



Shelter SA
Housing: a basic human right

“We are happy as Larrys”:
A discussion with
community housing
tenants

Shelter SA

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Executive Summary

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

On the 5th of February, 2013 Shelter SA conducted a discussion with tenants of a community housing organisation—Junction Housing—in order to hear directly from them about their housing experiences. Undertaking discussions with tenants living in all sorts of tenures is a component of Shelter SA's *Shouting about Housing!* network that aims to help South Australians raise their voices about their housing issues and experiences with the aim that they will be heard at the policy level (see: <http://www.sheltersa.asn.au/branches/consumer-network/>).

It was not the intention of the discussion to gather specific information about Junction Housing, but rather about the experience of living in community housing more generally. However comments made by discussion participants are about Junction Housing, likely because their experiences are linked to that organisation.

The key themes to emerge from the discussion included:

- Shared experiences of living in housing co-operatives;
- Maintenance of properties by Junction Housing and care taken of properties by tenants;
- Personal safety and security;
- Cost of living pressures and affordability; and
- Security of tenure and disrupted housing careers due to multiple house moves.

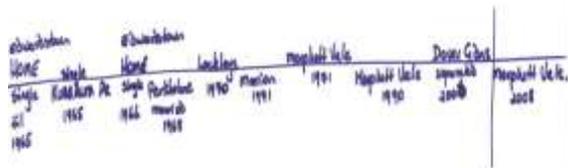
The fundamentally important finding from the discussion is that engaging tenants is valuable to their wellbeing through enabling the establishment of relationships between tenants and the organisation and providing security of tenure. Shelter SA promotes tenant engagement as a means of enabling people to speak and be heard and take positive and consequential action in their lives by being able to participate in organisational decision-making. Junction Housing has established tenant engagement strategies that have been well-received by a number of their tenants and should be commended for taking this important step.

Outline and Methods

Participants were recruited with the assistance of Junction Housing. Junction Housing tenancy officers recommended interested tenants and 47 letters were subsequently sent to these tenants that included a covering letter from Junction Housing, an invitation to the group discussion and some information about Shelter SA. Of the 47 invitations that were sent, 8 tenants attended the discussion that was held at Southern Junction Community Services in Reynella on the 5th of February, 2013 from 1pm-3pm.

After group norms of mutual respect (e.g. one person speaking at a time, giving other people space for expression, listening to others) were established the discussion began with participants introducing themselves, using the open question ‘what’s happening at your place?’ as a means to elaborate on where they live. This question allowed participants to choose what aspects of their housing they would discuss, rather than being led by Shelter SA interests.

Following this discussion, participants were asked to undertake a ‘timeline’ activity (see image to the left).



A ‘timeline’ is a participatory activity that requires people to draw a horizontal line across a page and then indicate points in their past that have a bearing on their present situations. In this case, the timeline was used to map the past housing careers of the discussion participants.

Following the completion of the timeline activity there was further discussion that was guided by the questions:

1. What changed once you moved into community housing? and;
2. How is it different from private rental?

All participants contributed to the discussion and adhered to the group norms.

Major Themes

There were 5 key themes that emerged throughout the discussion:

- Shared experiences of living in housing co-operatives;
- Maintenance of properties by Junction Housing and care taken of properties by tenants;
- Personal safety and security;
- Cost of living pressures and affordability; and
- Security of tenure and disrupted housing careers due to multiple house moves.

Housing Co-operatives

A number of the participants had past experiences of living in housing co-operatives that had been transferred to Junction Housing. Discussions on this topic revolved around management issues of housing co-operatives. Some viewed this type of accommodation as offering a sense of community and a high level of engagement with other tenants and the running of the co-operative. However, some noted that a high level of engagement could lead to squabbling amongst tenants over management and maintenance issues. Overall it was concluded that their current tenure in community housing was more enjoyable than past experiences in housing co-operatives.

Shared past experiences of living in housing co-operatives may explain the common desire amongst many participants for interaction and engagement with one another and Junction Housing. One participant talked about the importance of tenant engagement:

“I love Junction Housing and the reason that I wasn’t real happy in the beginning was because I’m nosy and I like to know what’s going on and *I had no say*, except paying my rent. Now they’ve got all these other things [tenant engagement activities] happening and I’m happy now, because I can get my nose in...Knowing what’s going on, meeting people who are in the same, or similar, situations. It’s great.”

It is important to note that tenant engagement promotes satisfaction, which is obvious in the above comment. Discussion participants also talked about their satisfaction with the organisation’s approach to dealing with maintenance (discussed further below). Their satisfaction in this area is arguably based not only on the ability of the organisation to carry out maintenance, but on the *relationships* that the tenants have with the organisation and its representatives, which is fostered through engagement.

The value of creating opportunities for tenants to *develop relationships with one another* was also evidenced by a new friendship that appeared to form between two of the participants who had previously not met, but left the discussion together, chatting, to catch their respective buses home. The opportunity to meet and talk with other tenants provided by the discussion enabled these two participants to recognise their common concerns and interests and use this as a basis for their budding friendship. Further engagement opportunities offered by Junction Housing will enable the participants, as well as the other discussion participants, to strengthen their bonds with one another and build the social capital that is integral to the formation of strong communities.

Maintenance

Maintenance was raised as an important issue by participants. Junction Housing's responses to maintenance issues were overwhelmingly discussed as quick and efficient. One participant said:

"Junction Housing have been the easiest and most cooperative organisation that I've had the pleasure of dealing with. If you ring them up about something, nothing seems to be too much trouble."

Another participant noted that any time that something needed to be done, Junction Housing acted on it promptly.

One participant had a less positive experience regarding maintenance. This participant said they had experienced difficulties. Another participant noted that when there had been some renovations done to their house there had been problems that were now resolved and overall their experience had been good.

A number of participants spoke about doing maintenance to their homes themselves, which included 'fixing-up' the interior of the properties and gardening. One participant noted that doing self-funded maintenance was neither possible nor desirable:

"I refuse to fix the backyard up...There are a lot of other things that could be fixed up at my own cost, I'm not willing to pay for it. Because (a) I can't take it with me, (b) I can't afford it, and, (c) I don't actually own the house, so when I move out, everything I've put into it gets left behind, that's a lot of money out-of-pocket for me."

Many participants felt a greater sense of ownership over their homes and would invest their time and money in fixing and beautifying their properties (for example, by way of gardening, painting etc.). There may be other reasons for tenant investment in home maintenance and beautification however, including generational beliefs and practices. Many of the older participants invested time and money in their properties, whereas a younger participant was reluctant because they could not take the value of alterations with them. Also, during discussions, it became clear that this younger participant did not want to purchase a house, and was of the opinion that money would be better spent elsewhere.

Personal Safety and Security

Participants talked about their personal safety and being concerned about the security of their properties. One participant spoke about drug deals that occurred in her neighbourhood and a 'drug pipe'¹ in her backyard. Another participant spoke about people jumping over their fence and pounding on their door, looking for past inhabitants. Another participant said that they get startled awake when their screen door bangs open and closed in the wind and won't open their windows

¹ A 'drug pipe' was described as a small section of innocuous-looking plastic piping installed in the backyard in order to conceal drugs and protect them from the elements.

because they are not fitted with security screens. Other participants reported not sleeping well and feeling afraid at times of home invasions and threat of assault.

Discussion about personal safety and security was a surprising theme to emerge because it developed unexpectedly out of a discussion about security of tenure (discussed further below). Addressing tenants' concerns of personal safety and security and fears of home invasions and threat of assault may be an important area for community housing organisations to address, particularly with their older tenants who may feel vulnerable.

Cost of Living Pressures and Affordability

The high cost of living was raised by participants who spoke about being on income support payments and being financially limited because of that. Mention was also made of the recent Federal policy to move single parents with children over the age of 8 onto the Newstart allowance, which will significantly cut the income support that they have received in the past. One participant said that they cannot afford the costs associated with a car and instead use public transport. There was some limited discussion about the difficulty in accessing services, including education, for people who are limited to using public transport. One participant made a poignant statement about the pressures of increasing costs:

“My medication, they put an impost of \$3.26 on one medication and I said to the Doctor ‘well I won’t take it’ and he said ‘then your heart will stop’. So I have to take it and I’ve got no option but to pay this extra money...You can’t do anything for that small amount, which to me is \$36 a year minimum!”

Another participant spoke about choosing not to live with a partner because the rent would become too high. Others spoke about approaching their ‘ceiling rent’, but joked that they would never reach it because it would always be readjusted (i.e. it would be continually made higher). There were also discussions about the change in Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) and recent changes that mean that community housing now attracts 100% of CRA, rather than the previous 25%. One person stated that, despite all social housing tenants being on an equal footing as a result of the policy change that it “doesn’t make it right”. Considerable dissatisfaction was expressed by some participants with regard to the change in CRA. A participant stated that the increase (in their opinion) is:

“Basically a contribution on our behalf, paid out of our money, that is to be used to build new houses. But we don’t get to live in those new houses, other people on the lists do.”

Participants placed the blame for increases in housing-associated costs (both current and potential) on the State Government.

Conclusion

The key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- Shared experiences of living in housing co-operatives;
- Maintenance of properties by Junction Housing and care taken of properties by tenants;
- Personal safety and security;
- Cost of living pressures and affordability; and
- Security of tenure and disrupted housing careers due to multiple house moves.

The most important finding from the discussion is that engagement is valuable to the wellbeing of tenants because it enables the establishment of relationships between tenants and the organisation.

These themes and findings may be useful to both Junction Housing and other community housing organisations when thinking about the needs of their tenants and Shelter SA encourages community housing organisations to grapple with these important issues.

Community housing organisations are welcome to contact Shelter SA if they would like assistance in planning for tenant engagement.