



SPARKING A CONVERSATION

An organiser's guide to Renters' Forums created by the Tenants' Union of NSW in partnership with the Sydney Alliance

May 2025



TENANTS' UNION
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Sydney ALLIANCE 

CONTENTS

WHAT WE WANTED	4
Renters across NSW should be heard, and feel heard.	4
Renters know the problems; they also know the solutions	4
Renters are diverse, and we need to hear from diverse voices	5
WHAT WE DID	6
Doing (and designing) consultation differently	7
Guiding principles for the Renters' forums	7
Introducing the Community Champions	7
Connecting with the diverse community of NSW renters	9
Focused roundtable with First Nations renters	10
Collaborative and consultative design	10
The role of decision makers on the night will be to listen.	11
Accessibility and set-up of the consultation room space	12
Planning: Choosing key themes and facilitation styles	13
Sparkling a conversation	17
What is renting like?	17
Adjusting and adapting to the needs of renters	18
What should renting be like?	20
Updating the prompt cards for better conversations	22
Moving Towards: Renters-led solutions.	27
WHAT WE'VE LEARNED	30
Issues Felt Widely and Deeply	32
Keep Listening to Renters	33
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	35
APPENDIX	38

FOREWORD

By Sydney Alliance Community Organisers Diana Olmos and Jess Harrison

The Sydney Alliance is a non-partisan, broad-based coalition of over 40 civil society organisations across Greater Sydney. Our members are trade unions, community organisations, schools, and faith groups who come together to work for the common good of our city. We worked together with the Tenants Union of NSW to co-design and implement the Renters Forums project.

By the time this report is read, a significant win will have occurred for renters across our State. In part thanks to Forums like this, where everyday people had the chance to share their experiences and exercise their ability to act on solutions to big challenges. Our communities, organised through civil society organisations, have won an end to no-grounds evictions and investment in energy upgrades for social housing. These policies will make tangible improvements to the lives of renters across NSW. It is a good start on our pathway to solutions that benefit housing, renters' rights, climate, health, and the cost of living. We will continue to work together to ensure that everyone can benefit from more solutions like this.

The success of these forums is a testament to what we can accomplish when we centre the different expertise and lived experience of community leaders. For us, the greatest pleasure was working with and learning from the Community Champions who made these forums a reality. These Community Champions are the leaders in our communities who step up every time their people are in crisis. They are the people to whom others turn for help and are, therefore, experts in what works for their communities. It is leaders like these who support renters, year after year, who often don't get to be part of consultations and have a say in policymaking. We are so grateful for the Champions' generosity, commitment, and vision.

To tackle the crucial issues of our lifetimes, such as climate change and the housing crisis, a government alone may not be able to solve them. It requires a united civil society to be part of these solutions and decisions to shape the future for our next generations.

The Renters Forums were a powerful display of what collaboration between civil society and government could look like. In the forums, we spoke about 'renting as it is' and 'renting as it should be', but the real lesson we learned was this is how **'policy making could be done'**. The forums provided imagination and demonstrated how we can work together across our State.

We look forward to continuing to work with Governments and different Departments on the next steps to ensure that underrepresented communities are no longer underrepresented.

Diana Olmos
Jess Harrison

WHAT WE WANTED

Renters across NSW should be heard, and *feel* heard.

The Renters' Forums gave renters the opportunity to directly share their own experiences with decision-makers and with each other.

The Renters' Forums, coordinated and developed in collaboration with the Sydney Alliance and delivered in partnership with the NSW Rental Commissioner Trina Jones (NSW Fair Trading), were a series of face-to-face workshops for renters in NSW. The six forum events, held between May and November 2024, were community-led consultation events focused on ensuring that renters from underrepresented communities – who are often marginalised by formal consultation and decision-making processes – were well represented in the room and able to share their experiences and ideas about solutions. These participants were able to share their concerns about renting directly with the NSW Rental Commissioner and other key decision-makers. Renters also heard directly from one another about their current challenges, what they hope for in the future, and the solutions they want Government and other decision-makers to consider to move us towards a better renting future.

The face-to-face, in-person consultation workshop model adopted for the project allowed us greater flexibility and responsiveness to participant needs. Participants were able to clarify in real time what was being asked, and others listening were able to sense-check their understanding of the experiences being shared and the solutions put forward.

The project was funded by NSW Fair Trading to inform the development of new laws to improve renting in NSW.



Renters know the problems; they also know the solutions

Consultation through surveys and submissions can engage policy and subject matter experts and those within the community who feel more confident about their knowledge of the rental system. This group typically includes individuals and organisations aware of existing consultation processes or adjacent to networks circulating invitations to such consultations. However, many underrepresented communities are not able to participate in this form of consultation; a different approach is required to engage meaningfully with them.

We chose a participatory and inclusive approach to facilitating renters' engagement in decision-making for the Renters' forums. The workshop model adopted for the forums encouraged renters to feel comfortable and confident to play a role in shaping the public policy that directly impacts their lives.

We built on work carried out in recent projects such as the collaboration between Energy Consumers Australia and the Sydney Community Forum, which recognised difficulties for diverse communities in feeling heard in relation to energy and housing policies.¹ The 'Deep Dive' process relied on leaders from the Sydney Alliance network Voices for Power speaking on behalf of groups, but also identified leaders with clear connections to communities and explored how to better gather insights from these communities directly.

Renters are diverse, and we need to hear from diverse voices

Renters from across diverse communities took part in the forums, including renters typically underrepresented in more formal Government consultation processes. The project approach was built in early local outreach with communities who typically face barriers to engaging in consultation processes, and worked with them to address these barriers. This included organising transport for the forum, providing a warm meal to participants, considering childcare needs, ensuring the accessibility of the venue, and facilitating and resourcing translators where necessary.

¹ Energy Consumers Australia and Sydney Community Forum (2024) *Insights Report: Understanding the diversity of consumers and their experiences of the energy system* <https://energyconsumersaustralia.com.au/publications/report-insights-understanding-diversity-consumers-experiences-energy-system-cald-edn> accessed 11th March 2025.

WHAT WE DID

The project team devised the formula based on our understanding of why traditional models of community consultations may be unsuitable or difficult for some renters to engage with. Together with community partners, we designed an event targeting frequently missed groups, including First Nations renters, renters in regional areas, young renters and renters from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

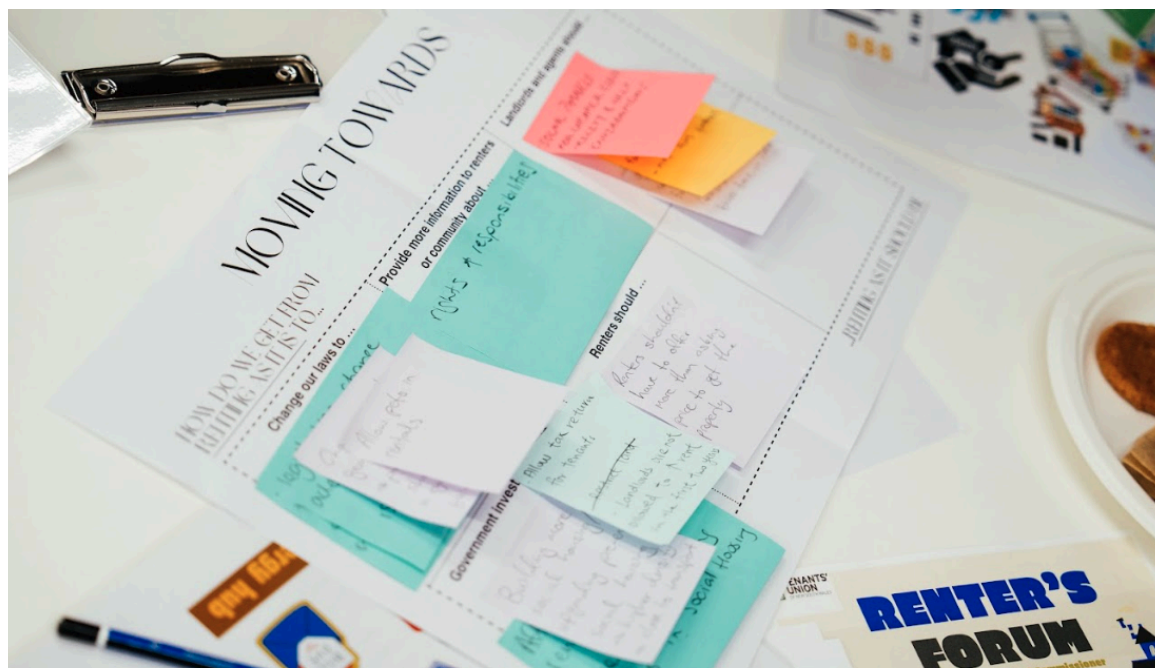
To ensure a meaningful representation of the voices of typically hard-to-reach renters, we relied on the community organising know-how of the Sydney Alliance, and liaised with community representatives in three critical areas of Greater Sydney: the Sydney CBD, the SouthWest, and the NorthWest. To successfully connect and engage with regional renters, the Tenants' Union relied on the support of community organisers in two areas: the Hunter and the Illawarra.

These locally based individuals, with the help from the local Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services, enabled the regional forums to take shape reflecting the local community's needs. In addition to the sessions open to all renters, we also organised a smaller roundtable dedicated to the issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander renters in Raymond Terrace with help from the Northern Area Aboriginal Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Service.



Early in developing the proposal for the event, inviting decision-makers and policymakers to the events was identified as the key element to guarantee the public's interest and a good turnout. Renters in NSW wanted to be heard and understood and have their issues spelled out and explained. Having politicians and bureaucrats actively listen to renters' stories was a

The forums moved beyond the typical format of listening circles, shifting out of the passive model of merely recording shared stories and instead allowing renters to actively share potential solutions with one another and pitch these to decision-makers in the room. The event's format allowed the participants to challenge existing laws and policies, and to propose solutions to rental insecurity, the poor quality and accessibility of rental homes, rent rises and other related cost-of-living pressures and climate resilience and the ways renters can be involved in moving to net zero.



Guiding principles for the Renters' forums

- We used different approaches to reach out and engage communities who often get missed. The project complemented the existing consultation processes led by the Department to improve NSW rental laws, and provided a nuanced focus on the intersection of renters' experience with the cost of energy and climate resilience.

Introducing the Community Champions

The Tenants' Union of NSW and Sydney Alliance identified local leaders within communities, who rent their homes or care strongly about renters in their community, to help us shape the development and design of each of the local forums. These critical connectors and organisers were referred to as *Community Champions*. We drew on their understanding of the local community and their community's experience of renting to fine-tune the session format and tailor the events to best suit local community needs.

The role of Community Champion (as defined by the Sydney Alliance and Tenants' Union of NSW for the Renters forum project) was intended for respected members of their communities who have relationships with renters and an interest in supporting renters' rights. They needn't all be renters themselves, but all had to demonstrate a deep connection to their communities of renters.

Community Champions were recruited within target local areas through established networks in the community sector and civil society alliances. Sydney Alliance member organisations were encouraged to participate in order "[t]o ensure that the needs of your members and interests are represented in the consultations". In the callout for nominations, Sydney Alliance described the ideal candidate as someone "well connected to renters of their community or your organisation."



Photo: Community Champions Ernest Henry (Vinnies NSW), Sheik Adid Al Rubai (Muhajirin Association for Community Development), Emilia Nicolas (Sisters of St Joseph), Amity Lynch (Better Renting), Sajeda Bahadurmia (Rohingya Women Association), Sandra Olarte (Shelter NSW) with the Sydney Alliance team.

The organisations to nominate a member for the role of Community Champion were:

- Muhajirin Association of Community Development (NorthWest Sydney)
- Vinnies NSW (NorthWest Sydney)

- Australian Rohingya Women's Organisation (SouthWest Sydney)
- Better Renting (Sydney Central)
- Sisters of St Joseph (SouthWest Sydney)
- Shelter NSW (Sydney Central)

Community Champions were supported in their work by local teams from their respective areas, also identified from among the members of Sydney Alliance partner-organisations. These teams were responsible for logistics, engagement with communities to support turnout efforts, inviting local decision makers and providing feedback during the forum design stages of the project. While Community Champions took on the bulk of the work preparing the content, local teams were the ones to fill the room, further fine-tune the content, and plan logistics. All of these roles were taken on by community leaders (a mixture of renters and renters' supporters). This approach to responsibility sharing allowed renters in underrepresented communities to build their leadership skills, ensuring they can continue to engage in civic processes that address renters' issues in the future.

Connecting with the diverse community of NSW renters

The Champions were also instrumental in bringing renters from their local areas into the room for the forums. The community-champion-driven model helped us demonstrate and test the ways in which consultations can be more accessible, relevant and culturally safe. Closely collaborating with community champions meant the project benefited from accessing prior knowledge of renters' needs and using trusted networks, language, and framing. This was particularly important when engaging with renters with a temporary visa status, who often face extra and unique barriers in engaging in public consultation due to fear of visa or work loss and concerns about possible deportation alongside their challenges as renters.

Additionally, renters with lived experience of seeking asylum or arriving in Australia as international students took on public leadership roles in the forums (like co-chairing). Highlighting their personal stories helped make members of some migrant communities feel safe to participate and fully engage in the event.



Photo: Assistant Organisers, Sydney Alliance team and local organisers at the South West Sydney Renters' Forum

Utilising the trusted community networks fostered by the Community Champions and well-established civil society organisations ensured a representative sample of diverse voices in the room. Community Champions helped us connect with their networks of renters, including people from non-English speaking backgrounds, refugees, First Nations people, international students and social housing renters.

In the case of the three regional forums, the TUNSW relied on the assistance of locally based organisers, one in the Hunter Region and one in the Illawarra. They identified and connected with networks supporting renters and community organisations with renter clients interested in participating in the forums. The events in Raymond Terrace, Newcastle (in October) and Dapto (in November) were facilitated with the help of local Tenant Advice and Advocacy Services: Hunter TAAS and Illawarra TAAS respectively.

Apart from participating in the forums, sharing their renting experience stories and proposing policy solutions, some of the more passionate registrants were invited to take on the roles of table leaders moderating the discussion or notetakers capturing the sentiments shared by the attendees of the forums.

The remaining people in the room on the night were the project team, co-chairs of the event, policymakers, invited local politicians, and the NSW Rental Commissioner Trina Jones, with members of her staff.

Focused roundtable with First Nations renters

Aboriginal and Torres Strait renters too often do not get to directly share their experiences and solutions. First Nations renters participated in all the forums held. In addition, a dedicated roundtable for First Nation renters was organised at Raymond Terrace in collaboration with Wahrenga Aboriginal Corporation, and with the assistance of the

Northern Aboriginal Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service. Eight Aboriginal women from Raymond Terrace took part in a facilitated roundtable discussion, with the NSW Rental Commissioner attending to hear and engage on the issues.

Collaborative and consultative design

Community Champions were involved in the design and development of the Renters' Forums and helped keep the focus of the forum events on ensuring renter participants felt powerful and connected.

In our forum planning meetings, we discussed wanting to bring the decision makers into the reality of renting in Sydney and leave them compelled to act with urgency after they hear and connect with renters' stories. During consultations, the Champions stressed the importance of the politicians and decision makers seeing renters as whole people with jobs, families and aspirations, not merely "people who rent".

Participants should have the opportunity to:

- Share their experiences
- Hear from other renters in the room
- Propose and discuss together systemic solutions to commonly reported problems.

We agreed it was important to set attendees' expectations about the workshop and prepare them for the sharing and listening activities they would be a part of. The team conducted short check-in calls with all registrants in the days leading up to the event. These phone conversations were an opportunity to connect, confirm attendees' details and clarify any instances of conflict of interest. Wanting to ensure the forums were a safe space for renters, we asked anyone working in housing development, real estate and real estate tech industries not to attend the event, even in a listening-only capacity.

The role of decision makers on the night will be to listen.

Community Champions stressed the importance of active listening by decision makers and other government policy makers in the room. Decision makers were briefed by organisers that their role on the night was not to speak or respond to the participants' stories. They were there to listen. Participants later reported this approach to community consultation as the biggest "selling point" of the event. Many of the renters attending were keen to have a policymaker seated at their table, listening to their experiences.

Serious consideration was given to the issue of trauma-informed practice in the workshops. The nature of some rental experiences and life events intersecting and impacting people's home lives can sometimes be traumatic and upsetting. That is the case not only for the person whose life experience it is but also for those listening to the disclosed story. For those reasons, during consultations on the forum's format, it was decided that each event would have an assigned social worker available on the day in case anyone needed to discuss and work through their feelings privately.

With our understanding of the limitations of the traditional survey-style consultations came ideas for how to best approach the language and cultural diversity of the invited renters. Among the people the teams engaged with there were some groups of renters who wanted to attend the forums but did not feel confident being able to fully express themselves in English. The organising team was aware of this challenge and collectively a decision was made that specific language groups would sit together and facilitate the forum's sessions in either their home language or a mix of their home language and English.

We designed the structure and format of the forum to reflect the language and cultural diversity of participants in the room. This included incorporating Acknowledgments of Country at the start of the forums delivered by various members of the community in their native tongues. The languages represented included Tongan, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Igbo, Vietnamese, Spanish, Rohingya, and Bengali.



Photo: Hava acknowledges the traditional Aboriginal custodians of the land in her native language, Pashto, during the NorthWest Renters' Forum taking place on Daruk country.

A big part of the consultation on the forum format focused on the visual prompts and representations of issues frequently faced by renters. The team made considerable efforts to use various communication strategies in small group discussions to ensure participants' understanding of the discussion topics. During consultations with Community Champions and representatives of the Sydney Alliance member organisations, a consensus was reached that to spark the most productive conversation, table leaders will be provided with an illustrative case study² and visual aids to complement the themes covered.

² Available in the Appendix

Accessibility and set-up of the consultation room space

Beyond being consulted on the types of conversation prompts used in each session, Community Champions assisted in designing the spatial layout of the rooms where the Renters forums were held. They shared their feedback on how both aspects should be designed to make participants most at ease during the workshop.

One of the ideas considered but ultimately rejected due to space and time constraints was foregoing the formal seating arrangement in favour of more free-flowing interactions throughout the workshop. This proposal was an alternative to the traditional assigned seating scenario. It aimed to give attendees sceptical of formal interview-style set-ups the freedom to come and go as they felt comfortable. The team conceded that allowing attendees unrestrained access to various discussions could empower some people to speak their minds more freely, but also noted that capturing such free-flowing interactions would be too challenging for the notetakers.



Photo: Table discussions in progress at South West Sydney Renters Forum in Revesby.

Planning: Choosing key themes and facilitation styles

Drawing on the existing data and anecdotal evidence of the challenges typically faced by renters in NSW, the team designed the workshops to cover three thematically varying rounds, each focusing on a different aspect of the renting experience. With the cost of housing and energy, cost of living pressures more generally and concern about climate change and extreme climate events all being a concern among renters, we needed to ensure sufficient time to discuss a broad range of issues. Therefore, the three-hour forum was divided into two parts to accommodate the relevant topics and give all participants a chance to be heard.

A workshop format was adopted for the Renters' Forums, with most of the workshop focused on facilitated discussion within small groups. Each table had up to 10 participants, a table leader to facilitate table discussion, and a notetaker to document key themes and solutions. Co-chairs (local renters identified early in the process) led the forum through the workshop agenda, and helped reflect back through the forum what was being discussed and heard at the tables.

At each table, key themes in the stories shared were recorded by a notetaker in the standardised data collection sheets created especially for the forums³. In each session, renters were encouraged to speak honestly about their experiences and to give space for other participants to express themselves freely while refraining from providing advice or attempting to solve the issues raised. The format of an open discussion allowed the table leaders to clarify any unfamiliar terms or expand on the definitions of concepts introduced in the sessions.

Part One, entitled *Renting as it is*, consisted of a small round of introductions at the start, followed by two 20-minute discussion sessions:

- Session 1 was dedicated to finding, keeping and leaving a rental home.
- Session 2 focused on the quality of rental homes and managing the experiences of extreme heat or cold.

Part Two, delivered after a break, titled *Renting as it should be*, covered a discussion in:

- Session 3, where renters were invited to talk about the aspects of the renting experience they most wish for (30 minutes), and
- A 15-minute segment called *Moving Towards* dedicated to proposing solutions to issues discussed throughout the forum.
- Final evaluation and recapping of the sentiments widely felt throughout the event.



Photo: Co-chairs Sandra and Matt leading the Sydney CBD forum on May 20th 2024.

To help facilitate and support participation, the forums addressed barriers in the following ways:

³ Samples of notetaker forms in Appendix

- **Culture and language barriers:** Renters from the same linguistic background were seated together with an assigned table leader with appropriate language skills. Table leaders were tasked with translating statements made by the event's co-chairs and those shown in slide shows or printed material. This arrangement was deployed during most forums, except the Sydney event, where a large group of Spanish speakers in attendance necessitated printing case studies and group leader instructions in Spanish.
- **Use of plain language:** Each session included conversation starters such as a written example case study. It was important to ensure the story was written in clear, plain English for ease of understanding and translation. Each case study described a familiar situation that renters could identify with to allow for a conversation to begin spontaneously. If the story didn't spark the discussion as expected, the table leaders could ask the group questions, encouraging them to share their thoughts or experiences relating to the case study.
- **Visual aids:** Each session's theme was represented by a series of images illustrating issues commonly faced by renters. These visual aids were intended to help spark conversation and better describe the range of topics up for debate.
- **Jar Voting:** The forum included activities that allowed participants to contribute by sharing the level of their rental stress via *Jar Voting*. In this activity, four jars were set up on a table, each labelled with a particular percentage and a question: What's the closest % of your income you spend on rent? (less than 20%, 20%-29%, 30%-50% more than 50%). Renters were instructed to place a token in a jar representing the percentage that applied to them.



Photo: Jar Voting in progress at the Hunter Renters Forum event

- **Written comments:** Each forum venue featured a printed outline of a house divided into even *Renting as it is* and *Renting as it should be* sections. The space was designed to allow participants who weren't keen on sharing their stories with the group the opportunity to add their voices to the discussion via a note left on either side of the House.

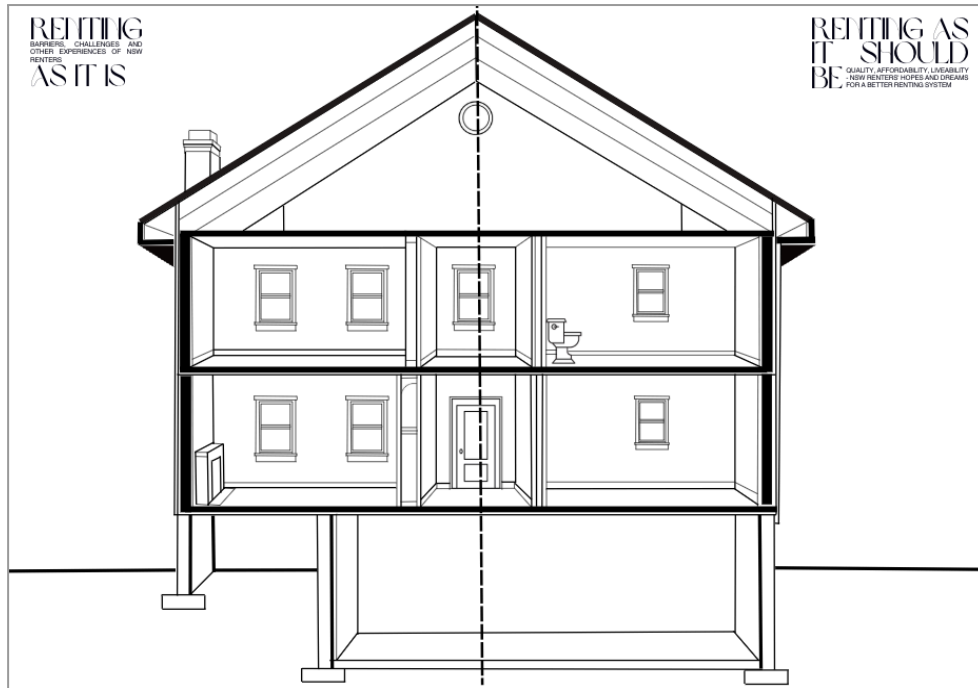
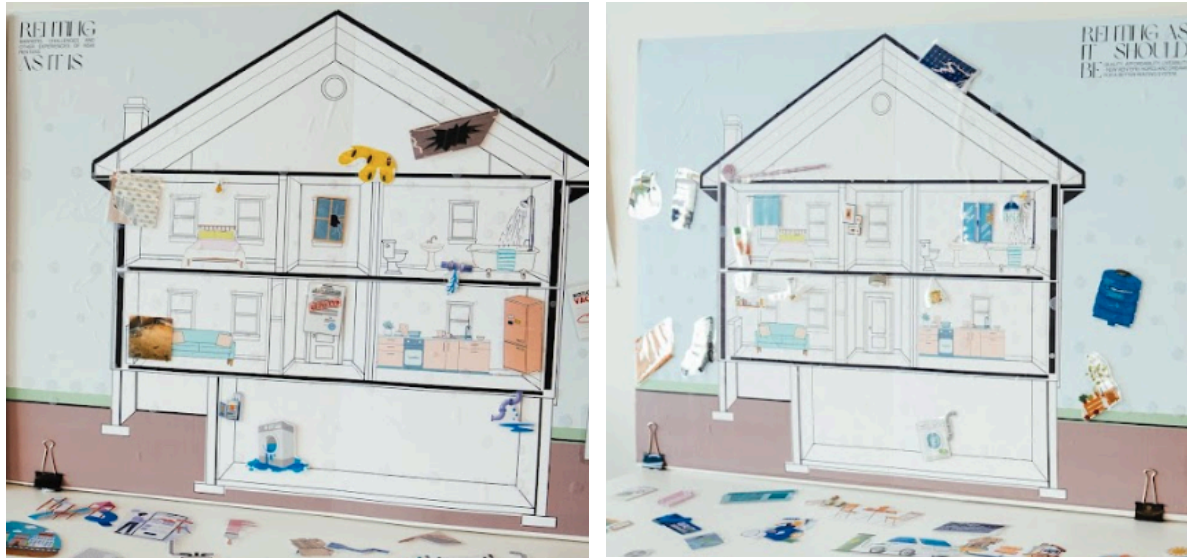


Image: The House split into *Renting as it is* and *as it should be* (design)

Each venue space set-up also included large-scale images of cross-sections of 2 homes. One was titled *Renting as it is* and offered a selection of features to pin inside the home to illustrate the common frustrations in renters' experiences. The items available to place inside the *Renting as it is* home included a broken window, an overflowing washing machine, a broken lightbulb, and energy-inefficient appliances.

The other home represented *Renting as it should be* and allowed participants to select features they believed would improve their renting life. These included solar panels, insulation, reverse-cycle air conditioning, a garden bed, and art on the walls.



Photos: *Renting as it is* (left) and *Renting as it should be* (right) homes: cross-sections with selections of features.

Additionally, throughout each venue, the project team placed posters urging attendees who had additional stories to share or that they had forgotten to mention to follow the QR code and complete a survey about their renting experience.



Image: QR code linking to the online submission form available to attendees (design)

Sparking a conversation

What is renting like?

The first part of the forum focused on *Renting as it is*. It offered the attendees a chance to describe and analyse some of the experiences renters in NSW know so well: lack of stability,

security and affordability, paired with energy inefficiency, poor treatment by the landlord or agent and challenges with growing energy bills. To allow enough time for nuanced discussion, this part of the forum was divided into two sessions, preceded by a round of icebreaker introductions. Session 1 focused on finding, keeping and leaving a rental home. Session 2 was dedicated to the issues of climate impacts, energy efficiency, climate action and managing extreme heat and cold.



Image: *Renting as it is*. A round of introductions during Session 1 of the Hunter forum, October 7, 2024.

At the start of Session 1, attendees met their fellow participants and shared one thing they appreciated about their neighbourhoods. After the introductions, the table leaders read out a short case study illustrating the issues most commonly faced by those looking for a rental and those worried about keeping their home at a time of low vacancy and ever-growing rents.

In Session 2, the participants focused on discussing the quality of available rental homes and how they managed during bouts of extreme weather. To spark the conversation, the table leaders shared a different case study⁴. This time, the issues described included a renter's deteriorating health due to persistent mould compounded by high energy bills racked up by the attempts to heat their home.

Adjusting and adapting to the needs of renters

Throughout designing the content of each session of *Renting as it is*, the Community Champions were consulted regarding the case studies illustrating renters' experiences. These evolved to best reflect the kinds of issues renters in each target area dealt with, as did

⁴ Case studies for Session 1 and Session 2 available in the Appendix

the visual aids produced to help contextualise the challenges renters face in the NSW rental market as it is. As we moved from planning a forum for renters in the Inner West to considering visual aids most suitable for participants from Western suburbs, the team adjusted the prompts to stimulate discussion.

The initial assortment of images for Session 1 of the Renting as it is part of the event included pictures of a lease agreement, a payslip, an eviction notice, an image of a crowded house inspection, a home with a “Sold” sticker on it, a moving truck, a graphic depicting a rent increase and a passport with visa stamps in it and an image of a house and key marked “Bond”.

Following feedback from Community Champions and the forum attendees, this selection of pictograms was expanded to include a picture of a person behind Venetian blinds with the word “Privacy” on it, an electricity bill and a calendar with an hourglass labelled “Public housing waitlist”.



Image: Visual aids used to spark conversation during Session 1 of the *Renting as it is* part of the Renters forums (left to right: progression from the early iteration to the final selection of prompts used)

Visual aids for Session 2 went through a similar process of change. The prompts created for the Sydney forum included multiple images related to the experiences of extreme heat and cold, as well as several photographs of home interiors. Many of them were ultimately removed from the packs provided to the table leaders. The overall number of visual aids provided in Session 2 was, therefore, reduced, making it easier to manage the materials available to spark conversation.



Image: Initial selection of the visual aids and the final selection available in Session 2 of the *Renting as it is*

Thanks to the Community Champions' existing relationship with the renters in their area, visual aids could be adjusted to better match those renters' experiences, making them more likely to spark conversation.

What should renting be like?



Photo: Renters discuss their renting experiences at the SouthWest Renters Forum in Revesby.

Commencing after a short break, Part Two of the Renters' forum focused on a vision of a better rental experience for people in NSW.

Session 3, titled *Renting as it should be*, allowed participants to move from the pain points of their current renting experience and into the space of an aspirational vision of what a renter's life might look like in an ideal world. In this session, attendees were asked to suspend their disbelief and focus on the things most important to them that are currently lacking from their renter experiences.

The attendees were tasked with selecting one of the experiences or features described on the prompt cards laid out in front of them on the table by the table leader. Each card showed illustrations capturing the essence of the experience and a short description on the other side, spelling out the key aspect of that experience.

This section of the forum was introduced from the stage by a member of the project team, who explained the concept behind Session 3 on a practical example, using a specific renting experience prompt card that resonated with them.



Photo: NSW Rental Commissioner and community organisers, renters and Community Champions at the Renters Forum in Sydney.

For example, the experience of **Genuine Affordability** was illustrated with images of bills, banknotes, medication and a trolley full of groceries on the back, described as: *'A rental property that suits my household, where I can afford to pay my rent and other life essentials but still have some money left over for going out, for a holiday and other important things.'*



Image: *Renting as it should be:* Genuinely Affordable Renting prompt card used during all six Renters forums.

Attendees were then instructed to tell their table why this aspect of renting life matters to them and the current barriers that stopped them from reaching it.

Other conversation prompt cards used in the *Renting as it should be* session included:

- A rental home with energy efficient appliances/cheaper ways to cool down, heat up and use appliances in your home
- A rental property that feels like home
- A renting experience that feels stable
- A range of rental homes to choose from
- A renting experience that is equal and dignified
- As a renter, I have a sense of community
- My rental home is close to the things that I need
- As a renter, I am included in solutions and responses to climate change
- A rental system that is fair
- An accessible, well designed home



Photo: Table leader and facilitator, Amity, reads out a case study at the Sydney CBD Renters' forum.

Updating the prompt cards for better conversations

The *Renting as it should be* prompt cards underwent a series of adjustments as the project team continued consulting with Community Champions and local organisers in each area. Firstly, the original number of cards was cut down from eleven to six as it became apparent that the multitude of choices made deciding on and discussing the issues too difficult and time-consuming.

Some of the themes were combined into one to reduce the number of cards while retaining the message they conveyed.

For example, the card dealing with connection to the community and the card dedicated to access to amenities were combined into one prompt stating: *"As a renter, I have a sense of community, and my rental home is close to the things that I need."*



Photo: The evolution of the renting experience prompt card "As a renter, I have a sense of community, and my rental home is close to the things that I need, from individual cards" (top and middle) to the combined final version (bottom)

Additionally, the feedback provided by renter-participants during the forums indicated that some of the illustrations featured on the prompt cards needed to be changed to better explain and match renters' experiences in the target areas. For that reason, several of the cards went through a number of iterations as the project team and Community Champions worked to refine and contextualise the essence of the issue on each card.



Photo: *Renting as it should be* Rental home that is easy to cool and heat & Energy Efficient appliances prompt cards as presented during the first Renters forum in Sydney CBD.

And so, the initially designed card describing a *Rental home that is easy to cool and heat* (left) and the card dedicated to Energy Efficiency (right) were combined and replaced by one card more explicitly linking the energy efficiency of appliances with better cooling and heating of rental homes (centre).

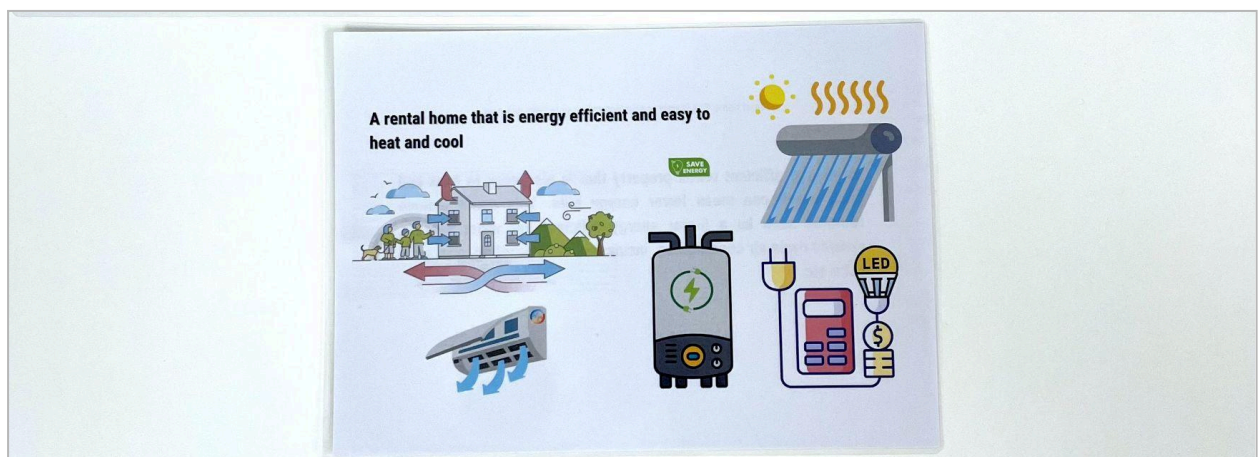


Photo: Energy Efficient ways to cool and heat prompt card from the SouthWest Renters forum.

This combined renting experiences prompt card evolved again after the SouthWest Renters forum into a card that very explicitly linked the energy efficiency of a rental home with cost savings and temperature control (bottom).



Image: *Renting as it should be* Energy Efficiency prompt card adjusted for clarity and presented at subsequent Renters forums in NorthWest, Hunter and Illawarra.

Other prompt cards that changed following feedback from forum participants and Community Champions included:

- A rental system that is fair
- As a renter, I am included in solutions and responses to climate change
- An accessible, well designed home



Photo: *Renting as it should be* prompt cards adjusted for clarity from the first iteration (top row) to the final version (bottom row)

In anticipation of some of the renting experiences being more popular than others, the attendees were asked to pick their second or third favourite card in the event their first choice was taken. The notetakers recorded the rate of interest in the most popular cards, allowing for a truthful representation of people's preferences while keeping the conversation going beyond one or two of the most selected themes.

Moving Towards: Renters-led solutions.

Once the group had discussed their aspirational vision of the renting experience in NSW, the renters were asked to perform one final task. The table leaders laid out an A3-sized page featuring a grid of six items in front of the group. Titled *Moving Towards: How do we get from Renting as it is to...Renting as it should be*, the grid was designed to prompt people to provide solutions to the various issues renters face and pathways to creating a better renting experience for all.

The grid was divided into:

1. Change our laws to...
2. Provide more information to renters or community about...
3. Landlords and agents should...
4. Government invests money in...
5. Renters should...
6. Other ideas...

Renters were asked to write their solutions on post-it notes and affix them to the appropriate part of the grid in front of them or take their solution to the enlarged copy of the grid displayed on one of the venue's walls.

MOVING TOWARDS		
HOW DO WE GET FROM RENTING AS IT IS TO...		
Change our laws to ...	Provide more information to renters or community about ...	Landlords and agents should ...
Government invests money in ...	Renters should ...	Other ideas ...
...RENTING AS IT SHOULD BE		

Image: The Moving Towards suggested solutions grid (design)

The collections of answers provided by each table group and those added to the shared grid were photographed in situ to ensure all ideas were captured and recorded.



Photo: The wall-hung Moving Towards solutions grid, complete with renter-attendees' Post-its at the Sydney CBD Renters forum, May 2024.



Image: Slide indicating the beginning of the voting session of the renters' forum event.

Finally, as the forum drew to a close, the co-chairs conducted a vote to determine the consensus on some of the key issues widely heard and deeply felt throughout the event. Participants were offered an Agree and a Disagree card and asked to vote (by raising a card of their choice) on all of the below listed three statements:

1. Renters want a renting future in which our homes are genuinely affordable;
2. We want a renting future in which we feel secure and stable in our rental homes, they "feel like home";
3. We want a renting future where renters are included in solutions and responses to climate change - where we can not only reduce our bills but also our footprint.



Photo: Renters at the SouthWest Renters forum endorse the statement: *We want a renting future in which our homes are genuinely affordable*

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

The Renters' Forums embraced a participatory and inclusive approach to facilitating renters' engagement and consultation. The process of creating the Forums' model required time and commitment from Community Champions, the waged staff of the community organisations involved in the project and the renters (and renter supporters) who came on board as volunteers. Throughout the designing of the workshops, we have encouraged renters to feel comfortable and confident in taking on leadership roles in shaping the content, supporting turnout efforts and facilitating activities during the events.

As a team, we sought out diverse voices and people with various life experiences to ensure a broad base of ideas to draw on in the planning of the events. One member of the Sydney CBD team reflected that participating in the project taught them about the *"(i)mportance of building teams. There was a big diversity in experiences and knowledge. Broad-based organising is about building teams by bringing together diverse organisations and communities, and leaders. We have embodied that in the whole process."*

When reflecting on the events, the Community Champions and facilitators agreed that the often multi-step consultative design process was worth the time invested in it, as it was the key to the forums' success.

Everyone had a part to play. People pitched in where they thought they could. We had a lot of great preparation.

Lots of preparation!! It paid off in the end. It went so smoothly.

One of the key project coordinators and facilitators of discussions during the forums, Jemima, commented that the pathways to creating the event's format were rewarding, even if there were many changes along the way:

Working with the ideas of the community champions, the content team, and the other members of our team, I really loved hearing the feedback and having to change our plans a lot. We had a really iterative process, and it was a really positive outcome.

For some of the community members participation and helping shape an event like this was a first opportunity to step into a leadership role. Sydney CBD forum co-chair Matt reflected:

I co-chaired an action for the first time; it was a big learning for me. Bringing myself into these situations relationally and working together across diversity in a meaningful way.

Providing access to decision makers was one of the key factors that made the forums a success. We have heard from the attendees that they felt listened to and appreciated the opportunity to literally speak their truth to power and feel heard.

During one of the post-event debriefs, a small table leader and Community Champion, Amity, remembered a moment of unity between renters of different backgrounds:

A decision-maker from the Department of Energy and Climate was listening in as someone on my table said: I'm not a lefty, but this shouldn't be so hard, we should just have housing! I liked that we showed how this was common ground for a lot of us.

Some attendees reported wishing they were seated with people from backgrounds different from theirs to help expand people's understanding of various circumstances and experiences.

I would recommend a mixed table of renters from various ages and demographics, so that there is more opportunity for young students to learn about the wider community rather than just their own environments. I think it would have been more eye opening if students got to listen more to non students experiences.

The forums brought together renters of diverse backgrounds with varied experiences of renting. Despite the many differences between the participants, the atmosphere during the discussion was one of understanding and empathy.

The way the forum was arranged (both group and whole room discussion) created multiple opportunities where I felt both comfortable and inspired to share my experience, ideas and concerns about renting. I felt very much heard by the people at my table as well as interested in what they had to say (...)



Photo: NSW Rental Commissioner in conversation with a renter during the Hunter Renters' Forum.

Issues Felt Widely and Deeply

Over the course of six events, renters told us they no longer want to be treated as 'second-class citizens' and wish that landlords and their agents showed them greater respect and care. We learnt that renters care about the future of the planet and want to have access to renewable energy sources and play an active role in reducing our collective carbon footprint. Many are passionate about access to public and affordable housing and see the government as the driving force for improving that access for all.

Each forum ended with a short session dedicated to looking back and revisiting the sentiments most widely and deeply felt in the room during the event.

This part of the workshop allowed for a brief report back to the attendees on the issues and concerns most frequently mentioned at the discussion tables that evening. It was possible thanks to the standardised note-taking forms, which included tick boxes for recording the types of matters raised by renters at each table. The tally of most popular concerns was shared with the room before the consensus vote on the issues most widely and deeply felt by the renters in attendance.

That moment of agreement on fundamental rights they all longed for was expressed for the benefit of the decision makers in the room, but also as another sign of recognition that the challenges faced by renters across the state are not issues of individuals but a sign of a systemic problem in need of a system-level solution.

Keep Listening to Renters

The experience of bringing renters and renter supporters together to design and build an event best suited to their needs reinforced for us that responsive design and adaptation lead to greater accessibility and, by extension, improved and more engaged participation. This is especially true for the most often missed communities of renters who require specialised accommodations like child minding and translation assistance to confidently and comfortably participate in a consultation event.

Renters who have long been advocating for change and those who are only recently discovering their role in bringing about better outcomes for their communities have been included in the making, hosting and evaluating of these unique events.

Our partner organisation Sydney Alliance, housing sector allies and Tenancy Advice and Advocacy Service partners provided the foundation for the development, design and delivery of the Renters' forums. Through the sharing of their community connections network and providing advice on content and logistical support, they have created the environment necessary for this highly consultative and iterative project to grow and blossom into a series of unique events tailored for specific audiences.

The invited decision makers had the opportunity to listen to voices they often don't get to hear from and benefit from the insights of renters who are frequently overlooked during traditional consultation processes. The willingness to accommodate a longer, more conversational style of event gave the policy makers and politicians a rare chance to listen to underrepresented perspectives and gain a true understanding of the issues stopping renters from living a stable and healthy life.

Importantly, the forums enabled the NSW Rental Commissioner to discover and take note of renting experiences shared by underrepresented groups like First Nations renters, renters in regional areas, young renters, and renters from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

As we move towards a fairer renting future for the renters in NSW, we do so knowing that there are various areas of renting life that could and should be improved. The forums proved that renters are experts in their affairs and are eager to offer solutions to improving their lives.

As a community sector focusing on housing rights, if we wish to ensure that underrepresented renters' voices and perspectives help inform our advocacy we should commit to engaging in consultations like the Renters' Forums more and more frequently. The key to the success of these highly collaborative workshops hinges on the organisers' willingness to continue the conversation and remain open to the need for change and further adaptation of the formula. The time and effort dedicated to creating an accessible and comfortable space for renters to open up, share and discuss their experiences is the key to unlocking and recording the knowledge, insights and community-led solutions for a better renting future for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Renters' forum project would not have been possible without generous support from our project partner organisation: the Sydney Alliance. The Alliance and its member organisation brought the know-how and the community organising spirit necessary to make the workshops truly inclusive, accessible and relevant to the renters from communities typically missed by mainstream consultation processes.

In particular, the Tenants' Union would like to thank Diana Olmos and Jessica Harrison, the two community organisers at Sydney Alliance responsible for the relationships with Community Champions in their role as the forum content shapers. Diana's and Jessica's planning support meant the forum format was highly consultative and responsive to the needs of the renters invited to participate in the events.

We are also hugely grateful for the efforts of the two regional project coordinators: Seema Sanghi and Julie Lee.

Seema was responsible for creating a space for the informal conversation between the Rental Commissioner and the renters living in Raymond Terrace, as well as coordinating the Newcastle-based Renters' forum.

Julie helped bring together renters from the Illawarra and the South Coast to ensure members of local hard-to-reach communities could be heard.

We wish to thank and acknowledge the Community Champions who helped shape and guide the design of the forums:

Ernest Henry - Vinnies NSW

Sheik Adid Al Rubai - Muhajirin Association for Community Development

Emilia Nicolas - Sisters of St Joseph

Amity Lynch - Better Renting

Sayed Bahadurmia - Rohingya Women Association

Sandra Olarte - Shelter NSW

Also acknowledging the following leaders at the forums:

Sydney CBD:

Co-chairs: Sandra Olarte (Shelter NSW), Matt Powell (United Workers Union)

Speakers: Jemima Mowbray, Jodi Denehy

Social Worker: Cat Coghlan

Table facilitators: Amity Lynch, Joel Digman, Murray Mayes (Better Renting), Jodi Denehy (Vinnies NSW), Kate Dacosta (Wesley Mission), Joan Carmona (International student), Michael Walker (Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney).

Note takers: Vittoria Albanese, Aleksandar Damjanovski, Jim Wackett, Isobel, John Engler, Laura Riera, Peter Tuner, and Amelia England

Sydney SouthWest:

Cochairs: Sheik Jamal Chami (ANIC), Cassandra Ngurah (Shelter NSW)

Speakers: Sajeda Bahadurmia, Nirmal Joy (Sydney Community Forum), Solange Frost (Vinnies NSW)

Logistics: Raul Sugunananthan (Sydney Alliance)

Social Worker: Abdalnasser Abumustafa

Table Facilitators: Liesa Davis (Wesley Mission), Asma Bahadurmia (Rohingya Women Association), Troy Byrnes and Thuy Linh Nguyen (Uniting), Miguel Ferrero and Nirmal Joy (Sydney Community Forum), Vittoria Albanese (Sisters of St Joseph), Joannie Lee (Democracy in Colour), Astrid Perry (SSI), Solange Frost (Vinnies NSW)

Note takers: Nnenna Emechafor, Rekas Fatima, Joelle Sassine, Brandon Lim, Lauren Grgurevic, Michael Thorn, Christie Duong, Phuong Doan, Lihn Nguyen.

Sydney NorthWest:

Co-chairs: Earnest Henry (Vinnies NSW), Denice Hernandez (Sydney Alliance)

Social Worker: Nusrat Islam

Speakers: Leo Patterson Ross (TUNSW), Vittoria Albanese (Sweltering Cities) Sheik Adid Al Rubai,

Table facilitators: Godwin Eddie Bognet (Baptist Care), Jijo (Sydney Community Forum), Chao Zhou (Parramatta Mission), Raj Maharjan, Hava Rezaie (Alzahra Support Association), Andy, Abby Huynh

Note takers: Ana Zamora, Malika, Ishika, Caerus Wong, Yin, Cathy

Raymond Terrace:

Discussion facilitators: Seema Sanghi, Jemima Mowbray,

Logistics: Di Ball (Aboriginal Corporation - Warhoonga), Donna Connors (Northern NSW Aboriginal TAAS)

Hunter region:

Co-Chairs: Nicole Grgas (Hunter TAAS), Mark Griffiths (Northern NSW Aboriginal TAAS)

Speakers: Catherine Cain (CDAH), Jemima Mowbray

Logistics: Seema Sanghi

Table leaders and note takers: Salma, Rehab Aljabri, Tyler Bugeja, Kate Ormonde (HTAAS), Lisa Ronneberg, Jack Turner (HCA), Barbe Winter, Charlie Wilde

Illawarra region:

Chair: Solange Frost (Vinnies NSW)

Speakers: Jemima Mowbray, Ela Akyol (Illawarra and South Coast TAAS);

Logistics: Julie Lee

Table leaders: Claire Brown (Illawarra and South Coast TAAS), Emma McMahon, Katelin Mcinerney, Jonathan Branett (Illawarra and South Coast TAAS), Douglas McCloskey (JaEC), Alessandro Moliterno

We give thanks to the key organisations and individuals that supported the design and development, and in many cases the delivery of the Renters forums in the Greater Sydney Region and in Raymond Terrace, in the Newcastle and the Illawarra regions.

They include (in alphabetical order):

Alzahra Support Association

Australian Rohingya Women's Development Organisation

Better Renting

Community Disability Alliance Hunter

Democracy in Colour

Hunter Community Alliance

Hunter Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Service

Illawarra Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Service

Justice of Peace Office Sydney - Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

Mosaic
Muhajirin Association for Community Development
Northern NSW Aboriginal Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Service
Port Stephens Family and Neighbourhood Service
Rohingyan Women's Organisation
Settlement Services International
Shelter NSW
Sisters of St. Joseph
Solar Citizens
Sydney Community Forum
Swealturning Cities
The National Tertiary Education Union
United Workers Union
Uniting Church Leichhardt
Uniting NSW/ACT
Vinnies NSW,
Wahroonga Aboriginal Corporation
Wesley Mission

APPENDIX

Case study 1: Accessing a rental and keeping a rental

Ajay lived in a house for more than 2 years. He then had to move to another place after not being able to afford the rent increase. Now, after finding a place, the lease is up, and he has received an eviction notice without any reason. The notice says he has to vacate within 30 days. He has not been able to get in touch or negotiate with the landlord.

Now, inspection after inspection and a number of applications rejected in his local area, he has had to make the decision to move to another suburb away from his close family and friends.

Image: Renting as it is Session 1 case study

Case study 2: Quality of rentals and Extreme Weather case study

Ajay can only afford a rental that is in a 30 year old apartment complex. The air conditioner just keeps making a big noise and hardly warms or cools the home. On top of that, there is a growing mould infestation in his bedroom. Ajay's wife fell sick one day and had to be rushed to the hospital. The doctor advised that she should keep herself warm and stay away from mould.

A couple of weeks after he got a real shock when he got his next electricity bill. It was 10 times more than what he used to pay. He doesn't know how he will pay both rent and the electricity bill next month. Ajay and his wife are scared to ask for repairs and face another rent increase.

Image: Renting as it is Session 2 case study

Session 1: Renting as it is

Note taker name : _____

Table number: _____

Case study 1: Getting and keeping a rented home

Instructions:

- If the renter is happy for us to document their name, add their name into the Renter column. Also please see confidentiality information below.¹
- Don't feel you need to collect all the details shared by participants.
- Catch key words, key ideas, and if possible catch their language (their words!) to describe some of the issues.
- If you aren't able to document a story that you feel is powerful, place a ★ in the Renter number column to indicate we should follow up with renter about whether they are happy to share and document their story in follow up.
- At the end of the tables there is a space to sum up the consolidated issues at your table.

¹ In the final report all responses will be kept anonymous and any identifying aspects changed. Names are only documented in case the Tenants' Union wants to get in touch about a renters' experience and to discuss any further opportunities for sharing their experience or feedback.

Renter	Experience of	Further details
1. Name:	<input type="checkbox"/> Eviction <input type="checkbox"/> Rental application issues <input type="checkbox"/> Inspection issues <input type="checkbox"/> Rental increase <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of moving <input type="checkbox"/> Experience with landlord/agent <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	
2. Name:	<input type="checkbox"/> Eviction <input type="checkbox"/> Rental application issues <input type="checkbox"/> Inspection issues <input type="checkbox"/> Rental increase <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of moving <input type="checkbox"/> Experience with landlord/agent <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	
3. Name:	<input type="checkbox"/> Eviction <input type="checkbox"/> Rental application issues <input type="checkbox"/> Inspection issues <input type="checkbox"/> Rental increase <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of moving <input type="checkbox"/> Experience with landlord/agent <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	

Images: Selection of pages from the Notetakers form used to capture renters' stories during renters forums (Session 1)

Renter	Home has	Impacts	Notes This may include strategies for dealing with climate change impacts (weather extremes, natural disasters).
8. Name:	<input type="checkbox"/> Mould <input type="checkbox"/> A leak <input type="checkbox"/> Too hot <input type="checkbox"/> Too cold <input type="checkbox"/> In need of repair <input type="checkbox"/> Is missing (eg curtains, aircon) <input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/> Family <input type="checkbox"/> Sleep <input type="checkbox"/> Physical Health <input type="checkbox"/> Well being impacts <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of energy bills <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of other essentials <input type="checkbox"/> Other	
Totals: Home has <input type="checkbox"/> Mould <input type="checkbox"/> A leak <input type="checkbox"/> Too hot <input type="checkbox"/> Too cold <input type="checkbox"/> In need of repair <input type="checkbox"/> Is missing (e.g. curtains, aircon) <input type="checkbox"/> Other		Impacts <input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/> Family <input type="checkbox"/> Sleep <input type="checkbox"/> Physical Health <input type="checkbox"/> Well being impacts <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of energy bills <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of other essentials <input type="checkbox"/> Other	

Renter	Feature	What is standing in the way	Any other comments
1. Name:	<input type="checkbox"/> Accessible, <u>well designed</u> home <input type="checkbox"/> Energy efficient, easy to heat and cool <input type="checkbox"/> Located close to things I need <input type="checkbox"/> A rental home that is genuinely affordable <input type="checkbox"/> A range of rental homes to choose from <input type="checkbox"/> Feels stable <input type="checkbox"/> Feels like home <input type="checkbox"/> A fair rental system		
2. Name:	<input type="checkbox"/> Accessible, <u>well designed</u> home <input type="checkbox"/> Energy efficient, easy to heat and cool <input type="checkbox"/> Located close to things I need <input type="checkbox"/> A rental home that is genuinely affordable <input type="checkbox"/> A range of rental homes to choose from <input type="checkbox"/> Feels stable <input type="checkbox"/> Feels like home <input type="checkbox"/> A fair rental system		

Images: Selection of pages from the Notetakers form used to capture renters' stories during renters forums (Session 2 and Session 3)