

# Advancing Tenant Voice

*Examining the Efficacy of Tenant Participation*

Looking at 40 years of tenant participation initiatives in NSW public housing.

# ABOUT THE TENANTS' UNION OF NSW

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The Tenants' Union of NSW is the peak body representing the interests of tenants in New South Wales. We are a Community Legal Centre specialising in residential tenancy law and policy, and the main resourcing body for the state-wide network of Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services (TAASs) in New South Wales.

The TAAS network assists more than 35,000 tenants, land lease community residents, and other renters each year. We have long-standing expertise in renting law, policy and practice. The Tenants' Union NSW is a member of the National Association of Renter Organisations (NARO), an unfunded federation of State and Territory-based Tenants' Unions and Tenant Advice Services across Australia. We are also a member of the International Union of Tenants.

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The Tenants' Union of NSW' office is located on the unceded land of the Gadigal of the Eora Nation.



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

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The Tenants' Union acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and that these lands were possessed under the laws and customs of those Nations. The lands were never ceded and always remain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Country. Our office is on the Country of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

We acknowledge that the land, sea, sky and waterways are of spiritual, social, cultural and economic importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and support their right to culture, language, land and various notions of self-determination.

We acknowledge that as a result of government policies and practices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have been dispossessed from Country without compensation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are also over-represented in NSW renter households. We acknowledge the present and historical disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the role of government policies, past and present and racism throughout Australia in creating this disadvantage and the impact of this disadvantage on tenancy and housing issues.

We acknowledge that a lack of support for non-tenancy issues such as intergenerational trauma, mental health issues, financial hardship, substance dependence, family violence, and disabilities can often lead to an escalation of tenancy issues and result in tenants receiving termination notices and/or suffering other negative outcomes such as accruing large rent arrears.

We recognise, respect and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their communities and will work in partnership with them and their advocates to deliver appropriate advice and advocacy for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tenants.

The Tenants' Union supports the reforms called for in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. We actively support Aboriginal people in their struggle for Treaty, Voice and Truth.



**LEO PATTERSON  
ROSS**  
CEO

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Advancing Tenant Voice: Examining the Efficacy of Tenant Participation looks at the 40 years of tenant participation initiatives in NSW public housing and explores them further through a case study of the Hamilton South estate in Newcastle.

The document charts how changes to government-funded programs translated into empowerment and support for public housing renters over time, and how shifting trends in community development theories and the consequences of changing political leadership shaped the material conditions of people's lives and advanced or limited their influence over their surroundings.

To date, the Tenant Participation program has reached its peak in providing pathways for public tenant associations to undertake small, independent initiatives, make requests of their housing provider, and provide feedback on proposed policy changes or site development plans. At its lowest point, Tenant Participation was reduced to public housing renters attending a monthly afternoon tea get-together and discussing their concerns with third-party facilitators.

Since the aspirational goal of 'maximum opportunity to participate in the management of their dwellings and estates' was articulated in the 1980s, the shift in policies of successive NSW governments saw support for and investment in public housing communities decline, the waitlist for public homes stretch out and the impacts of economic pressures and ill physical and mental health compound for people on government benefits. These combined factors created an environment of growing disenfranchisement for tenants and neglect of their neighbourhoods, rather than a space for "maximum opportunity for participation."

As the state government housing provider, Homes NSW, embarks on the path to department-operated Tenant Participation, the Tenants' Union of NSW proposes six key actions to ensure the newly-developed program addresses the shortcomings of the initiatives past, learns from gains made by community members who have come before and, most importantly, builds on and with the knowledge and expertise of the public housing tenants it is intending to assist.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Homes NSW rebuilds their knowledge and deepens its understanding of the communities they are to support for Tenant Participation in public housing.
- Overall significant improvement to the standard and quality of public housing dwellings.
- Return to more bespoke, responsive and appropriately resourced initiatives in Tenant Participation and Engagement in public housing.
- Commitment to delivering long-term planned, consistently run and critically reviewed programs as part of Tenant Participation and Engagement.
- Tenant Participation program utilises existing networks and builds operationally sustainable partnerships.
- Creation of government-funded, independent state-wide Tenant Participation Panels for the benefit of all social housing tenants and their housing providers across the sector.

# HISTORY SUMMARY

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## 1980s

Starting with a multilevel scheme of Tenant Associations and Regional and State Councils in the 1980s, the government built a model capable of addressing issues as they arise locally and of investigating whether they are replicated at scale and require systemic rather than individual action.

This opening in communication was the result of years of advocacy by tenants seeking better services and amenities for their neighbourhoods. These residents demonstrated, through tangible examples, that the delivery of public housing properties shouldn't be separated from the provision of services and civic spaces if the government wanted to create thriving communities.

## 1990s

Before mechanisms such as Neighbourhood Improvement Plans and Neighbourhood Advisory Boards jump-started collaboration of various government agencies, including Health and Police, and local residents, the early 1990s were a period of the government's attempt to separate housing provision from service provision, leading to the severing of the ties and connections between renters in social housing and the safety net of services they needed to lead good lives.

## 1996-2004

The turn of the century was arguably the time of the most nuanced and multilevel approach to engagement, service provision, and tenant participation in social housing. Years of analysis of

intersecting issues, such as the appropriateness of properties for allocation, residents' perceptions of safety, the availability of programs for renters with various needs, and responsive site maintenance, led to the introduction of innovative solutions, such as Neighbourhood Advisory Boards and localised "interagency" collaborations.

Across the state, through the Public Tenant Councils, Tenant and Community Initiatives Program, Regional Tenant Resource Services, on-site outreach initiatives, and various efforts to engage and include residents in the life of their neighbourhood, the Departments, local NGOs and resident associations gained a deep understanding of people's needs, concerns, and the barriers they face, and how to address them.

## 2005-2015

Following the creation of Housing NSW (2007), efforts to streamline and consolidate existing (sometimes bespoke) initiatives addressing the differing needs of residents across NSW resulted in a loss of flexibility and reduced responsiveness of the tenant engagement and participation solutions offered to renters in social housing.

The two main remaining mechanisms for tenant participation were the Tenant Participation Resource Service (2009), facilitated by an NGO to assist with tenant management and renters' rights issues and the place-based Housing Communities Assistance Program dedicated to small local programs and upskilling future community leaders.

# Chronology

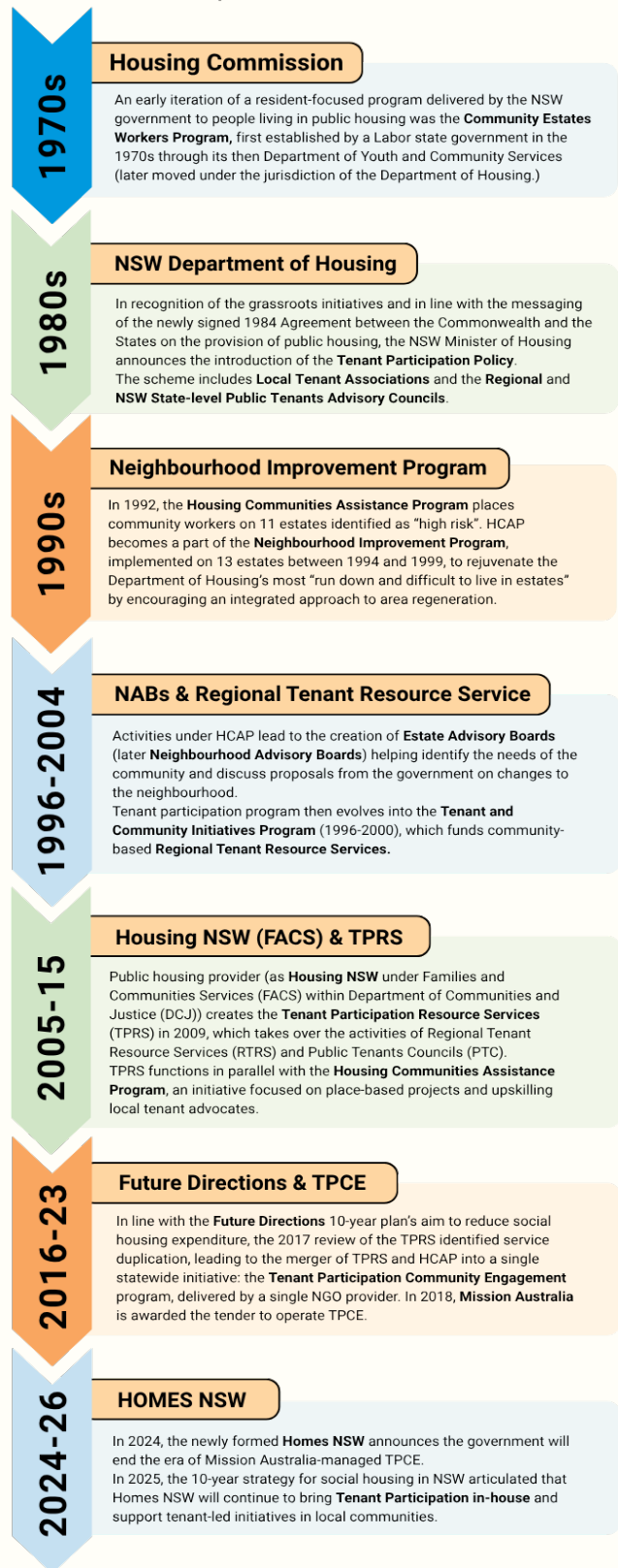
## Simplified Timeline

### 2016-2026

Eventually, TPRS and HCAP were further consolidated during a period of future directions in social housing, when the government sought to transform the provision of subsidised housing for the most vulnerable into a scheme that offered temporary assistance rather than a reliable safety net. Rolled into one, TPRS and HCAP became TPCE: Tenant Participation Community Engagement (2018). TPCE was underfunded and struggled to fulfil the role of its two predecessors. It was also often disconnected from the communities it was meant to serve, as the tender for its operation was awarded to a single NGO (Mission Australia) with an inconsistent footprint across the state.

Following the slow rollout of TPCE (interrupted by the outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent restrictions on in-person events), workers employed to carry out the program’s objectives struggled to reach and meaningfully engage residents, let alone encourage advocacy or renters’ rights campaigning.

Against this backdrop of distrust and dissatisfaction, the newly formed Homes NSW announced in 2024 that the TPCE program would cease and that tenant participation activities would continue as part of the public housing provider’s in-house services under the Programs and Partnerships Directorate. At the start of 2026, new in-house teams had been finalised, and the first activities under the Homes NSW Tenant Participation were announced.



# INTRODUCTION

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The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy—a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone. The applause is reduced to polite handclaps, however, when this principle is advocated by the have-not(s) [...].<sup>1</sup>

In 1969, Sherry Arnstein identified the unwillingness to cede power as the core reason for the failure of citizen participation in the United States of America.

A similar conclusion could be drawn from the exploration of the many iterations of Tenant Participation programs trialled, tested and terminated by the public housing provider in NSW. The lack of appetite for power-sharing, combined with years of neglect of public housing stock and underinvestment in social services, created a space for deepening disenfranchisement among social housing tenants, further eroding their capacity to exercise influence.

Since the 1980s, successive NSW governments have been led by the principle that ‘public housing authorities should ensure that tenants have maximum opportunity to participate in the management of their dwellings and estates and in the development of public housing policies.’<sup>2</sup> Forty years of various tenant participation programs later, however, tenants seem further away from managing their homes and developing policies than ever before.

In this exploration of tenant participation initiatives in public housing, we chart how changes to government-funded programs translated into empowerment and support for renters. We observe how shifting trends in community development theories and the consequences of changing political leadership shaped the material conditions of people’s lives and advanced or limited their influence over their surroundings.

Using a NSW-based case study of the Hamilton South public housing estate in Newcastle, we illustrate how various programs worked in practice, which strategies benefited tenants, which proved ineffective, and provide observations on the most likely reasons for these outcomes.

Finally, we aim to provide recommendations on how to address existing barriers and challenges, and to build on past experiences to rebuild trust and create a functional tenant participation model that can grow into a tenant-designed and led self-governance structure.

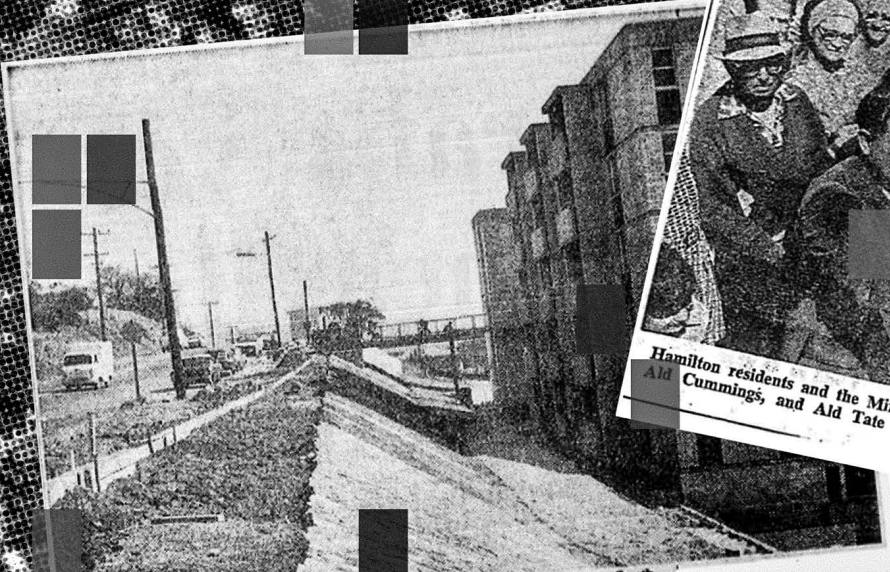
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1 Arnstein, S. (1969) A Ladder of Community Participation.

2 [https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num\\_act/haa1984207/sch1.html](https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num_act/haa1984207/sch1.html)

# Advancing Tenant Voice

## Examining the Efficacy of Tenant Participation



● The Housing Commission's blocks of six-storied flats at Hamilton South, built on land shown as park in the County Scheme, which have been



A COMMUNITY HALL & YOUTH ACTIVITY AREA  
Plans for 1962-63  
BUILDING PLANS CONSTRUCTION PROVIDED BY THE NEW HAMILTON HOUSING COMMISSION

Hamilton residents and the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Tourism, Mr Booth, the lord mayor, Ald Cummings, and Ald Tate look over yesterday the site of the proposed community hall at Hamilton.

# TENANT PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC HOUSING: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVES IN NSW

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Since its introduction in the early 1900s, the focus of the state-managed housing (initially as Housing Board and later as Housing Commission) had been ‘supplying affordable properties for rental or home purchase to low and middle income working families, towards providing accommodation on a priority needs basis to households with special needs or in challenging circumstances’.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, following a period of rapid growth in the post-IIWW area, this arm of the state welfare system “refocused its priorities” in a response to a change to the demographic of applicants from nuclear families of the 1950s and 60s with a demonstrated ability to pay rent unassisted, to more vulnerable community members facing economic disadvantage,<sup>4</sup> and reshaped public housing policy to better support the increasing ‘numbers of single people, including sole parents, the homeless, older people, people with disabilities (...)’<sup>5</sup> via the NSW Department of Housing.

## Initial approaches to working with tenants

In the last decades of the 20th century, the Department of Housing<sup>6</sup> focused predominantly on the delivery of dwellings, leaving the provision of services and amenities to the local governments. For tenants in newly created estates, especially those built away from existing municipal centres, this meant moving into areas without any community spaces or shared outdoor amenities. Isolated from their faith groups and facing a lack of community and childcare centres, public housing tenants were concerned about their children’s safety and frustrated by limited access to shared spaces.

In an effort to bring about what they felt was lacking in their lives, some residents formed community groups to work toward a shared goal of improving their environment.

An early iteration of a resident-focused program delivered by the state government to people living in public housing was the Community Estates Workers Program, first established by a Labor state government in the 1970s through its then Department of Youth and Community Services. This program placed community workers on several Housing Commission estates.

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3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, A profile of social housing in Australia, AIHW, Canberra, 2010, p1

4 <https://www.iut.nu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Thirty-Years-of-Public-Housing-Supply-and-Consumption.pdf>

5 Housing NSW, History of Public Housing in NSW, 2010.

6 The Department of Housing was created in the 1980s to carry on the work of its predecessor the Housing Commission. By 2005, it was reshaped and renamed as Housing NSW, which subsequently became a part of the Families and Community Services (FACS) within the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ Housing). As of 2024, provision of housing services (and management of the properties previously under the control of the Land and Housing Corporation) has become the responsibility of Homes NSW (still within the DCJ portfolio).

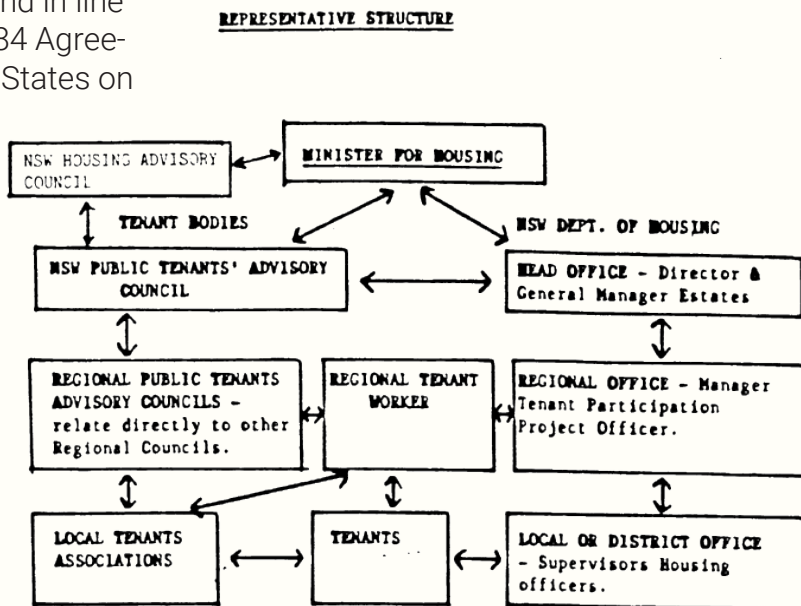
At the time, the welfare and housing portfolios were held by the same minister. The program was moved under the umbrella of the newly established Department of Housing in 1986. Around the same time, from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, a number of grassroots groups formed across NSW, motivated by the desire to create more accessible spaces for residents to gather and socialise. These community groups took on the challenge of liaising with state and local governments, as well as their housing provider, to negotiate a pathway towards achieving their goals. Apart from the obvious issue of resourcing these community projects, the Department and local government had to overcome existing policy hurdles and create policy frameworks to accommodate residents' requests.

In 1977, a group of residents from a newly established public housing area of Campbelltown, with assistance from the Youth and Community Services' Community Liaison Bureau, began agitating for the establishment of a long-hours daycare centre in the neighbourhood. Concerned tenants participated in the Housing Commission's Community Services Planning Committee meetings to advocate for the promised 9:00 AM-3:00 PM pre-School to be replaced by a long-hours care facility, enabling parents commuting to work to continue their employment after relocating to the newly established public housing estate in Campbelltown. Despite not having a formal association or government-approved avenue to voice their concerns, the Campbelltown tenants, through a variety of tactics, including a citizens' rally in a city park, achieved their goal, and a centre catering to the needs of local families opened instead of the originally planned kindergarten.<sup>7</sup>

## 1980s: The NSW Department of Housing and the first Tenant Participation Policy

In recognition of the grassroots initiatives and in line with the messaging of the newly signed 1984 Agreement between the Commonwealth and the States on the provision of public housing, stating that 'public housing authorities should ensure that tenants have maximum opportunity to participate in the management of their dwellings and estates and in the development of public housing policies'<sup>8</sup>, the then NSW Minister of Housing, Frank Walker, announced the introduction of **Tenant Participation Policy**.

The 1986 policy envisioned a three-tier structure to facilitate communication and the sharing of feedback between tenants and various officers of the Department, up to the Ministerial level.



Graph taken from the 1986 Housing Officer's Training Course

7 Stakeholder interview notes (March 2026)

8 [https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num\\_act/haa1984207/sch1.html](https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num_act/haa1984207/sch1.html)

Beyond the role of information and knowledge sharing, each tier had its own assigned role and focus area for the “Tenant Bodies” within the Tenant Participation model:

- Local Tenants Associations were responsible for planning and hosting local activities, sharing ideas and remedies for common maintenance problems with the Department and taking up maintenance contracts for works around the estates.
- Regional Public Tenants Advisory Councils focused on facilitating meetings with regional Department staff, communicating and sharing ideas between other Regional Councils, providing support and encouraging information flow between local tenants’ associations.
- NSW State-level Public Tenants Advisory Council gave advice on common issues occurring across regions and liaised with senior staff, providing feedback and ideas for the consideration of the Head of the department and the Minister.<sup>9</sup>

Following a 1988 state election win, a Coalition government disbanded the State Tenants Council but retained the regional tenant councils on a reduced basis. Overall, the approach underpinning the Liberal government’s view was that the Department of Housing should provide landlord services only to its tenants and not involve itself in community services. Premier Nick Greiner’s government followed the rule of strict separation of roles between agencies dedicated to being either a “provider of housing” or a “manager of tenancies and services”.

However, this change of course didn’t last long. In 1992, a Housing Communities Assistance Program placed community workers on 11 estates identified as “high risk,” presumably because of a previously documented benefit of proactively connecting tenants with services.

## **1990-2004: From Neighbourhood Improvement Program to Tenant and Community Initiatives Program**

The turn of the century was a period of growing interest in a range of estate renewal and community development practices. Researchers identified a need to invest in the “human side” of public housing living by highlighting the intersecting challenges residents face, which lead to their further disenfranchisement and social isolation.

By the mid-1990s, along with a shift to a Labor-led government, the practice of strict separation between housing and service provision was being phased out, and the HCAP became a key element in the Neighbourhood Improvement Programme (NIP).

NIP was implemented on 13 estates between 1994 and 1999 with the aim of rejuvenating the Department of Housing’s most ‘run-down and difficult to live in estates’ by encouraging an integrated approach to area regeneration.<sup>10</sup>

A Shelter NSW report outlined the various ways NSW-based programs sought to boost community prosperity, with initiatives that featured elements of community renewal, community development, and social capital or capacity building.

9 Transcript from scans: 1986 TP Housing Officer’s training Course

10 [https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-09/AHURI\\_Positioning\\_Paper\\_No26\\_Resident\\_participation\\_social\\_cohesion\\_and\\_sustainability\\_in\\_neighbourhood\\_renewal.pdf](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-09/AHURI_Positioning_Paper_No26_Resident_participation_social_cohesion_and_sustainability_in_neighbourhood_renewal.pdf)

Apart from the above-mentioned HCAP, the report also listed:

- Community Greening, which involved the establishment of gardens in a common area that are tended by residents together;
- Neighbour Technology Centres, which provided public tenants with access to computers, email and the internet; (...) in Macquarie Fields and Waterloo;<sup>11</sup>

The new approach lent itself to the broadening of the Neighbourhood Improvement Programme (under the Community Renewal) from a purely asset-based undertaking focusing on improving residents' outcomes through upgrades to their physical environment, to a more holistic model that included tenant training and employment initiatives, mechanisms for tenant participation, among others.<sup>12</sup>

A 2002 AHURI report, Resident Participation in urban and community renewal, identified two key reasons why tenant participation benefited the process of upgrading neighbourhood infrastructure. One being 'the managerial or pragmatic benefits of involving local people, such as the efficiency savings that might be derived from their inclusion.'

The other reason was described as the 'citizenship perspective', which 'considered the notion that residents have a right to influence the decisions that affect them'. Despite identified barriers to participation and a high degree of scepticism among tenants in areas marked for renewal, the report stressed that participation leads to improved social cohesion and the development of more sustainable communities.<sup>13</sup>



Image: Comparison of estate renewal approaches, adapted from D. Lilley<sup>14</sup>

11 Tenancies communities and the redevelopment of public housing estates Background Paper Craig Johnston (June 2003)

12 <https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2005.9982419> Lilley 2010

13 Resident participation in urban and community renewal AHURI July 2002

12 <https://www.theahi.com.au/four-decades-of-estate-renewal-in-nsw-from-people-to-profit-and-then>

Despite academic assertions that residents influencing the renewal process leads to better overall outcomes, some public housing renters found themselves locked out of decision-making about the future of their neighbourhoods as they were slated for renewal or redevelopment.

In 2002, for example, large swaths of poor-quality, high-turnover Minto public housing stock were thrown into a drastic redevelopment process, including demolition, with no proper consideration of the repercussions for tenants and no formal consultation that would allow residents to voice their opinions, concerns and preferences regarding the overhaul of their neighbourhood. This failure to follow “best practice” resulted in a fracturing of a community, disenfranchisement of the residents, and increased likelihood of loss of public housing stock due to the bottom-line-driven public-private nature of the redevelopment partnership the Department of Housing has entered for the project.<sup>15</sup>

Around the same time, the Tenant Participation Program evolved into the **Tenant and Community Initiatives Program** (1996-2000), which funded community-based **Regional Tenant Resource Services**, with some residual funding for the remaining tenant-driven Regional Tenant Councils dating back to the 1980s. In addition, a public housing customer service was established with an appointed tenant membership to advise the Department on customer-related issues specific to public tenants.<sup>16</sup>

In large public housing estates, via the **Community Housing Assistance Program**, which provided a worker enabling tenants’ engagement, the Department of Housing facilitated the creation of **Estate Advisory Boards** (later renamed **Neighbourhood Advisory Boards**) to help identify the needs of the community and discuss proposals from the government on changes to the neighbourhood. Each board had elected tenant representatives from local community groups, members from the Department, workers from service providers, as well as representatives from the council and the police in its ranks.

In a promotional video from the early 1990s showcasing the Waterloo Estate EAB, Jennifer Wescott, the Head of Department of Housing at the time, said:

*“The role of the EABs is to bring those agencies [that contribute to the functioning of the estate] together with the residents, to talk about their concerns and to come up with coordinated strategies to address them.”*

For years to come, Neighbourhood Advisory Boards continued to play a role in tenant participation in areas with a high concentration of social housing dwellings, notably in Redfern-Waterloo, where a local NAB met monthly and operated alongside the work of government departments and non-government stakeholders contracted under HCP and TPRS.

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15 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2005-02/apo-nid107476.pdf>

16 Housing NSW Community and Tenant Participation Unit, Consultation Paper Future Directions Tenant Participation Program, March 2008

## What do we do?

- **Work in partnership and collaboration**
- **Respond to community issues and concerns**
- **Monitor trends and social issues**
- **Integrate planning and coordination of government and community services**
- **Address service gaps and develop joint problem solving**
- **Lobby for resources**
- **Highlight policy or system issues**
- **Provide information to tenants**
- **Feed issues into other forums**
- **Make people accountable**

## The Sub-Groups:

- **Waterloo Housing Standards - lead by FACS Housing**
- **The Redfern & Waterloo Events Group - lead by Counterpoint Multicultural**
- **The Waterloo Wellbeing and Safety Action Group - lead by City of Sydney, Safe City**
- **The Waterloo Redevelopment Group - lead by Counterpoint Community Services**

Image: Slide from a 2018 presentation about the work of the Waterloo NAB.<sup>17</sup>

The 2003-04 Annual Report from the NSW Department of Housing listed eight Regional Tenant Resource Services funded in that fiscal year to provide advisory and support services to individual social housing tenants and groups of tenants across NSW.

The report also mentions the NSW Social Housing Tenant Conference (a continuation from the early iterations of the Tenant Participation policy dating back to 1986), describing it as:

*A major tenant participation initiative event that took place in Sydney on 23 – 24 September 2003. (...) [The conference] explored ways to encourage tenant participation in rural and regional communities, how to resource providers and staff to support tenant participation, and how to incorporate it into policy development and practice.*

That year, the conference shifted its participation model to selecting through an expression of interest process, rather than by nomination, opening up the event to broader participation - a development welcomed by tenants taking part.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Waterloo NAB Presentation by Counterpoint (Laura Kelly), 2018

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/61056/Housing%20AR%202003-04.pdf>

## 2005-2015: Consolidation of Tenant Participation programs and Building Harmonious Communities under Housing NSW

Two years later, and under the leadership of a new state Labor leader, Maurice Lemma, the Social Housing Tenant Conference attendees received a stark message from the Housing Minister, Cherie Burton:

*"If a tenant wants to cause trouble, damage the house that the taxpayers of NSW provide for them, damage someone else's house, or disrespect their community, then our message to them is that they are not welcome in public housing. (...) To us, public housing was a privilege, not a right. (...)*

*Ladies and gentlemen, this is why I am so keen to drive the reforms of public housing. I want to work with you to make sure that good tenants have the chance to live in a strong community. And that public housing is fair, provided to those who need it most. And that is what Reshaping Public Housing is all about, Housing those most in need, while they are in need."*<sup>19</sup>

In early 2008, the public housing provider, "reshaped" and rebranded as **Housing NSW** and brought under the umbrella of **Families and Communities Services (FACS)**, issued a Consultation Paper outlining its vision for the future of the Tenant Participation Program. Among the activities identified was a range of internal and externally funded tenant initiatives, including:

- Regional Tenant Resource Services (RTRS)
- Public Tenant Councils (PTC)
- Housing Communities Assistance Program (HCAP)
- Community Development Resourcing Grants (CDRG)

The Paper put forward the idea of creating Tenant Participation Resource Services (TPRS), which would take over the activities previously delivered by Regional Tenant Resource Services (RTRS) and Public Tenants Councils (PTC).<sup>20</sup>

The "future directions" for the Tenant Participation Program were set against the broader objective of Building Harmonious Communities 'through increasing participation and integration in community activities', rather than allowing for tenants' influencing the shaping of their neighbourhoods and, and the NSW Housing Corporate Plan, which aimed to improve the quality of customer services and 'integration of social housing into communities.'<sup>21</sup>

By the beginning of the 2010s, Housing NSW assisted predominantly people on very low incomes; receiving government pension as their main source of income; mostly single, and/or are older than the population in general.<sup>22,23</sup>

19 <https://files.tenants.org.au/tenant-news/Tenant-News-80-web.pdf>

20 Housing NSW Community and Tenant Participation Unit, Consultation Paper Future Directions Tenant Participation Program, March 2008

21 NSW State Plan: A New Direction for NSW, Nov 2006

22 [www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/researchpapers/Documents/social-housing/Social%20housing%20e-brief.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/researchpapers/Documents/social-housing/Social%20housing%20e-brief.pdf)

23 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010, n2.

The year 2009 marks the official beginning of **Tenant Participation Resource Services (TPRS)**, a program designed to assist public housing tenants with access to information, resources, and tenancy support, and to provide opportunities to feed into decisions made about their housing and communities. TPRS functioned in parallel with the **Housing Communities Assistance Program (HCAP)**, an initiative focused on delivering place-based projects and upskilling grassroots tenant advocates with the capacity to lead their communities and facilitate group discussions and decision-making.

Broadly speaking, TPRS served as a communication conduit between tenants and their housing provider, providing a source of information and an avenue for seeking tenancy assistance and advocacy, while the HCAP played a more in-situ project and skills development role, facilitating opportunities for neighbourhood and social cohesion-building projects.

In fiscal year 2006/07, Housing NSW provided \$697,000 in HCAP grants to fund 10 projects across NSW. The program facilitated tenant participation to *'decrease social isolation by enabling social housing tenants to make decisions about social activity and physical amenity in their neighbourhoods.'*<sup>24</sup>

Both programs relied on partnerships with local governments and non-government organisations funded to carry out activities and perform the role of delivering services to tenants.

TPRS's goal was to *'ensure customer-centric services and improved tenancy outcomes'*.

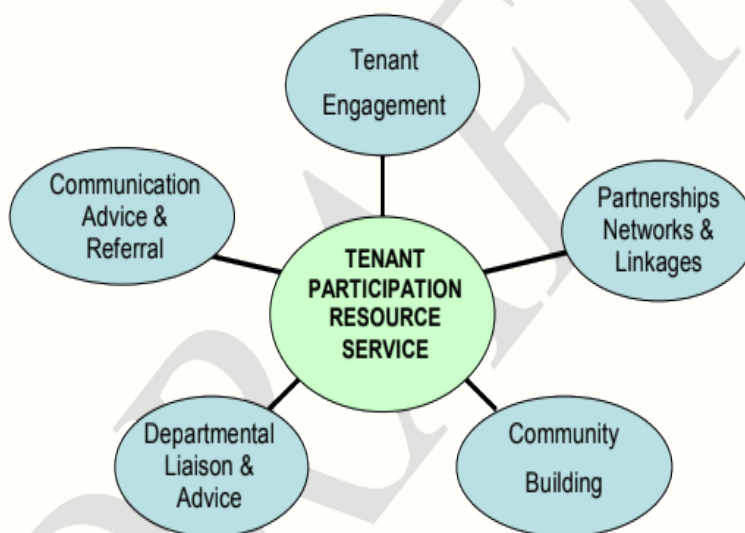


Image: The diagram of the five (5) Core TPRS activities as summarised in the Consultation Paper 2008

To achieve these objectives, the service was committed to playing a role in five key areas: to operate as a communications channel between the tenants (Tenant Engagement) and the Department of Housing (*Departmental Liaison and Advice*); provide information and referrals on the subject of tenancy issues (*Advice, Referral and Tenant Advocacy*), assist with neighbourhood-based project development (*Community Building*), and facilitate local network creation to support those development projects (*Partnerships, Linkages and Networks*).

24 [https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/30759/Housing%20Annual\\_Report%202006-07.pdf](https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/30759/Housing%20Annual_Report%202006-07.pdf)

Organisations applying to deliver services as part of the TPRS were required to provide a Service Plan demonstrating which one of the five core activities under the tenant participation umbrella they were intending to deliver and how they propose to action and measure their impact.<sup>25</sup>

After some years of the new Tenant Participation regime, in 2013, research by the City Futures Research Centre concluded that across NSW and Victoria, social housing Tenant Participation was increasingly being seen as ‘about enhancing participation in community activities’, rather than ‘inputting into landlord decision-making’. Research also suggested that a ‘consumerist ethic – treating tenants as if they are customers [was] gaining traction, especially in community housing’, with tenant empowerment ‘conceptualised in terms of choice rather than voice’.<sup>26</sup>

## **2016-2026: Communities Plus, Tenant Participation Community Engagement program and Homes NSW**

In 2017, nearly a decade after Tenant Participation Resource Service (TPRS) became the delivery model for Tenant Participation in social housing in NSW, Family and Community Services (FACS) commissioned a Review of the program. The review followed the announcement of Future Directions for Social Housing (2016-2026), the NSW government’s long-term strategy focusing on creating conditions in which living in a government-subsidised home was a temporary stop along the road of one’s life, rather than a destination permanently fulfilling people’s housing needs.

The changes foreshadowed by Cherie Burton in 2005 were becoming a reality, alas under Liberal leadership, embodying the principle of public housing as a ‘*hand-up for the future, not a hand-out for life*’.<sup>27</sup> This approach translated into a strong focus on driving tenants’ work-readiness and transitioning residents into the private rental market, rather than on creating sustainable community-building initiatives.

The government’s future vision for social housing also included Communities Plus, a program created as a pathway to subsidising public housing operating costs and boosting portfolio size, through state-owned site redevelopments ‘in partnership with the private and non-government sectors’.<sup>28</sup> From then on, estate renewal/redevelopment would be conducted to maximise housing density and financial returns, while tenant consultation and social service delivery would become means of assuaging tenants. This constituted an instrumentalist approach, consistent with market fundamentalism or neo-liberalism.<sup>29</sup>

In line with the overall pursuit of savings in expenditure on social housing, the 2017 Report from the Review<sup>30</sup> of the TPRS identified areas of service duplication and looked at ‘maximising synergies between tenant-initiated, NGO facilitated, and FACS managed tenant engagement, participation and resourcing mechanisms.’

25 Housing NSW Community and Tenant Participation Unit, Consultation Paper Future Directions Tenant Participation Program, March 2008

26 Can tenant participation thrive in an increasingly pressurised social housing system? H. Pawson, City Futures Research Centre, UNSW & T. Gilmour, Swinburne University of Technology

27 <https://files.tenants.org.au/tenant-news/Tenant-News-80-web.pdf>

28 Future directions for social housing in NSW (2016)

29 Lilley, D. (2024) People or Profit: The use of critical systems thinking to diagnose and transform housing policy for health, wellbeing, and equity. UNSW. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/103259>.

30 ARTD Consultants TPRS Review Final Report, Nov 2017

The Review pointed out significant changes to the environment in which TPRS was operating since its commencement, including the continued funding of existing TPRS service provider contracts through a series of extensions, despite the original intention that the program be competitively tendered every 3 years. The authors also pointed out significant organisational structural changes within public housing services, with Housing NSW transitioning to FACS and the four regions initially moving to 15 Districts and later to 7.

At the time of the Review, following the commencement of the Social Housing Management Transfer program, non-government community housing providers began managing approximately one-third of all social housing in NSW, taking over responsibility for tenancy services and tenant participation. Residents of the properties handed over to not-for-profit managing organisations were legally guaranteed a vehicle for input in decisions about their homes, but there was no coordination or consistency among the managing companies' policies on tenant participation.

In 2018, the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) announced that, in an effort to "maximise synergies", the Housing Communities Program, responsible for place-based community development projects, would be discontinued and merged with the Tenant Participation Resource Service to create a new iteration of tenant participation in public housing: the **Tenant Participation Community Engagement** program.

Following the decision to combine TPRS and HCP, the Department of Family and Community Services commissioned an Industry Sounding Workshop to identify the optimal pathway to retaining *'the local nature of TPRS and HCAP grants, which is widely recognised as a strength of both programs, while allowing FACS district staff to spend more time on service planning and support, rather than grant administration.'*<sup>31</sup>

The report from the sounding workshops, published by the ARTD consultancy group, revealed considerable uncertainty and concern among stakeholders about the future of local (place-based) community development and effective (client-based) tenant participation under the proposed new TPCE model.

In particular, the workshop participants identified risks surrounding the effective implementation of place-based work, given the lack of formal evaluation of the sustainability of existing Housing Communities Program projects within the broader program. Concerns were also raised about the impact the changes to the service provision would have on the existing community relationships, *'recognising that any "new" providers may take a number of years to develop these relationships.'*

The proposed model for the combined TPRS and HCAP drew criticism from stakeholders, who described its planned core deliverables as insufficient compared to the services previously delivered by TPRS and HCAP.

Concerns were also raised about the program's ability to balance the place-based local needs of residents with the standardised district-level priorities and to ensure the service providers can *'demonstrate experience and appropriate approaches to working with vulnerable client groups and communities'*.

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31 ARTD Consultants TPRS-HCP Industry Sounding Report, March 2018

Overall, the feedback gathered in the Industry Sounding workshop demonstrated participants' appreciation for the local, needs-based approach to tenant participation that the combined work of TPRS and HCAP was able to provide, and a concern that a centralised operational model of TPCE would lead to the loss of the on-the-ground connection and the resident-centred character of tenant participation services.

In 2018, after a tender process, **Mission Australia** was awarded the contract as the sole non-government organisation to run activities under the new Tenant Participation Community Engagement initiative.

This announcement came as a surprise to the many well-established community organisations<sup>32</sup> that had previously carried the responsibility for delivering the program's objectives. The decision to award the TPCE tender to a single organisation was likely motivated by Mission Australia's significant state-wide footprint, which would theoretically enable it to deliver services to all Housing NSW Districts while providing centralised coordination from a single head office.

Following the announcement of the tender winner, the Chairperson of Inner Sydney Voice, one of the organisations previously contracted to deliver TPRS services, reflected:

*The most noticeable [challenge for ISV] (...) was the loss of our Tenant Participation Resource Service (TPRS), which ISV was engaged in for 23 years; the loss of this program has had a significant impact on staff morale due to the severing of longstanding relationships and the loss of key staff. It also reflects a significant loss of community knowledge to the detriment of those most vulnerable.<sup>33</sup>*

TPCE under Mission Australia was due to be operational on December 9, 2018, but it wasn't until March 2019 that the new model was rolled out and the first activities with residents in public housing began taking place across NSW.

The available information on the outcomes of the work carried out by Mission Australia includes: *over 4,800 activities delivered between December 2020 and February 2024, ranging from community events to skill-building workshops. These activities enhanced tenants' access to information, improved social connectedness, and facilitated referrals to essential services.<sup>34</sup>*

The program was described as underresourced, with \$11.6M over five years considered insufficient for statewide impact. Mission Australia reported having difficulty accessing 'geographically dispersed areas, describing the TPCE program as "metro-centric".'

As anticipated in the industry sounding workshops back in 2018, the Tenant Participation Community Engagement program struggled to connect with tenants, with only 24% of surveyed residents aware of the initiative. The overreliance on entry-level roles and high staff turnover exacerbated tenants' low engagement with TPCE.<sup>35</sup>

32 Notes from stakeholder meeting (2 Sep 2025)

33 <https://innersydneyvoice.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/ISV-AR-2019.pdf>

34 Summary of an internal document supplied by Homes NSW for the purpose of this project, available on request

35 As above

Under Mission Australia's leadership, TPCE activities appear to have included no representative voice for tenants and no access to pathways to hold the state housing provider accountable for decisions impacting tenants and their neighbourhoods.

In 2024, the newly formed **Homes NSW** announced the government would end the era of Mission Australia-managed TPCE by bringing all tenant participation activities in-house.

The following year, the 10-year strategy for public housing in NSW articulated that Homes NSW would continue to bring tenant participation in-house and support tenant-led initiatives in local communities. One of the core themes of the plan was a "customer-driven" approach to service delivery, with a '*system-wide vision that everyone has access to a decent home and support if they need it*'.

The strategy stressed the importance of community development and promised Homes NSW would listen to public housing tenants and match its service delivery to their needs, as well as '*support local community and tenant-led initiatives to build strong communities*'. This work may include '*working in partnership (where appropriate), for example, to assist in elevating the voice of Aboriginal tenants*'.<sup>36</sup>

In November 2025, Homes NSW identified the themes of **Voice, Belonging** and **Opportunity** as the key elements characterising all of the agency's future Tenant Participation actions.

The Voice referred to consultation and seeking tenants' views; Belonging was associated with fostering community well-being and social cohesion, and Opportunity was seen as a path to supporting education and employment and to building social and cultural capital through partnerships with external non-government organisations.

Key priorities for the in-house Tenant Participation at Homes NSW (as of November 2025) are:

1. Develop a one-year plan for tenant participation strategies in each of the 6 Districts
2. Establish a statewide Tenant Consultative Committee
3. Launch tenant-led grants program
4. Host Regional Forums to improve engagement and access to services
5. Conduct Customer Experience and Post-Occupancy surveys to gather actionable feedback.

Under the new Homes NSW structure and following a period of new talent acquisition, the Tenant Participation program has been placed within the Homes NSW Programs and Partnerships Directorate. The same body will oversee the Communities and Place team, which is expected to manage Scholarships, Cadetships and Apprenticeships, Community Greening, the newly conceived vehicle for capturing state-wide tenants' voices: the Statewide Consultative Committee, and the new Tenant Initiatives Fund grants program.

Initiatives to continue as established prior to the creation of Homes NSW include the Royal Botanic Garden Community Greening, an expanded version of the CHIA NSW Cadetship Program, and Neighbourhood Advisory Boards (*refined for 'enhanced engagement'*).

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36 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2025-10/homes-for-nsw-strategy-2025-2035.pdf>

# TENANT PARTICIPATION CASE STUDY

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*A note about the case study research methodology:*

The example of Hamilton South estate was selected as the focus of an in-depth exploration of tenant participation in public housing in NSW due to practical reasons, such as access to relevant historical materials and availability of past and current workers willing to share their experience from the years of involvement in tenant engagement and participation programs dating back to the early 2000s.

Hamilton South had been developed to house tenants from the Hunter and Newcastle city areas. It therefore offers an opportunity to retrace and examine the particular challenges and opportunities of facilitating tenant participation activities in a neighbourhood with a large population of public housing tenants (not too dissimilar to the estates in the Greater Sydney area), under the jurisdiction of a regional NSW housing office covering a vast geographical area.

This case study is based on desktop research of available archival records and historical materials generously shared by Louise Riley and Jo-Anne Allen, as well as contemporary news articles, and a series of online and in-person interviews with stakeholders based in Newcastle. The interviewees included both past and present Housing NSW (now Homes NSW) employees, as well as an independent academic, a local grassroots organiser and a community worker employed by Mission Australia during the TPCE program years. The historical and contemporary research was complemented by information provided by the leadership of the current Tenant Participation team at Homes NSW.

The compilation of the above-mentioned materials amounts to a case study of the NSW government's and non-government organisations' engagement with public tenants in Hamilton South. It is an attempt to illustrate (on an example) the beginnings of tenant-led initiatives, the NSW government departments' response to them, and policy and funding efforts to assist residents in exercising influence over their public housing environments in the years since.

### 1960s

On 14 July 1961, the Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales published an announcement of the acquisition of private land in proximity to the previously established Garden Suburb of Hamilton, Newcastle.

Under the provisions of section 4 of the Housing Act, 1912, (amended in 1941), the Governor and Housing Minister signed off on the appropriation of approximately 12 acres of Crown land wedged between the Beaumont and Glebe Streets for the purpose of building government housing.<sup>37</sup>

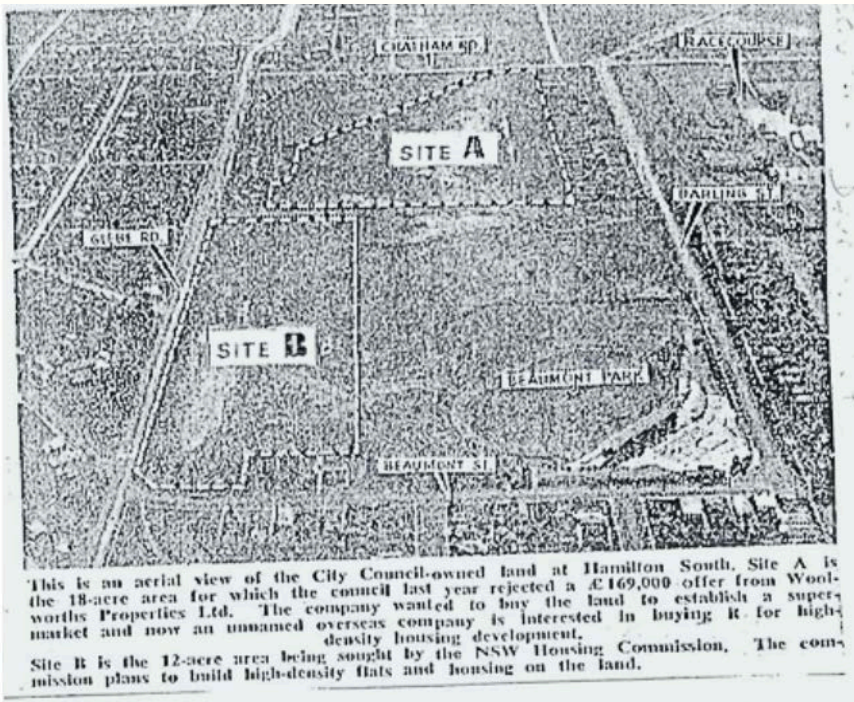


Image: Map of Newcastle, circled in blue is the land acquired for the Housing Commission's development

The land acquired through this decree was soon to become Newcastle's newest site for high-density government-owned housing. These were the official beginning of the Housing Commission estate in Hamilton South.

Meanwhile, the Council of Newcastle debated whether to sell off the remaining part of the government-owned land to Woolworths Properties LTD for the purpose of building a large supermarket with on-site parking for a whopping 1700 cars. According to articles published at the time, the land sale was seen by some ALP Aldermen as an opportunity to utilise "unhealthy" land and raise funds needed for 'essential projects the council has stalled'. Those opposed to the supermarket deal reaffirmed their view that the subdivision should be used for residential purposes and that accepting the Housing Commission's offer was not precluding the council from building neighbourhood shops and park spaces.

<sup>37</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/220282193?searchTerm=%22hamilton%20south%22>



The land already designated for the Housing Commission's high-density residential project was contracted to deliver a mix of family-sized two- and three-bedroom units and "aged people's units," totalling 360 flats. Building works began soon after.

The debate over the use of 18 acres (which became known as the "supermarket site") of council-owned land continued after 12 acres of the Glebe Road facing lots were committed to the Housing Commission.

Image: Newspaper clipping showing the areas for residential and commercial development in Hamilton South (1961)

Local businessmen, under the banner of Hamilton Business Association, supported a joint residential and commercial development of the land, with their representative noting that '(...)we were opposed only to the proposal that the whole of the land be sold to one firm(...); we realise that with the building of homes and flats, people must have stores to cater for their needs'.<sup>38</sup>

By 1965, some of the homes contracted for delivery in Hamilton South were made available to those on the waitlist, and further building works were underway. In an article from that time, a reporter described flats as economical to build and "looking it", adding that their design was 'typically Housing Commission, deviating very little from the two and three-storied flats it has been building all over NSW in the past 10 years'.<sup>39</sup>

A key focus of the development was the aged people's units - nearly a third of all properties to be delivered were scheduled for older residents.



Image: Newspaper clipping of Minister for Housing with elderly residents of the newly opened flats in Hamilton South (Newcastle Morning Herald 18/2/1965)

38 "Development Plan Backed", NS 29/6/1961

39 Alan Farrelly, "Hamilton South flat project", newspaper article

A year later, despite the large-scale expansion, people seeking public housing accommodation were still required to wait up to 18 months for a two- or three-bedroom flat, and longer if they required a single-bedroom or aged unit.

In 1967, a few years after the first residents moved into the new homes in Hamilton South, there was still no shopping centre servicing the developing neighbourhood, nor a direct bus service linking the estate with surrounding suburbs and large commercial areas. The residents found themselves travelling by taxi to the nearest shops or changing buses four times to reach the nearest shopping strip, despite the Housing Commission's internal policy at the time of providing shopping facilities as part of their development projects.<sup>40</sup> This issue was particularly felt by the older residents of Hamilton South, who, housed in purpose-built "aged people's units", were now stranded away from services, forcing them to rely on relatives for help with everyday errands.

Also in 1967, in its Retail & Trade section, Newcastle Morning Herald published a series of articles on the contentious subject of Hamilton South's shopping area. The titles of the articles alone: *Council upsets Hamilton business men, Hamilton South shopping plan defended, Council land sale protest, Shopping centre plan endorsed, Shopping centre debate deferred, Row looms over the shop issue, No tenders for shopping site, Business area not needed, ALP wants land for shop area, and Shop area appeal*, suggesting that the power struggle between the stakeholders wasn't easing around the issue.

The legacy of the ill-fated supermarket site sell-off, along with misunderstandings about the scale of the shopping centre needed in the area and failed tender rounds to secure private investment in the area, led to the failure to establish the necessary services.

## 1970s

The beginning of the 1970s marked a shift in the tone of development announcements by the NSW Housing Commission. The upcoming projects are described as "carefully planned", boasting "terrific views", television antennas, kitchens with garbage chutes, off-street parking, playgrounds and gardening contractors to service the site. The articles from the time mention no consultation with residents or discussion of potential tenants' needs; however, the identified features of homes and their surroundings suggest that the Commission began paying at least some attention to aspects of properties that tenants might find appealing.



Image: Newspaper clipping picturing Area Manager and local

40 W. H. Fenwick, "Hamilton South merry-go-round" (Newcastle Morning Herald, July 1967)

Some controversy continued to plague the Hamilton South development. In 1971, it was reported that some of the newest additions to the Housing Commission's estate, large split-level, six-story buildings, were constructed on parkland in a zone where erecting large residential buildings was prohibited. This error was later blamed on incorrect colouring on a map showing the size of the council-designated open space parklands.<sup>41</sup>

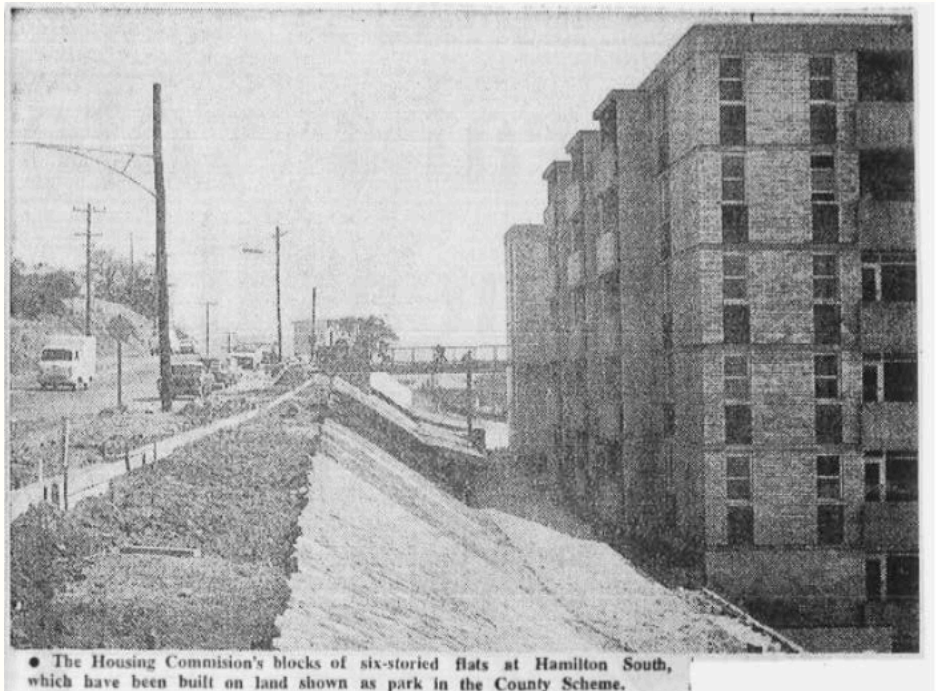


Image: Newspaper clipping from 1971 picturing the Housing Commission properties erected on a site reserved for parklands.

By 1975, the number of residents in the area covered by NSW Housing Commission properties was approximately 1500, of whom 350 were children, and 220 were pensioners. In response to the lack of promised facilities, a local community group began fundraising for a community hall for the area.

Four years of residents' efforts led to a joint commitment by the State Sport, Recreation and Tourism Minister, Newcastle Mayor, and council to purchase land and build a hall with bathroom and kitchen facilities to serve the community. A "youth activity area" outside the hall was simultaneously promised to be developed into a "games and recreation" area.<sup>42</sup>



Hamilton residents and the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Tourism, Mr Booth, the lord mayor, Ald Cummings, and Ald Tate look over yesterday the site of the proposed community hall at Hamilton.

Image: Hamilton South residents at the site for the promised community hall (1975)

Years passed, and plans for additional homes for the elderly and for terrace-style homes north of Chetham Street were announced, yet the promised community hall did not materialise.

The number of tenants in the area grew, and the corner of Fowler and Ogden Streets remained vacant and "reserved". Tenants in Hamilton South waited almost 5 years for the promised facilities to be delivered. In January of 1979, the newspapers reported that the building was expected to be completed in July. The Hall was finished and made available to the community in 1980.

41 "Flats Are Built on Parkland", Newcastle Morning Herald article, 3.9.1971

42 Newcastle Morning Herald, article 25.9.1975

## 1980s-90s

Newspapers from the early 1980s reported on activities undertaken at the newly opened community centre in Hamilton South. In the spring of 1983, the **Combined Pensioners Association (CPA)** held a morning tea for out-of-town members in the hall and a fundraising fair in November of the same year.


### Tea Gardens-Hawks Nest C.P.A.

The preparations for the Christmas Party to be held on December 6 are in hand and tickets for the three Christmas Hampers raffle are on sale. Ideas are already in the pipe line for our social day in March 1984, the occasion being Senior Citizens Week. Our raffle of the day was donated by Mrs Bytheway, and won by Mrs B. Edwards.

Thirty five members paid a visit to **Hamilton South**

CPA and what a wonderful welcome we received, the ladies had a lovely morning tea set up for us; after that we went to Spears Point and had our picnic lunch by the lake. On our return to the hall we had a most enjoyable afternoon of entertainment, with one lady and four gentlemen, singing and playing the organ, guitar and accordian; this was followed by a very sumptuous afternoon tea. We congratulate and offer our sincere thanks to the **Hamilton South CPA** on such a great effort to entertain another branch, and we of Tea Gardens-Hawks Nest being their first guests. We look forward to meeting all of you again sometime next year, at Hawks Nest. At our October general meeting, 63 attended, and president George welcomed back Mr and Mrs Charlie Brown, Mrs Kirk, Mrs Mildred Robinson, Mrs Jean Haydn and Mrs Rose Duggan. We received a negative reply from the Shorland County Council in regards to our secretary's continued effort to have an agency for the paying of electricity accounts established in our area. Several of our members received birthday greetings for the month of October. A visit is to be made to the Cardiff Soccer Club on November 16 for a games day.

### Tribune Fairs



Donations of goods etc to all fairs needed now. If you can donate any material, contact the CPA office in your city (see list p.15). Volunteers also needed on fair days.

**Melbourne:** Sat. Nov 12 from 10am, North Melbourne Town Hall... bigger and better than ever...

**Brisbane:** Sat Nov 19 from 8 am, Senior Citizens Hall, Boundary St, West End... more stalls than ever...

**Sydney:** Sat Nov 19, from 9 am, Foley Park, cnr Glebe Pt Rd, Bridge Rd, Glebe... special kids' entertainment ... new stalls...

**Adelaide:** Sat Nov 26 from 10 am to 5 pm, Red Shed, 255 Angus St... everything from Kampuchean food to custom-made badges...

**Canberra:** Sat. Nov 5, 12.30pm. Opening of Process Bookshop plus Trib fair. BYOG and meat. Speaker: Stephen Rix. Kingsley St, opp. 2XXX.

**Newcastle:** Sat Nov 26 from 9 am to 4 pm. **Hamilton South** Community Hall... fresh tropical fruits from north coast ... crafts ... plants ... curries...

**Townsville:** Each Sat, Nov 26 thru Dec 24, 8 am. Keyatta Park, Garbutt... kids' furniture ... dolls' houses ... rockers ... Also toys on sale at the Bishops', 63 Halifax St, Garbutt throughout...

**Perth:** Jumble Sale, Sat, Nov 19, 10am to 2pm. North Perth Town Hall. (Fremantle Jumble Sale to be advised.)

### Karuah fete

Karuah Pre-school's fete in September was enjoyed by many, and realised a profit of about \$600.

The pre-school now has two morning sessions which are operating well under teacher, Michelle Leaver. Next year, it is hoped to have a full day session on Thursday and a morning session on Friday, as from second term. There are vacancies for new enrolments. If interested, please phone Bev 97 5310 or Jeanette 97 5382.

Images: Newspaper clippings from 1983 mention CPA activities in Hamilton South

In 1986, the NSW Department of Housing launched its three-tiered Tenant Participation Policy, and by the 1990s, the Neighbourhood Advisory Boards model had grown in popularity in the densely populated housing estates of Metro Sydney.

## 1995-2005

The 1990s marked an era of popularity of Estate Development via the **Neighbourhood Improvement Programme**. This trend reached Hamilton South, and in 1997, a preliminary survey of the site was conducted to assess its potential for improvement.

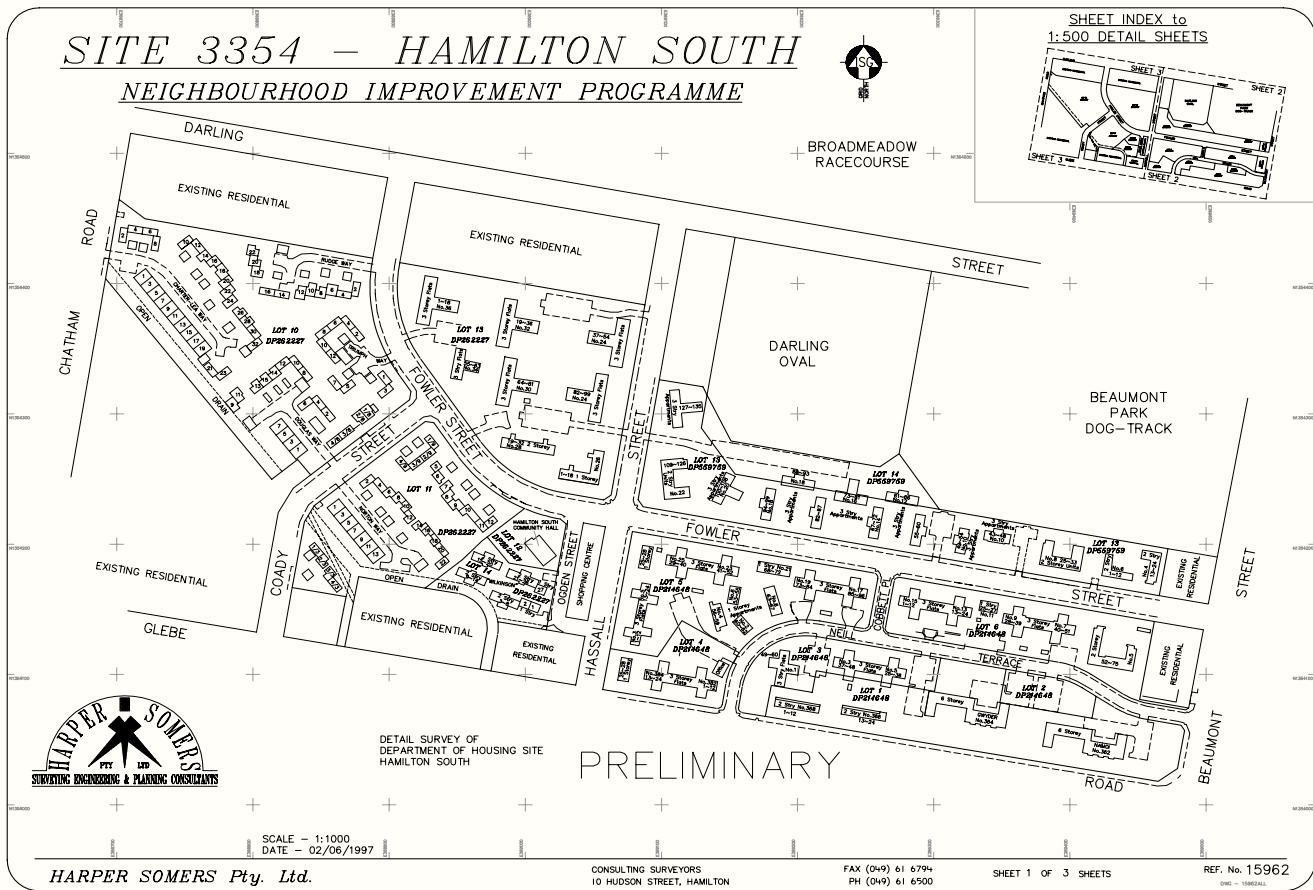


Image: Hamilton South site survey plan 1997 by Harper Somers

While NABs were being taken up in the Metro areas, in regional NSW, such as Newcastle’s Hamilton South, the Public Tenants Advisory Councils were the preferred format for influencing policy and managing issues faced by residents.

In the case of the **Hunter Central Coast Tenants Advisory Council**, a DoH-funded **Tenant Participation Project Worker** had the capacity to assist tenant representatives with their regional-level advocacy by liaising with, and providing practical help with associations’ incorporation, drafting policy submissions and consultation papers replies, on advice from tenant representatives

According to a long-time Housing (now Homes) NSW employee, HCCTAC operated since the mid-1980s, had a shop-front office (paid for by the department) in a central part of Newcastle, and up to 12 volunteer staff who advised, supported, and reported to tenants across social housing estates in the area.<sup>43</sup> The issues brought by individual renters ranged from repairs and maintenance to transfer requests, rent arrears management and crisis support.

Volunteers working at the HCCTAC would also recruit additional volunteers (from their Local Tenants’ groups) to assist with putting on events at the estates. From among the volunteers, through an EOI process, one representative of the HCCTAC would be selected to attend the **NSW Public Tenants Advisory Council**, where representatives from all areas discussed policy changes and other announcements by the Department of Housing.

43 Stakeholder interview notes (19 January 2026)

HCCTAC and the Project Worker were also responsible for holding at least one **Tenant Forum** a year. These forums were an opportunity to invite residents to actively participate in existing Local Tenant Groups, as they offered free training and opportunities to develop leadership skills. The callouts to join were particularly important in Hamilton South, as the tenant groups were dominated by older residents and lacked the diversity of voices needed for well-rounded advocacy.<sup>44</sup>

Local Tenant Groups formed and, in many cases, incorporated as associations to facilitate events initiated or requested by local residents. Once a grassroots group was incorporated, it could (with the help of HCCTAC volunteers or the Project Worker) apply for grants to carry out residents' plans.

The unincorporated Local Groups were forced to rely on relationships with local non-government organisations, such as the Salvation Army, for administrative assistance, especially in the application for and management of grant monies (as Sponsors) for one-off initiatives dedicated to tenant participation. In its role as sponsor to an unincorporated tenant group, a non-government organisation was required to:

- *manage the grant on behalf of the group and make it accessible to the group*
- *support the group as agreed to carry out the project, and provide professional help*
- *report on the expenditure of funds and provide an audited statement*
- *ensure that the grant was used for the purpose for which it was provided.*<sup>45</sup>

If an incorporated tenant group (or an unincorporated one with assistance from an NGO) wished to develop a project, they could apply for a portion of the money allocated by the Department for tenants' activities.

The Community Development and Resourcing Grants Funding Guidelines (2003) described the projects it would prioritise for funding as projects which:

- *involve groups of tenants which have not previously been involved in tenant participation activities;*
- *Give tenants knowledge, skills, or confidence to work on the housing and other issues which affect them;*
- *Help tenants to take part in existing planning and consultative processes to address housing and related issues;*
- *Strengthen the ties between tenants, housing providers and the local community;*
- *Help tenants make better use of other services, programs and resources which can be used to address housing and related issues.*<sup>46</sup>

In 2003, the Department of Housing provided "new products" funding to the Newcastle Client Service Team to support the introduction of an **Intensive Tenancy Management (ITM)** model in Hamilton South.

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44 Stakeholder interview notes (19 January 2026)

45 NSW Department of Housing Community Development and Resourcing Grants 2003/2004, Funding Guidelines (August 2003)

46 as above

At the time, the estate consisted of 763 properties, including 169 bedsitters, 492 units, 98 townhouses, and 4 villas, situated mainly around Neill Terrace, Fowler Street, and Hassall Street. The Intensive Tenancy Management model called for the reduction of the CSO portfolio sizes to fewer than 200 tenancies per CSO to allow for a more responsive and interactive tenancy management.

To facilitate its goals, ITM's funding covered three client service officers (CSO), a housing manager (HM), a senior client service officer (SCSO), a Community Development Worker (CDW) and a part-time clerical officer (CO) to work on-site in Hamilton South. The CDW role was to work within the community to 'increase interagency support for Hamilton South', develop partnerships with the local chapter of the **Samaritans Foundation**, establish a tenant group (**Hamilton South Community Action Team**) and develop a community facility (Rosella Cottage).<sup>47</sup>

Following a period of increased outreach and cooperation, the ITM was discontinued in 2006, and the availability of Housing NSW staff onsite in Hamilton South was reduced to 4 hours per week. In the quarter immediately after the cessation of the ITM, the Department recorded an increase in estate-related transfer applications from below 20% to 28%. Tenants continued to find their experiences of living at Hamilton South as challenging. Issues and concerns reported by residents, along with their severity, are outlined in the table below.

## IDENTIFIED TENANCY RELATED ISSUES, CONSTRAINTS AND LOCAL NEEDS

The table below details identified tenancy management issues within the Estate.

Tenancy Management Issues	Impact on Estate's Operation (Current & Future)	Severity
<b>Bedsitters</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High vacancy rate</li> <li>Squatters</li> <li>Vandalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in void loss/maintenance costs</li> <li>Negative perception of area – greater stigma</li> <li>Very short tenure length</li> <li>Significant staff time</li> </ul>	High
<b>Community Safety</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular media coverage</li> <li>Assaults</li> <li>Break &amp; enters</li> <li>Discarded needles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative perception of area – greater stigma</li> <li>Increase in transfer requests</li> <li>Greater rejection of offers</li> <li>Reduced tenure length</li> <li>Increase maintenance costs</li> </ul>	High
<b>Noise &amp; Annoyance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inappropriate allocations</li> <li>Intergenerational disputes</li> <li>Neighbour disputes</li> <li>Youth causing nuisance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative perception of area – greater stigma</li> <li>Increase in transfer requests</li> <li>Reduced tenure length</li> <li>Significant staff time</li> </ul>	High
<b>Property care</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vandalism</li> <li>Graffiti</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative perception of area – greater stigma</li> <li>Increased maintenance costs</li> </ul>	Medium
<b>Arrears</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Higher number of evictions than other areas in Newcastle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater turnover of stock &amp; vacant costs</li> <li>Reduced tenure length</li> </ul>	Medium

Table: Identified Tenancy Related Issues within the Hamilton South estate 2007

47 Housing NSW Hamilton South Estate Management Plan: 2007/2008

Despite a decrease in CSO presence on site, Rosella Cottage remained a functional community facility, with service providers continuing to manage weekly outreach sessions. At least 7 groups and organisations ran programs from Rosella Cottage, and a further 6 worked out of the Hamilton South Community Hall. In 2006, 3 tenant groups had exclusive use of individual store rooms based in the Namoi apartment block, which had been provided for the community by the Department.<sup>48</sup>

At the time, HCCTAC continued to be responsible for supporting tenants and linking them with services such as tenancy support, but since 2004, this work has been carried out through the Regional Tenants Resource Service. In this work, as with Community Development and Resourcing Grants, priority was placed on fostering connections between tenants and community organisations in their area, to help them with tenancy management, renter advocacy, and access to other support services.

HCCTAC was also responsible for facilitating Public Tenants Councils, where residents could review the Department's policy proposals and advocate for adjustments that best suit their communities' needs. This feedback was viewed favourably by the Department of Housing as it lent credibility to the final policy.<sup>49</sup>

## 2005-2018

In Hamilton South, tenants routinely reported issues typically relating to maintenance of the estate site, unaddressed repairs to individual properties, and concerns about neighbourhood safety.

A **Community Wellbeing Project** undertaken at the estate at the request of Housing NSW in the early 2000s, collected ideas, insights and complaints from 61 residents through a series of informal conversations at the main intersection in the Hamilton South public housing neighbourhood.

In the project report, the authors conveyed tenants' frustration with the lack of responsiveness from various government departments and services, and their concern about their neighbours' antisocial behaviour, which led them to avoid spending time outside their homes out of fear for their safety, even if it meant missing community events. Surveyed public housing renters believed that services should be available to them at the estate, with drug and alcohol and mental health services quoted as those most needed.

The recommendations listed by the Community Wellbeing project report included, among others:

- Rosella Cottage and the Community Centre should be joined under the one banner of the Neighbourhood Centre
- The Community organisations operating at the estate develop programs based on residents' stated needs
- A community newsletter should be developed to improve communication between services and residents.
- Pathways should not go straight through the estate.
- The Tenants Committee should be strengthened by extending membership to more residents.
- Those residents at the Fowler Street end of the estate are encouraged to have gardens and landscape the grounds.<sup>50</sup>

48 Housing NSW Hamilton South Estate Management Plan: 2007/2008

49 Stakeholder interview notes (27 Nov 2025)

50 Community Wellbeing Service LTD: Housing NSW Project Report (Tony Cameron)

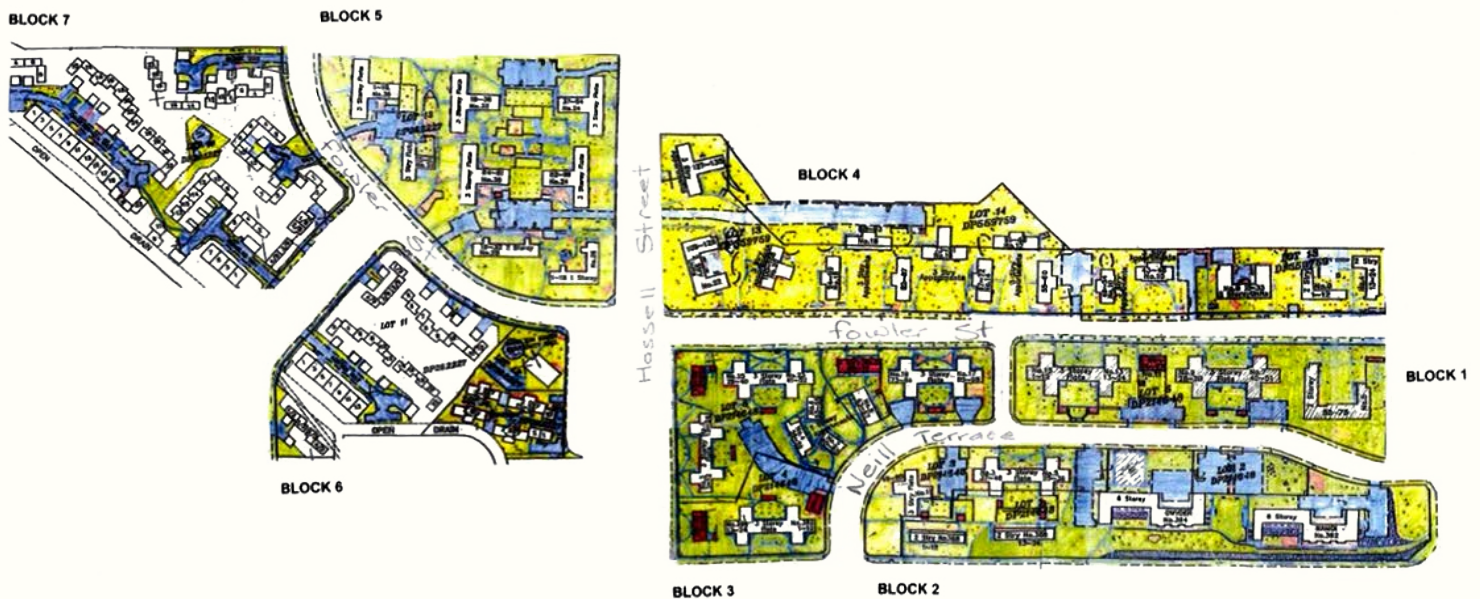


Image: Contemporary Hamilton South public housing area plan

The 2007-08 Estate Management Plan issued by Northern NSW Housing Services Division (Hunter Area) for Hamilton South identified that a number of interventions and collaborative tenancy, agency groups and services have come and gone due to 'issues such as loss of funding, loss of interest, the loss of community champions who drove projects and the loss of need for such interventions.' The plan recognised the critical need to find a suitable balance of relevant interventions and pointed to a number of initiatives continuing to support Community Regeneration, such as:

- Community Development Worker role,
- Handyperson Scheme (in partnership with Wesley Mission);
- Community Facilities – Rosella Cottage;
- Outreach Services (weekly)
- 'Work It' Community Contract (linking to employment and training): <sup>51</sup>

The Estate Management Plan demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the issues and challenges faced by residents, as well as the potential for improvement, growth, and further tenant empowerment and engagement.

In early 2009, under the newly reshaped Housing NSW, a fresh iteration of the Tenant Participation program, **Tenant Participation Resource Services** (TPRS), was officially launched. TPRS took over the activities previously delivered by Regional Tenant Resource Services (RTRS) and Public Tenants Councils (PTC) through Hunter Central Coast Tenants Advisory Council.

For Hamilton South public housing residents and the rest of the Hunter area, the services and activities delivered through TPRS would be facilitated by the well-established local community organisation, **Samaritans Foundation**.

Like in many other areas of the state, TPRS functioned in parallel to the place-based **Housing Communities Assistance Program**, which focused on facilitating tenant-led one-off projects.

51 Housing NSW Hamilton South Estate Management Plan: 2007/2008

WHAT IS SAMARITANS  
TENANCY RESOURCES SERVICE



Funded by Department of Family and Community Services, Housing NSW, Tenant Participation Resource Services provide advice and advocacy to social housing tenants (Housing NSW, Department of Aboriginal Housing and tenants of Community Housing Providers).

The program is a NSW Housing initiative to "provide social housing tenants with increased access to information, advice and opportunities to more actively participate in processes related to their housing as well as to engage in their communities".

The Samaritans Tenancy Resource Services is the TPRS for the Hunter and Central Coast regions of NSW covering from Murrurundi, east to Port Stephens and south to the Hawkesbury River.



What do we do?

We provide social and community housing tenants with a wide variety of information, advice and support around their tenancy rights and obligations. This includes phone referral and support, face to face appointments as well as support at inspections or interviews with housing providers.

The Tenancy Resource Service provides support and resources to tenant groups. We recognise and support that each group is unique in the way they come together to discuss issues affecting tenants in their area or to work on projects for the benefit of tenants. We are also able to assist interested tenants establish new groups.

Our service supports a diverse range of community development projects that focus on responding to the needs and ideas of tenants – Bus Trips, Community BBQs, workshops, garden projects, events and more!

The Tenancy Resource service produces a quarterly newsletter for tenants. If you are interested in joining our mailing list to keep up to date with our events and activities please call us today.

As a local registered service provider with the National Disability Insurance Agency, Samaritans provides quality, personalised disability support.

Since 2012 Samaritans has worked extensively in the NDIS trial sites of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie, and more recently in Maitland and Penrith, and is a highly experienced NDIS provider.

If you're beginning your NDIS journey or received your NDIS package and are not sure how to begin the transition, talk to us.

With over 300 NDIS participants to date, Samaritans has a wealth of experience as a local provider of quality disability support.

In all of Samaritans work we put the person we are supporting at the centre of what we do. We work with you and your family to ensure that your goals are met and provide personalised support with:

- Independent Living Skills
- Personal & Home Care
- Mental Health Support
- Social & Recreational Activities
- Family & Community Support for children with disabilities
- Specialist Clinical Support

To talk to our Project Officer who can support you through the transition process contact us on 1800 786 466



Samaritans

Samaritans is one of Australia's largest regional welfare organisations, providing a wide range of services for children, youth, families and those with a disability in the Hunter, Central Coast and Manning regions.

Our aim is to provide a quality, professional caring service.

Some of the Services available include:

- **Disabilities:** accommodation, outreach and recreational services for people with a disability.
- **Children:** before and after school care and daycare, out of home care and supporting children with additional needs.
- **Youth:** accommodation and early intervention programs for youth at risk of family breakdown and homelessness and mental health programs.
- **Families:** emergency relief, disaster relief, retail shops and Christmas Lunch in the Park initiatives.

For up-to-date information about Samaritans Programs please visit our website or phone.

Funded by Department of Family and Community Services, Housing NSW.



Samaritans Tenancy Resource Service



"Providing social housing tenants with support to access information and advice to help them participate in processes related to their housing".

PH: 1800 786 466



Images: Flyer describing the role of and the services provided by the Samaritans Tenancy Resource Service



Under the leadership of Samaritans and with the dedicated work of a local project coordinator, the TPRS offered information and referrals to other services, paired them with the organisation’s youth engagement programs, built a strong reputation, and ran successful events.

One such initiative was the painting of the neighbourhood’s letter boxes - a creative venture connecting young and old residents of Hamilton South to brighten up the area by adding colour to it. Nearly ten years later, the letterboxes painted by the residents with the help of a creative community engagement company, Up&Up, remain a joyful splash of colour in the streets of the area.

Meanwhile, the issue of community safety and the need for access to on-site Drug and Alcohol and Mental Health services continued to be front of mind for many residents.

In April of 2016, on the occasion of a Youth Week event organised by **One Point** – a newly established partnership project between Samaritans, Housing NSW and Partners in Recovery- the Newcastle Herald interviewed young tenants who grew up in Hamilton South, which the

Image: Page from Samaritans Foundation’s Annual Report showcasing the work of One Point initiative (2016/17)

paper described as “one of the most stigmatised estates in the region”.<sup>52</sup> At the time of the article’s publication, the area had become the focus of yet another police operation.

The newest in a series of law enforcement interventions, named Restore Hamilton South, was described as aiming to ‘drive down crime rates and reconnect tenants with a range of government agencies to improve resident wellbeing’.

Photo: Resident-painted letterboxes in Fowler Street, Hamilton South (courtesy of Up&Up)



52 <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/3845675/hamilton-south-youth-present-ideas-to-transform-estate-poll/>

One of the young residents interviewed for the Herald reflected:

*I see it [Hamilton South] as a home, just not a very good one. There are lots of drugs, prostitution, alcohol, fights and people getting stabbed. It's a bit scary for our generation, because we don't want that to happen to us. Things will have to change – I would not try to have kids here; I want to try to have kids in a good area.*

With the majority of local youth reporting eagerness for more community activities like the Youth Week, 'a new mental health support service, [Wesley Young Healthy Minds] planned to survey Hamilton South adolescents, to ascertain what activities would help them improve their psychological wellbeing and reach their potential'.

'There's a long way to go, but at least we're moving in the right direction. The community now needs to get behind the activities and initiatives for it to keep going,' said One Point's project worker.<sup>53</sup> A year later, following a change in government funding, the One Point project was no longer available to adolescents in the area.

The collaboration among several local community and non-government organisations in Hamilton South ended abruptly in 2018, when Housing NSW awarded the tender for its latest iteration of the Tenant Participation Program, **Tenant Participation Community Engagement** (TPCE), to a charity not previously involved with the community on the ground: **Mission Australia** (MA).

## 2019-2026

Mission Australia winning the tender came as a surprise to the residents and to established, well-regarded organisational facilitators in the community.<sup>54</sup> While long-time residents of Hamilton South have grown accustomed to changes and upheavals in tenant engagement, for others, high staff turnover, limited resources, inconsistent engagement, and shortcomings in other associated public housing services have led to a lack of trust in the programs and an unwillingness to participate. The greatest challenges were faced by younger residents and families who had been cut off from connections to services, and by the people who represented them when programs coordinated by Samaritans were abruptly discontinued.

The new provider had a limited presence in the Hunter region and initially struggled to fill the Project Worker role, with TPCE activities not initiated until well into the year 2019. Mission Australia had been given specific direction from Housing NSW on the areas of focus for their tenant participation activities. The Project Worker's Key Performance Indicators were centred on delivering information to tenants, organising tenant forums, and recruiting tenant volunteers to run the forums and any additional events. These activities were priorities as they were considered conducive to successful tenancy management.<sup>55</sup>

53 <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/3845675/hamilton-south-youth-present-ideas-to-transform-estate-poll-had-organisingtenants-well-regarded/>

54 Notes from interview with stakeholders in Newcastle (26 & 27 Nov 2025)

55 Notes from interview with stakeholder in Newcastle (27 Nov 2025)

On their website, Mission Australia described Tenant Participation Community Engagement as a program that:

*aims to provide DCJ Housing tenants with greater access to information and advice, and more opportunities to be actively involved in processes and decisions related to improving social housing tenancies and communities. TPCE works in partnership with communities to find sustainable solutions to local issues, actively involving tenants in processes and decisions that relate to their tenancy and engaging in their local and broader community.*<sup>56</sup>

According to a former TPCE project worker from the Hunter area, running events without the allocated budget was nearly impossible. The funding available to Mission Australia covered the entry-level wage of the TPCE worker (at 4 days per week) and access to a work vehicle, with no additional funds for incidental spending or for resources to run activities. For those reasons, and due to lack of access to the community hall, the former TPCE project worker reported relying on other local organisations, namely Hunter Mothers' Centre and Newcastle Family Support, to coordinate events, including the 2019 Mother's Day morning tea.<sup>57</sup>

During the first year of TPCE, with assistance from Samaritans, Hamilton South benefited from an education session on hoarding, a high-priority need as identified by residents.

The slow rollout of Mission Australia TPCE activities was halted completely in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As an organisation, MA was seen as highly risk-averse regarding worker interactions with the public and the risk of exposure. Consequently, the TPCE worker's activities were scaled back, and all face-to-face activities were suspended. To fill the void in activity, the Project Worker commenced issuing a newsletter to the public housing community in Hamilton South and distributing it via letterbox drop. This activity became difficult to execute as the Project Worker's safety became a concern, and they required an additional person to accompany them during letter boxing.<sup>58</sup>

In 2020, Newcastle Weekly reported that Ms Jan Patterson, a member of a local volunteer tenants group, **Hamilton South Community Solutions Group** (HSCSG), supported by the Mission Australia TPCE worker, applied for grants to build a garden located outside the community hall and wished to make use of the hall itself as it was underutilised.<sup>59</sup>

Around the time of the year-long campaign for the Hamilton South playground upgrade, the Fowler Street Community Hall was leased by **CatholicCare** and used to provide meals to the local community and homeless people in the area, serving around 60 meals a week. The organisation described their initiative as easing the food insecurity and the "burden of homelessness" through their volunteers' work with "other agencies, including Orange Sky Laundry, to provide "food, hospitality and friendship to the marginalised in our community."<sup>60</sup>

56 <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/find-support/community-development/community-development-programs/tenant-participation-and-community-engagement-western-sydney-and-nepean-blue-mountains/>

57 Notes from stakeholder interview (27 Nov 2025)

58 Notes from stakeholder interview (27 Nov 2025)

59 <https://newcastleweekly.com.au/group-hopes-to-replant-hamilton-souths-reputation/>

60 [https://www.mycommunitydirectory.com.au/New\\_South\\_Wales/Newcastle/Welfare\\_Assistance\\_Services/Food\\_Vans\\_and\\_Kitchens/90727/220907/CatholicCare\\_Hamilton\\_South\\_Community\\_Kitchen](https://www.mycommunitydirectory.com.au/New_South_Wales/Newcastle/Welfare_Assistance_Services/Food_Vans_and_Kitchens/90727/220907/CatholicCare_Hamilton_South_Community_Kitchen)



Photo: Jan Patterson and the state MP for Newcastle, Mr Crakanthorp, at the old Hamilton South playground (2021), photo Rod Thompson

Meanwhile, the only outdoor play equipment available to the children of Hamilton South, built in the 1980s and located next to the community hall, had fallen into disrepair. Despite residents' calls for its upgrade, the play area remained unsafe and was not designated for the upgrade by the Land and Housing Corporation.<sup>61</sup>

In 2021, local media reported on the complaints from local residents about the state of the children's play area: 'Local resident, Janice Paterson [sic], says the government has given significant funds to local councils to upgrade their parks, while abandoning children in their own social housing developments.'

*The children here are being left behind; the state of this is appalling. You've got to watch where you walk. We have a thousand residents in the community, it's desperately needed, the block behind us, there are grandparents, and they can't let their children play here because of the dangers.'*<sup>62</sup>

For a better part of five years, between 2018 and 23, Ms Patterson (later using her maiden name Chamberlain) was one of the central figures in tenant participation activities in Hamilton South, and there can be no doubt she played a significant part in delivering change for her community.<sup>63</sup> Her volunteer and advocacy work in the area earned her the title of 2022 Newcastle Senior Citizen of the Year.

61 <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/la/papers/Pages/qanda-tracking-details.aspx?pk=56078>

62 <https://www.2nurfm.com.au/news/hamilton-south-community-calling-on-state-government-to-replace-local-play-ground-set-to-be-demolished/>

63 <https://mnnews.azurewebsites.net/social-services/2023/56702-hamilton-south-says-goodbye-to-area-s-biggest-advocate/>

In 2021, under the leadership of a Mission Australia Project Worker, resident members of the Hamilton South Community Solutions Group began meeting monthly with representatives of organisations and local government to rebuild connections and restart in-person conversations about the issues Hamilton South tenants wanted to address. This initiative sought to work together to identify the system changes necessary to effectively support tenants who repeatedly face challenges accessing services.

This attempt to create a collaborative working group for the community saw regular meetings held in the Hall on Fowler Street, which included representatives from Mission Australia, Wesley Mission, the Newcastle Library, the Council Social Planning Department, and, of course, local residents. The levels of engagement varied, and tenant attendance was inconsistent; however, the regularity of the meetings and the project worker's efforts to engage a range of stakeholders restored energy to the space after the period of disconnection imposed by COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>64</sup>

The “interagency” discussions were often joined by local faith group representatives and focused on finding ways to alleviate the negative impacts of stigma associated with being a resident of a social housing estate, like Hamilton South, which was plagued by anti-social behaviour incidents and instances of violence.

Ultimately, due to limited capacity and resourcing from the non-government organisations attending, the outcomes of the monthly meetings took predominantly the form of artistic and creative initiatives that residents could participate in and use to channel their experiences and feelings.<sup>65</sup>



Images: Collage works by Hamilton South residents, courtesy of Louise Riley.

According to a one-time Housing NSW employee familiar with the estate and its tenants, the quality of support to the Tenant Group, Hamilton South Community Solutions Group, began to suffer after the Project Worker who helped establish it moved on to a different role and was replaced by a less experienced, less driven person.<sup>66</sup>

64 Notes from online stakeholder interview (16 Dec 2025)

65 Notes from online stakeholder interview (16 Dec 2025)

66 Notes from online stakeholder interview (16 Dec 2025)





Image: Flyer promoting the anniversary event and exhibition at the Hamilton South community hall

Photo: 42nd anniversary celebrations of the community hall in Hamilton South (mnnews.today September 2022)

According to the news reports, the celebrations included a Welcome to Country, smoking ceremony, an address by City of Newcastle Councillor, Carol Duncan and the launch of the 'Voices of Hamilton South - Stories of Resilience and Strength' booklet and exhibition.



Image: Booklet 'Voices of Hamilton South' commissioned by Hamilton South Community Solutions, image by Amy Jonas on Facebook

A year later, after a long struggle with bureaucracy, repeated appeals to the local state member, and a persistent campaign to replace the play equipment, the playground area was finally upgraded, with funds secured through a tender by a local CatholicCare under the NSW Government's Local Small Commitments Allocation program. The \$70,000 (one of 600 projects funded under the program) enabled the replacement of outdated equipment with modern, safer play spaces for local children.<sup>68</sup>



Photo: Newcastle Weekly: New play equipment at Fowler Street, Hamilton South (24 September 2023)

*'By opening it up and revitalising it [the playground], there's more opportunity for the connections of people and, especially now that it's safer and easier to take their kids to and have the families and communities come together, it's really a centre of pride for the community',* Hunter Community Alliance project organiser Shaylie Pryer said on the occasion of the playground reopening in September 2023.<sup>69</sup>

68 <https://newy.com.au/2024/09/23/new-playground-brings-joy-to-hamilton-south-community-centre/>

69 <https://mnnews.today/social-services/2024/58789-community-isnt-forgotten-new-playground-for-hamilton-south/>



Image: Community hall, play area and community garden (in the background) at Fowler Street in Hamilton South (November 2025)

2024 marked the formation of Homes NSW and the government’s announcement that it would not reissue the tender for the TPCE program (and bring management of all tenant participation activities in-house).<sup>70</sup> These changes coincided with a campaign by the Hunter Community Alliance (HCA) for funding to reinvigorate grassroots organising in Hamilton South.

In April 2024, during the official Founding Assembly of the Hunter Community Alliance in Newcastle, the Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Rose Jackson, committed, in principle, to funding the development of a tenant-led renewal project at Hamilton South.

This commitment was due to be followed by a meeting with the newly appointed CEO of Homes NSW in June to confirm details of the proposal.<sup>71</sup>



Photo: Hunter Community Alliance leaders of the tenant-led group and housing team members met to negotiate the wording of the funding commitment on the night of the HCA Founding Assembly, April 2024

70 <http://www.redwatch.org.au/issues/public-housing/participation/240927hnsw>

71 <https://www.thehca.org.au/about-us/2024-founding-assembly-report>

A year later, despite a previous announcement by the CEO Rebecca Pinkstone<sup>72</sup> that all tenant participation initiatives were to be centralised under the control of Homes NSW, the HCA secured \$150k per year for three years for its tenant-led renewal project at Hamilton South.<sup>73</sup>

According to the Newcastle Herald, the bulk of the allocated government funds was intended to establish a leadership group of residents in the area. These leaders would, in future, negotiate directly with the state government to improve conditions, informed by the residents' lived experience.



Photo: Shayline Pryer, an organiser with the Hunter Community Alliance, at a press conference in Hamilton South (picture by Peter Lorimer)

Despite persisting, unaddressed concerns about maintenance and upkeep of the aging homes across Hamilton South's public housing, Erin Killion, the Alliance's lead organiser, said the group was "playing a long, slow game of building tenant power" at Hamilton South to meaningfully engage with the state's housing department and secure better conditions but was confident residents' urgent short-term needs would be won along the way."<sup>74</sup>

72 <http://www.redwatch.org.au/issues/public-housing/participation/240927hnsw>

73 <https://www.thehca.org.au/hca-assembly-2025>

74 <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8934795/nsw-pledges-450k-for-hunter-social-housing-revival/>

# HAMILTON SOUTH IS READY TO RISE



We've been through struggle, but we're still standing. This community is full of heart, strength, and people who care.

Change starts with us — neighbors helping neighbors, voices being heard, and small wins that grow into something bigger.

**We're not waiting to be 'fixed.'**  
**We're building a better future, together.**

Image: Motivation post taken from Hamilton South Community Solutions Facebook page (Nov'25)

Following a recruitment process and internal restructuring at Homes NSW, in 2025, the Tenant Participation Unit staffing plan divided the workforce into Six Local Districts. The Northern District, which covers Newcastle, the Hunter, and the North Coast of NSW, will employ 3 team members: a Team Leader, a Senior Tenant Participation Officer, and a Tenant Participation and Engagement Officer.<sup>75</sup>

Together, the team is to deliver activities aligned with the themes of *Voice*, *Belonging*, and *Opportunity* to advance the Homes NSW vision of '*delivering quality homes and services that change lives and end homelessness*.'<sup>76</sup>

The Tenant Participation team is expected to work in synergy with the Communities and Place team under the Programs and Partnerships Directorate.<sup>77</sup>

The residents-run Facebook page, named after the one-time tenants' group, Hamilton South Community Solutions, continues to operate, updating subscribers

about upcoming events and initiatives at the estate. In early 2026, these included a Kid's Barber visit and a notification about a Hunter Community Alliance "Listening Session" event for residents scheduled for February 2026.

75 Email correspondence with Homes NSW stakeholder (21 January 2026)

76 Presentation by Homes NSW (November 2025)

77 Email correspondence with Homes NSW stakeholder (21 January 2026)

# CONCLUSION

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Looking back over decades of trials and tribulations in Tenant Participation programs across NSW public housing, it is possible to identify peaks and valleys in their impact. Changes in the political landscape and shifts in the popularity of various approaches to estate development and resident engagement have led to fluctuations in program quality and meaningful tenant participation.

At its most impactful, the Tenant Participation program provided pathways for tenant associations to undertake small independent initiatives, make requests of their housing provider, and provide feedback on proposed policy changes or site development plans. At its lowest point, Tenant Participation was reduced to public housing renters attending a monthly afternoon tea get-together and discussing their concerns with third-party facilitators.

Depending on which theory of engagement and influence one adheres to, there is reason to suggest that, to date, even in their prime, none of the activities, initiatives and programs facilitated genuine tenant participation in public housing, meaning that, government agencies, like the Department of Housing, Housing NSW and now Homes NSW, have so far failed to meet the 1980s aspirational goal of *'ensure[ing] that tenants have maximum opportunity to participate in the management of their dwellings and estates and in the development of public housing policies.'*<sup>78</sup>

To date, tenants' participation in decision-making has been limited to stakeholder consultation on existing redevelopment plans, listening to opinions, and receiving information about the government's decisions. NSW tenants couldn't dream of having voting powers over significant events affecting their homes, such as renewal, redevelopment, or relocation. Their influence is limited to the conditions surrounding the management of those significant events and their impact on tenants' individual lives.

This level of limited influence is not likely to change, given the comments made in 2023 by the Minister for Housing, Rose Jackson, who referenced the Compact for Renewal (published by Shelter NSW, Tenants' Union of NSW and City Futures Research Centre UNSW in 2017), as 'a really good document that talks about delivering control, autonomy, agency and voice' and foreshadowed returning to the principles outlined in the document when managing renewal of public housing properties.

Tenants' influence is also likely to remain low as long as their challenging material conditions limit their capacity to form and join tenant-led groups, meaningfully participate in them, and collectively lobby for the changes they envisage.

Additionally, given the government's "no wrong door" approach to accessing subsidised housing, it should be reflected not only in the way tenancies are managed but also in how tenants are included in decision making, through Tenant Participation initiatives, regardless of the type of housing they reside in; be it public, community or Aboriginal housing.

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78 [https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num\\_ct/hegardlessgovernment'sa1984207/sch1.html](https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num_ct/hegardlessgovernment'sa1984207/sch1.html)

Since the aspirational goal of 'maximum opportunity to participate in the management of their dwellings and estates' was articulated in the 1980s, the shift in policies of successive governments saw support for and investment in public housing communities decline, the waitlist for public homes stretch out and the impacts of economic pressures and ill physical and mental health compound for people on government benefits. These combined factors created an environment of growing disenfranchisement for tenants and neglect of their neighbourhoods, rather than a space for "maximum opportunity for participation."

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## **1. Homes NSW rebuilds their knowledge and deepens their understanding of the communities they are to support for Tenant Participation in public housing.**

Prior to successive governments combining and reducing the number of avenues available to tenants seeking to actively participate in shaping their neighbourhoods, some government and “interagency” initiatives recognised the needs and particular circumstances of different people and responded accordingly.

Years of reduced capacity, limited and/or unsuitable engagement strategies resulted in a regrettable knowledge gap and a loss of insight into the individual communities’ needs and the dynamics between tenants.

To rebuild trust and deepen its understanding of the communities it’s meant to assist, any future Homes NSW program focused on Tenant Participation and Engagement will need to invest significant resources in listening to and consulting with tenants. These knowledge (re)building activities need to be developed in consultation with the tenants who will attend so that their format suits and satisfies the expectations of each community. Much consideration will need to be given to strategies to engage a diverse group of tenants to ensure appropriate representation of all relevant renter stakeholders.

Given the levels of distrust and disillusionment with the government among many tenants in social housing, this long-overdue process of listening will require significant time and effort from stakeholders looking to re-engage public housing communities.

## **2. Overall significant improvement to the standard and quality of public housing dwellings.**

To meaningfully shift the current status quo of tenant disengagement and disempowerment and create a space for genuine engagement in Tenant Participation initiatives, the quality of public housing properties must improve significantly.

As it stands, many of the cases brought to the attention of Tenant Advice and Advocacy Services’ advocates assisting renters living in social housing include unaddressed maintenance and repairs issues. Tenants spend months, and sometimes years, calling, inquiring, and advocating for the most basic and necessary improvements to their living conditions.

Until the overall standard of living in public housing is improved, tenants’ participation in any form of governance will remain stifled by the material challenges of mundane (solvable yet unresolved) issues such as leaky roofs, missing doors and windows, mouldy carpets, and broken fences.

Once the conditions in public housing properties are improved and tenants have the capacity to look beyond immediate challenges of their material conditions, their ability and willingness to engage with issues related to their broader environment and community are more likely to increase and remain present, enabling tenant participation initiatives to thrive.

### **3. Return to more bespoke, responsive and appropriately resourced initiatives in Tenant Participation and Engagement in public housing.**

Following the deep listening and knowledge gathering, each community, with support from qualified staff, can begin the process of surfacing their most priority concerns and areas of collective interest. Understanding the drivers and motivations of each individual community is necessary to devise an action plan for how best to address and fulfil them.

The previous single-agenda, one-size-fits-all approach of TPCE, with strictly prescribed budgets, has proven ineffective, as it failed to recognise and address the individual needs of specific communities. A more responsive, bespoke approach to people's needs is required to ensure that tenants' action plans are executed and that promises made to community members are fulfilled.

Access to funds and grants will be integral to delivering responsive, appropriate events and initiatives that align with tenants' needs. Without the ability to deliver on commitments in a reasonable timeframe and at an appropriate scale, programs will struggle to rebuild the trust lost over the last decade and will likely lose any good accrued during the deep listening consultation process.

### **4. Commitment to delivering long-term planned, consistently run and critically reviewed programs as part of Tenant Participation and Engagement.**

In the past, what plagued various tenant participation programs and initiatives, more than anything, was inconsistent application, abrupt cessation of activities, and inadequate evaluation. Repeated changes and budgetary adjustments have led to many initiatives being cut prematurely, resulting in a consequent loss of community engagement and trust. High staff turnover and unexpected changes to the operations of broader programs have been disruptive, contributing to further erosion of community confidence in any future Tenant Participation scheme.

Some programs, such as the long-running Housing Communities Assistance Program, have been discontinued without any evaluation or review, resulting in the loss of significant data on past strategies that could have informed future best practices. This combined loss of information from operational evaluation and disconnection from the community following the cessation of programs set the stage for the creation of ineffective initiatives such as TPCE and should be avoided.

Instead, each initiative should be developed in collaboration with the community, grounded in deep listening and understanding of its needs. Tenant Participation in social housing requires foundational trust and consistent resident engagement. Both of these need time to grow before any activities and ventures undertaken by the community members can gain momentum and bear fruit.

For these reasons, no tenant participation model should be cut or significantly altered without consultation, evaluation, and input from all stakeholders, with particular emphasis on the views and needs of the most affected by the potential changes: social housing renters themselves.

### **5. Tenant Participation program utilises existing networks and builds operationally sustainable partnerships.**

As part of the Homes NSW Partnerships and Program Directorate, the Tenant Participation program is well placed to engage with NGOs and other community organisations for the benefit of tenants.

Past experiences have shown that for an “interagency” collaboration of services to be successful, it needs to be funded to operate and deliver its own outcomes, rather than being an ad hoc activity added to the workload of workers otherwise unable to engage in the partnership long-term.

Throughout history, NSW Tenant Participation schemes have aspired to offer tenants pathways to strengthen their understanding of renters’ rights and their ability to self-advocate. While ad hoc collaboration with the Tenancy Advice and Advocacy Network has been recorded, the scheme has not to date built a state-wide partnership with the TAAS Network.

With appropriate funding, the network of renters’ rights advocates can become a reliable, consistent partner for residents who come into contact with the Tenant Participation and Engagement program framework, seeking assistance with their tenancy issues. The TAAS Network employs and supports experienced staff who can facilitate advice, education and outreach sessions for tenants in social housing. The partnership will enable easier, faster access to the resources needed to manage and maintain safe, stable tenancies.

Overall, improved access to a range of services will not only support early intervention and tenancy management but also positively impact tenants’ wellbeing, address computer literacy gaps, and reduce stigma around asking for help.

### **6. Creation of government-funded, independent state-wide Tenant Participation Panels for the benefit of all social housing tenants and their housing providers across the sector.**

In-house Tenant Participation programs run the risk of providing ineffective pathways for tenant involvement in policy or management issues, as they may be conflicted about empowering tenants to openly express independent or critical views of their landlord. Providing a neutral, independent space for these deliberations would alleviate this conflict of interest.

That’s why, in addition to the Tenant Participation Program initiatives built to support grassroots activity in each community, sector-wide Tenant Participation Panels should be introduced. The Panels would facilitate information sharing with the broader tenant stakeholdership and provide resident feedback into ongoing evaluations and reviews conducted by their landlords. Creating independent panels, open to all social housing tenants, offers a whole-of-system avenue for tenant participation in public, community and Aboriginal housing.

Tenant participation Panels would expand access to independent information, empower tenants to make informed choices and provide considered input into ongoing decisions concerning not just their own tenancy but also social housing management questions more broadly. The creation of such panels would contribute to harmonising the experience of finding a home through the government's "no wrong door" policy for renters living and engaging in their community across public, community and Aboriginal housing alike.

If appropriately funded, the Tenant Participation Panels could become an independently facilitated, renter-designed and data-rich resource with the potential to benefit all stakeholders and improve tenancy outcomes for renters across all types of social housing settings.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Advancing Tenant Voice** project would not have been possible without the generous support from people from across the housing sector who shared their experiences and insights on the subjects of community development and tenant participation to help inform the research and writing of this investigation.

The Tenants' Union of NSW would like to thank:

Geoff Turnbull (*Redwatch spokesperson and advocate*)  
Jo-Anne Allen (*Homes NSW*)  
Glenn Beatty (*Vinnies NSW*)  
Michelle Craig (*Aboriginal Resource Unit*)  
Dare Kavanagh (*Tenant Participation Program manager, Homes NSW*)  
Susan Hawkswood (*former NABs secretariat; public housing tenant*)  
Phoenix van Dyke (*EATS tenant advocate, former HCAP worker, Illawarra*)  
Jesse Taylor (*Mission Australia Tenant Participation*)  
Shaylie Pryer (*Hunter Community Alliance organiser*)  
Anna O'Shea  
Louise Riley  
Christie McDonald (*Redfern Legal Centre tenant advocate relocations Waterloo project*)  
Carrey Cultra (*Tenant Engagement Waterloo Homes NSW*)

Adj. Prof. Michael Darcy (*Western Sydney University*)  
Dr David Lilley (*UNSW Sydney*)  
Dr Alistair Sisson (*Macquarie University*)