

## More than a roof over someone's head - an interview with Rosie Gallen on tenant engagement

By Angie Cairncross, Community Housing Aotearoa

Rosie Gallen has spent the last nine years as the Community Action and Engagement Manager at Wellington City Housing. Her role was to design and implement an inclusive Community Action Programme focused on strengths-based community development alongside the upgrade of Wellington City Housing.

I interviewed her shortly after she left this role to take up her new position with the Salvation Army in Porirua as the Community Ministries Manager.

This year Rosie won the Australasian Housing Institute's New Zealand award for most inspiring team member. The Community Action Programme won the leading community engagement category in both New Zealand and Australasia-wide. Other awards have been won: the 2012 AHI Leading Housing Innovation Award and, in 2010, the nationwide Australasian Housing Institute (AHI) - Excellence Award for Engagement.



Changing the hearts and minds of her asset-focused colleagues she considers one of her major achievements. They came to see that active participation by tenants in the design process meant a better result for everyone.

The project managers, architects and CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design) specialists, were all involved over nine years of the housing upgrade.

“The real test of that was when tenants could say ‘I talked to the architect and he changed his design so it worked better for me’. As a result – the designs are better,” says Rosie.

Tenant engagement is a philosophical commitment to include the people most affected by decisions in the decision-making process, in this case tenants about the housing they live in.

It makes for better and more sustainable solutions, says Rosie. It makes for a better investment; safer, sustainable buildings; more effective tenancy management, and more connected communities.

For example at Wellington City's Central Park apartments the tenants are the ones who live there 24/7 – we don't, she says. “They know where the unsafe areas are, who their neighbours are and exactly where the sun sets and rises.”

At Central Park there were 40 different entrances, tenants had no idea who was coming in or going out and felt very unsafe. They discussed their concerns with the architects (Simon Novak of Novak and Middleton) who incorporated safety into the design. Vertical pods were created so that tenants shared an entry way between six flats only, accessed by a card system. It resulted in less transience and tenants now stay longer because they feel safer.

The engagement process changed the way the community at Central Park interacted. The upgrade also included communal facilities which enabled communities to be created and sustained through community development activities and tenant leadership.



The opening of the up-graded Central Park apartments in 2012

“Tenants know their neighbours, they know who is away, who is unwell and they look out for each other.”

“They have a better relationship with their landlord, their tenancy is more sustainable, repairs are called in and they let their tenancy advisor know when there is anti-social behaviour or that they have arrears. Tenants are keen to stay and they have a stake in the community.”

[See the video here of ‘most significant change’](#) looking at Central Park.

According to Rosie we’re missing the legislative framework that would enshrine tenant engagement and participation in New Zealand so it tends to happen on an ad-hoc basis depending on time, resource, inclination, or priority.

“Tenant engagement is often seen as an extra to core service and resource intensive. However, there is growing evidence that tenant participation and engagement impacts positively on the bottom line. There

are some unsung heroes, according to Rosie – organisations like CORT Community Housing who have appointed a tenant to the board and are proactive in engaging with tenants.

“We could include it as a requirement in the certification of community housing providers through the Community Housing Regulatory Authority standards. But for the residential tenancies act - this would be much harder. That’s such a broad private-public sector piece of legislation.”

“It could be introduced to all public and social housing (CHRA regulations don’t currently cover Housing New Zealand or local authorities only community housing providers). The Residential Tenancies Act is a transactional relationship between the landlord and the individual whereas I believe state and social housing is so much more than that.”

Rosie thinks we may need to think about legislation in this area for all public and community housing.

“Fundamentally, it’s about why we do housing in the first place – if it’s social housing it’s about wellbeing, so we need to think about what the social outcomes are and know why we are involved in this area of public policy.”

Rosie would like to see New Zealand introduce a housing charter and something like the Scottish Housing Charter could be considered. It would be challenging for us here as it sets out quality standards and outcomes for all social housing providers. To make it sustainable we would need a cross-party agreement for that to be realised.

Overseas, tenant participation and engagement is a fundamental part in the delivery of public housing. In 1977, 42% of UK local authorities had some form of tenant participation

and has since been enshrined in the Housing Act 1980; Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; and the National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts 2005.

Australia has a number of standards and agreements that make tenant engagement a requirement, including the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement 1984 and the National Community Housing Standards 3rd edition 2010.

In the UK, HACT are working within the housing sector to explore how individual organisations express their social purpose, most recently through community investment and [this is a useful resource to look at](#). And Tenants Leading Change (TLC) have also looked at [the benefits of tenant engagement](#).

[UK Professor of Housing Policy, David Mullins](#), had the following to say about tenant engagement:

“Going back to basics there are four reasons why tenant engagement is important.

- First and foremost, social housing is there for the residents. If this basic fact were more widely recognized, it would be harder for governments to undermine the principles of social housing.
- Second, residents have the local intelligence that boards and executives often lack. They can spot problems and find solutions in a very effective way if they are empowered to do so.
- Third, being listened to and making a difference improves tenant satisfaction and builds a positive organisational culture, rather than ‘us and them’.
- Fourth is a more subtle reason, because **successful housing services are ‘co-produced’**. This means that housing services cannot simply be ‘delivered’ to residents but must be received and negotiated.
- Finally, while tenant engagement is important, it is also difficult to do well. It requires organisation and agreement between all the parties. Residents need to be motivated and see the benefits. Capacity building and training is essential if they are to become involved in strategic decisions, for example through board membership.”

Rosie Gallen has left a very strong imprint on New Zealand’s social housing and in particular, Wellington City Housing. In the Community Action Programme the New Zealand community housing sector have been provided with a model to aspire to, founded on community development principles and the values of democratic engagement.

A final word from Rosie: “Our commitment to the wellbeing of our tenants at Wellington City Housing has been at the forefront of our practice. We have been so fortunate that our Council have endorsed this approach for so long and I’m sure this will continue into the future.”