

# Putting the *community* in **COMMUNITY HOUSING**



> *David Zussman and Marc Slade look at how tenant participation in decisions about their housing produces a multitude of positive flow-on effects that cannot be ignored.*

When you're the one holding power and making decisions about a group of people, talking about those decisions requires much more care and thought when the people are actually sitting among you. That's what the Board of CORT (Community of Refuge Trust) found when they invited a tenant advisor onto their nine-person voluntary governance team about five years ago.

CORT has about 300 tenancies, which will reach 400 by the end of the year, and the role was an experiment that has worked well for everyone. In fact, it's worked so well that they've now got two. CEO Peter Jeffries says he has seen "some real benefits at the boardroom table" in having tenant advisors.

"It would be fair to say it changes the board process just slightly, because everybody is very aware that the tenant group that we represent is sitting there," says Peter. "The language we use, the discussions we all have are very cognisant of that. The tenant advisor doesn't have to say anything – the conversation just changes automatically, and people become much more humane."

CORT Tenant Advisor and tenant Julie Dudfield has a background in community development and housing, and had been living in a CORT house for four months when she came on the board and joined as first tenant advisor – a long-time resident.

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"Initially, it was daunting but they really listen and want to know how we have been doing and how it is impacting on tenants," says Julie. "They're not just in their ivory tower. They're there."

Only one of the tenant advisors has an actual vote on decisions, and he is also a full trustee. But Julie says they work more on consensus anyway: "I have never felt my views haven't been listened to. It's not just a token position."

CORT Operations Manager Stephen Hart says it's crucial to employ staff who understand they're working for a people-focused organisation that embeds tenant engagement from the very top. Even the place where the tenants interact with the staff is important. CORT has made its reception welcoming – with drinks, fruit, toys, plants, photos and biscuits.

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"We noticed it's always tense when you have to see your landlord and we are trying to downplay that possible tension," Peter Jeffries says.

Language is also important so they deliberately decided not to call the positions 'tenant representatives': "It's too hard for one person to represent our tenants, who are geographically spread and very varied."

CORT is still on a journey with its experience but they say they're making progress that is being reflected through the entire organisation. However, what about other community housing providers in New Zealand? All CHPs registered with the Community Housing Registration Authority as Class 1 Social Landlords are required to have a tenant participation policy but does being a 'community' housing provider automatically mean they are closer to, and more representative of, their communities?

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CHPs in New Zealand take many forms – large national or regional social services, health or faith-based organisations, trusts or non-profit companies managed by small boards of non-elected trustees or directors. In its 2018 strategic plan, Community Housing Aotearoa set a sector goal that half of all community housing providers should involve residents in their



CORT tenant advisor Julie Dudfield



CORT midwinter dinner with tenants

decision-making by 2025. If CHPs (and the sector) want to be recognised as having the advantages they claim, we need to rethink how we relate to our tenants, and how we connect with and represent the communities in which we are located.

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There are a number of levels of tenant participation, which can be thought of as a pyramid. The lowest two levels are landlords simply informing tenants about decisions they've made or explaining those decisions. The third level is the landlord seeking tenants' opinions when making decisions. Fourth is tenants having some opportunity to influence some decisions, and fifth means tenants have a genuine opportunity to do so. Finally, the top of the tenant-participation pyramid is tenants having a right to make independent decisions on a majority of housing issues.

Those upper levels don't often appear in New Zealand situations but are more common overseas. One Polish study found that tenant participation meant better adjustment of property managers' services to tenants' needs and preferences, and an increase in the efficiency and economics of management. But the authors warned this was only successful if they could participate in the decision-making process to “a relatively high degree”.

As far back as 1977, 47 percent of local authorities in the UK had some form of tenant participation. *The Guardian* describes it as “a critical function of housing management”, far from being considered a “warm and cuddly” approach.<sup>1</sup>

A UK paper in housing studies found, although tenant participation had become an “almost ubiquitous feature of the planning and provision of social housing”, there was “a perennial problem in actually getting people involved”, which included a tendency for older people to participate more than younger people.<sup>2</sup>

New Zealand is not even far enough advanced to have that as a problem. HLC (Homes, Land, Community) Community Development and Engagement Manager Rosie Gallen says, compared to places such as the UK, tenant representation here is sorely undeveloped: “It's seen as their democratic right to participate in their housing management in the UK, and they enshrined that very early.”

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It started in 1980 with the Housing Act, then stayed in agreements with housing providers through the National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts in 2005: “One of the people responsible for developing these Compacts, Richard Capie, who now works for BRANZ, commented to me once that there is a belief in the UK that tenant participation at all levels is an accepted practice and housing providers are expected to demonstrate it as part of their reporting.”

“I believe the New Zealand situation is a reflection of how we have viewed public housing over the years. Rentals are seen only as a stepping stone because of our history of an ethos of homeownership,” admits Rosie.

<sup>1</sup> Andalo, Debbie. 'How to get ahead in tenant participation.' *The Guardian*, January 25, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2012/jan/25/how-to-get-ahead-tenant-participation>

<sup>2</sup> Simmons, Richard, and Johnston Birchall. 'Tenant Participation and Social Housing in the UK: Applying a Theoretical Model.' *Housing Studies* 22, no. 4 (July 1, 2007): 573–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673030701408535>



In New Zealand, the relationship between tenants and landlords is an individual one under the Residential Tenancy Act, which means tenant representation tends to be ad hoc and heavily dependent on time, money and the housing provider's philosophical outlook. There's also a sense that it's not part of the 'core service'.

Those sound like a lot of challenges to overcome but CORT Operations Manager Stephen Hart says tenant engagement should be a core service because it supports core business. He says "there are great flow-on effects" in delivering their mission of good homes for all.

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"When neighbours know each other better and are more comfortable, they are more likely to look out for the individual and the property. They'll report a maintenance problem on their neighbour's place.

"When you meet people in a situation where they know all the staff, they feel much more comfortable when you have to approach them with tricky things – when the rent is behind or something is going on with the house," he continues. "Those difficult conversations are easier when people feel like you care and you've put in the work. We house a lot of individuals, and it's difficult for people to make a place in their community. We are the lubricant sometimes in helping people to do that."



Rosie Gallen says there are financial benefits in having tenants better engaged, including a reduction in rent arrears and anti-social behaviour, and cost-savings from a quicker response to repairs.

"That can save thousands of dollars down the track," she says. "When tenants feel comfortable with their landlord, they come forward all the time, reporting maintenance or their concerns about safety. It's a useful monitoring process that also protects the asset."

However, developing that relationship takes years, and housing providers need to commit to embedding it within their structure. It's not something where you try a few BBQs and then give up because six people came and you think they're not interested. Peter Jeffries says about a third of CORT's tenants are highly engaged in the relationship, a third come and go, and a third rarely want to hear from their landlord at all.

"You have to be intentional about engagement," Rosie says. "And it needs to be systemic – part of your core service, if you like – otherwise, you're reliant on tenants who sometimes have a lot on their plate. If you want systemic change, it comes down to the values of your organisation and incentives to encourage providers and landlords."

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That could mean enshrining the tenants' right to proper engagement in legislation, which is something our current Government should be considering as part of the creation of its new agency Kāinga Ora – Homes and Communities. But the community housing sector can also demonstrate leadership based on its core values, as evidenced by the ACHPN's recent *We Believe* campaign.

The homelessness and Housing First sector are already involving those with lived experience in the design and delivery of these programmes, and this provides a direction and example that the community housing sector can emulate. Given the overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika people in both social housing and on housing registers, we also need to support their high-level involvement and direction in the design and governance of housing projects, and approach all tenant and resident engagement using a treaty lens.

Working with tenants, community housing providers can begin these conversations in their boardrooms and start the movement for change, taking a rights-based approach. Community Housing Aotearoa will support this by increasing understanding about the benefits of this approach, and help educate all on how to do this well.