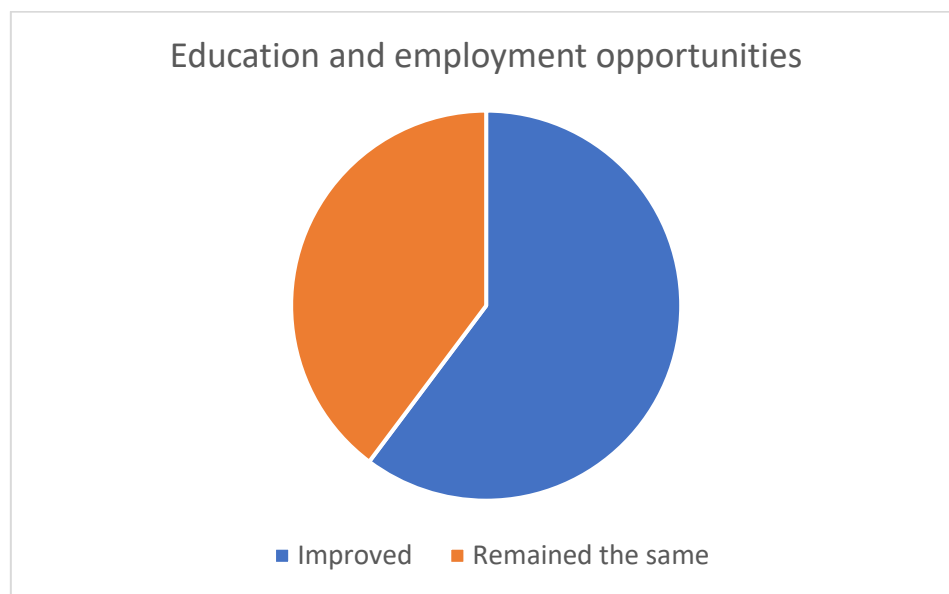
Question 5: Stability

The majority of participants experienced less anxiety about their housing stability in their best housing experience.



Question 6: Education/Employment

The majority of participants rated their education and employment opportunities as improved in their best housing experience,



One person commented that they had not been able to embark on employment or education “due to health difficulties”.

In discussion of the survey questions, it was acknowledged among the participants that it was ideal that there should be improvements in all of the areas listed in the outcomes questions. They were all

seen as important indicators of successful housing. Unfortunately, the past housing experiences of many participants did not reflect this improvement in outcomes.

Activity 4: Tenant/Landlord Engagement

In a discussion about tenants' experiences with landlords, participants named the following as being positive examples of good tenant engagement or processes that encouraged good tenant engagement:

- Landlords giving positive feedback to tenants
- Luncheons to bring tenants and landlord together
- Holding brainstorming workshops to involve isolated tenants
- Encouraging and making opportunities to generate community ideas
- Linking people with community activities
- A gardening shed where there are gardening tools available for loan by tenants

When asked how tenants would like to be involved with their landlord, the following suggestions were forthcoming:

- Community generated ideas should be followed through but there must be enough staff and resources to do this and there needs to be a full-time worker and volunteers.
- It should be a requirement for housing providers to appoint a tenant representative for housing and support services.
- There should be a tenant representative on the Board of Management of the housing provider and support/training for anyone who wishes to do this.
- Both an advisory group and tenant workshops should be held to generate ideas and these should be presented through the tenant representative to the Board.
- There may need to be several tenant groups covering different areas if the housing provider is large (north, south, western, central and eastern).
- Regular (anonymous) surveys should be provided and these should be both emailed and posted to tenants.
- It is important to have documentation of the tenant voice.
- A Christmas lunch/dinner is a way to celebrate both difference and the positive things that are happening.
- Housing providers should establish common sense protocols.
- Tenant group outcomes should be publicly reported.
- All communication between landlords and tenants should be done in multiple forms (including the use of social media).

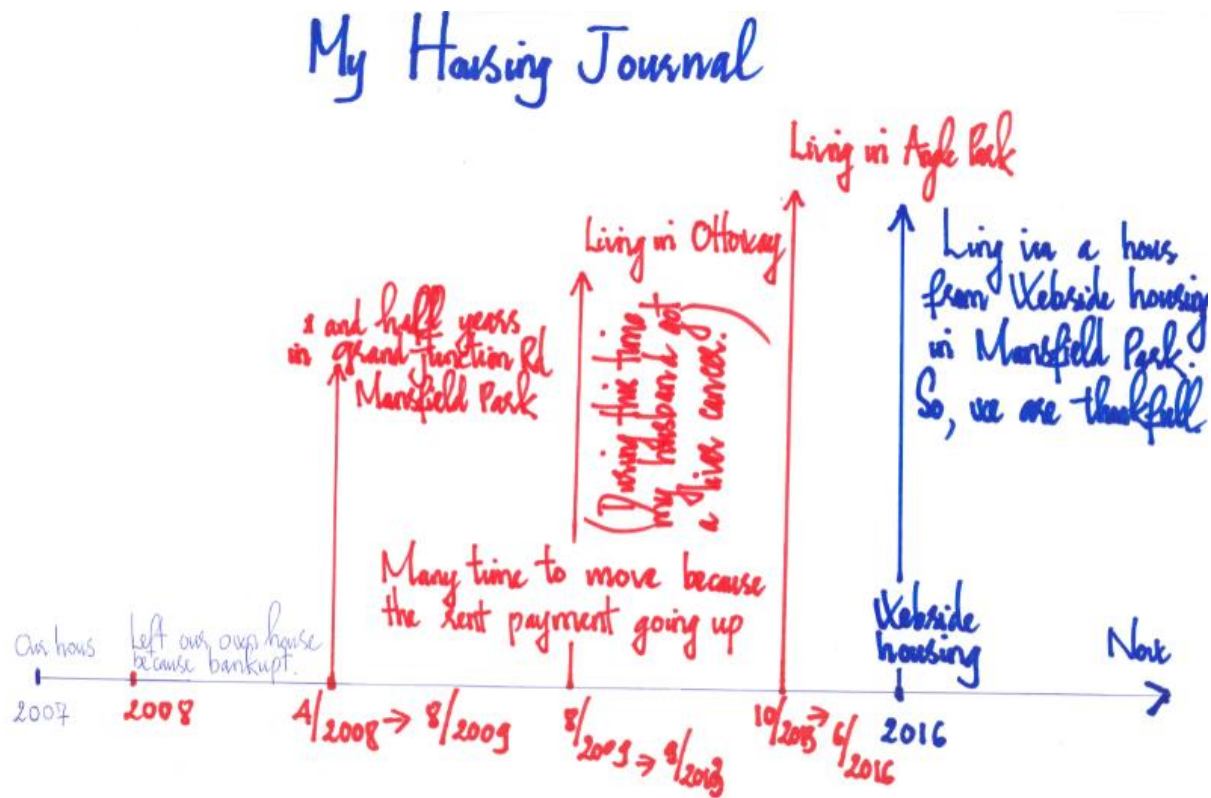


Figure 3: Participant's drawing of their housing journey

Conclusion

Tenants said they have experienced a disconnect between policy and practice. One person commented that it is "all good in theory, but nothing in practice". There was also concern about ideas/suggestions from tenants not getting past the planning stage. Tenants were realistic in their expectations and understood that housing providers can lack resources to assist with promoting good tenant outcomes and engagement but equally they saw this as essential if housing providers are genuine in their care for tenants' welfare. Beyond the typical tenant concerns about lack of housing, long wait times, culturally inappropriate housing and processes, lack of parking, difficulties with individual support workers, maintenance issues and problems with neighbours lay some basic but essential qualities that they sought in a housing provider. A list that one participant made that resonated with the thoughts and discussions of the whole group stated the need for flexibility, not being intrusive, empathy, openness to new ideas, flexibility about payment arrangements, reliability, not taking advantage of vulnerability and the big one – respect.

The tenant voice must be central to informing policy and practice in community and public housing. Tenants' positive housing experiences are an untapped resource in defining model tenant outcomes and engagement. Regardless of different providers, housing types and lengths of tenure that tenants experience they can clearly point to the essential elements that need to be measured to assess outcomes – namely, improvements in health, finances, feelings of safety, social connection and stability and increased education and employment opportunities. The definition of tenant engagement needs to be enlarged to include involvement by tenants at all levels of governance, strategy, planning, service delivery and engagement procedures of their landlord organisations.

Please contact us if you have feedback for us on this discussion paper via email to sheltersa@sheltersa.asn.au. Thank you.