

How can demanding behaviour in public housing be managed effectively?

CHANGES IN THE PROFILE OF PUBLIC HOUSING TENANTS IN RECENT DECADES HAVE SEEN A GROWTH IN THE NUMBER OF TENANTS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS AND DEMANDING BEHAVIOURS. BY ADOPTING PRACTICES OF SYSTEMATIC AND CLOSE SUPPORT OF TENANTS STATE HOUSING AUTHORITIES CAN ASSIST TENANTS TO CHANGE THEIR BEHAVIOUR AND SUSTAIN THEIR TENANCIES.

KEY POINTS

- Demanding behaviour by tenants is often displayed through socially intrusive practices such as excessive noise and verbal abuse, which disturb the peace and disrupt the lives of other residents but fall short of requiring a statutory response.
- Managing tenants with demanding behaviours requires a recognition that their behaviours are often related to personal vulnerabilities and difficulties such as mental health problems and drug and alcohol abuse.
- Eviction of families and households in these situations can create profound hardship, including homelessness, and this response only shifts the costs of these problems around an already struggling system.
- Adopting a 'sustaining tenancies' approach requires housing providers to focus on strategies for organisational learning, adequate officer training, information management and sharing systems and preventive strategies. These strategies make the job of public housing providers both easier and more effective and can provide better outcomes for tenants with high needs.

*This bulletin is based on research by **Dr Daphne Habibis, Dr Rowland Atkinson, Associate Professor Terry Dunbar, Dan Goss, Dr Hazel Easthope and Dr Paul Maginn** of the AHURI Southern Research Centre. The research identified examples of existing good practice in this area using an international literature review and interviews with housing and other relevant agencies in New South Wales, Tasmania, the Northern Territory and South Australia.*

The logo for AHURI (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute) features the acronym 'AHURI' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Above the letters 'H' and 'U' is a red curved line that arches over the text.

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CONTEXT

The *Managing demanding behaviour* project was initiated in a context of growing pressure on public housing providers to accommodate and sustain an increasing number of tenants with behavioural problems and who require particular forms of support from a range of agencies. Existing research highlights a range of strategies for assisting those in acute housing need; it also sets out adequate support structures and protocols that identify riskier tenants and ensure that such support can effectively make such behaviour more manageable.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers undertook an international literature review and interviews with key players and institutions across Australia. The literature review involved a systematic and comprehensive search of international good practice guidance and research on how to effectively sustain the tenancies of those with demanding behavioural problems. The findings were used to develop a good practice guide for use by State Housing Authorities and others managing difficult tenancies and demanding behaviours.

KEY FINDINGS AND STRATEGIES

Benefits of a 'sustaining tenancies' approach

The term 'sustaining tenancies' refers to housing management policies and practices designed to assist social housing tenants to manage their tenancy successfully and to achieve improvements in their lives. A successful tenancy contributes to a stable neighbourhood and increases the social capital of the area. Assisting tenants to establish a stable home and to feel a sense of identity and pride in the area has broader benefits than merely providing a roof over their head.

Conversely, high levels of tenancy turnover means a transient population with people moving on before relationships can be formed and lives settled. It creates a neighbourhood with weak social ties and a sense of alienation from the environment. Many of those who leave their public housing in adverse circumstances subsequently experience homelessness and consequent serious social and health harms. This is costly both in terms of human capital and financial resources, as homeless people are high service users.

Good practice strategies

The research uncovered a range of existing good practice strategies both in Australia and overseas, and used these as the basis for a comprehensive 'good practice guide' aimed at housing officers and policy makers. The following is a summary of some of the key strategies presented in the guide.

Preventative strategies are the most effective way of sustaining tenancies threatened by demanding behaviour. These include the promotion of neighbourhood harmony, and undertaking pre-tenancy work. This may involve arranging support for housing applicants identified as likely to lack the skills to manage a public housing tenancy without assistance.

The **allocations process** is also a key mechanism for reducing demanding behaviour and should:

- Maximise tenant participation in the selection of their home.
- Permit sensitive allocation that recognises that applicants at the top of the waiting list are not always the most appropriate for that property.
- Through the interview process, assess the capacity of applicants to sustain a public housing tenancy and develop a strategy for providing support if needed.

Early identification and response can prevent problems from becoming entrenched and more resource intensive. Although most difficulties are identified as a result of neighbour complaints, there are other signs that a tenancy is failing and early warning systems should be established to identify these. These can include:

- Using regular maintenance checks as a way of keeping open communication and checking whether a tenancy is in jeopardy, due to maintenance issues or other reasons.
- Regular visits by Housing Officers as a way of establishing and building trust and better communication with tenants.
- Developing notification systems with support agencies assisting tenants, within relevant privacy legislation, to ensure that the housing provider is aware of any changes or issues likely to affect the tenancy (such as hospitalisation for a mental health issue or withdrawal of support from a tenant).

AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE: EARLY INTERVENTION

Tenancy Management Team, Lismore Office, NSW Dept of Housing

Context

In the mid-1990s the Department of Housing moved to a new team model in which client service officers were expected to be multi-skilled. But it was impossible for each client service officer to do every part of their role, so in many teams a specialist approach with functional roles was adopted.

Objectives

- Improving responses to applicants and access to housing assistance products and services
- Improving sustainability of public housing tenancies
- Sound management practice – in particular making workloads more manageable for staff

Strategy

Specialised service provision by a team comprising:

- A specialised senior client service officer whose role is to assist clients with high or complex needs to sustain their tenancies. This includes negotiating support packages with clients as well as developing general strategies in co-operation with other service providers.
- A nuisance and annoyance co-ordinator who is the key worker managing nuisance and annoyance issues for the client service team.
- A team leader responsible for strategic planning and managing day-to-day operations.
- Client service officers who provide frontline tenancy management.
- A technical officer responsible for asset management and other maintenance issues.

Benefits

- Allows early intervention by specialist housing officers to deal with both nuisance and annoyance and high-needs clients, without getting bogged down in dealing with core business.
- Allows tenancy managers to focus on their core business without dealing with high-needs clients and complex nuisance and annoyance issues.

Responding to complaints in a fair, effective and timely manner is critical for all parties concerned. Good practice involves developing and documenting processes that are clear, transparent and easily accessible. An ideal process involves seven steps:

1. Investigate the complaint.
2. Assess the situation.
3. Plan an appropriate intervention.
4. Implement the intervention in consultation with the tenant and any other support services required.
5. Notify both the complainant and the tenant involved of the steps being taken.
6. Review the outcome.
7. Document each step of the process and the outcomes

Key interventions for tenants with demanding behaviours are:

- Providing information to tenants who have been the target of neighbour complaints through mechanisms such as brochures and web-based information on sustaining tenancy skills, referrals to advocacy services, and referral to behaviour management and skills-based courses.
- Mediation services, as a cost-effective way of solving an issue prior to litigation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that mediation can be a successful way of sustaining tenancies if the type of disturbance is low-level and both parties agree to engage in the process.
- Providing support plans that engage external agencies and services, where medium- to high-level support is required to sustain the tenancy.

- Where appropriate, transfer the tenant or the complainant. Tenancy transfers should be used with caution as they can merely shift the 'problem' from one area to another, and should only be used when an environmental factor has been identified as a significant contributor to demanding behaviour.
- If eviction is inevitable, any external services or agencies involved with the tenant must be notified and steps taken to reduce the potential for homelessness following eviction.

Sustaining Indigenous tenancies

The need to sustain the tenancies of Indigenous people was found to be more urgent than for any other group of Australians because of their extreme vulnerability to homelessness. Of special concern are the high numbers of children affected by Indigenous homelessness.

Indigenous people have traditionally lived migratory lifestyles, and the more recent pattern of migration from rural and regional areas to the cities has presented major challenges for many households in terms of acceptance of their social and cultural behaviours. Some Indigenous households may:

- Have never paid rent
- Not know how to use domestic appliances
- Have never used urban cleaning or sanitation techniques
- Have little experience of shopping and managing a food budget
- Face language barriers if English is not their first language.

Without appropriate support there is a high likelihood that Indigenous households in these circumstances will not be able to sustain their tenancies.

Targeted initiatives for sustaining Indigenous tenancies include:

- Community development and education in the local community to promote a positive image of Indigenous culture
- Employment of Indigenous tenancy officers
- Recognising and responding to the needs of special groups such as those with specific health needs, including renal failure, or those relocating from rural and regional areas to the city
- Making services more accessible by providing information in community languages, using consumer advocates, co-locating housing and translation services
- Establishing strong partnerships with Indigenous community organisations
- Providing personal development programs such as life skills and parenting skills, with involvement and co-operation of Indigenous organisations to ensure the programs are culturally sensitive and appropriate.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40327, *Managing demanding behaviour*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report: good practice guide

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300



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