



THE UNIVERSITY
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Tenant Engagement with Common Ground Queensland

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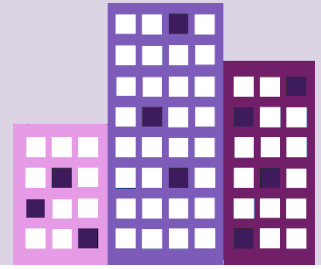
Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| BCG | Brisbane Common Ground |
| CGQ | Common Ground Queensland |
| ESB | English-Speaking Background |
| NESB | Non-English Speaking Background |
| PSH | Permanent Supportive Housing |
| QMHC | Queensland Mental Health Commission |

Executive Summary

Tenant Engagement with Common Ground Queensland

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What was the research about?

Tenant engagement is increasingly identified in literature, policy, and practice as an important means of supporting tenants' contribution to and satisfaction with their housing. This research examines the nature, experience, and relevance of tenant engagement for tenants living at Brisbane Common Ground (BCG), which is a single site model of permanent supportive housing provided by Common Ground Queensland (CGQ). In particular, this research investigates what tenant engagement means to tenants, including what, if any, type of engagement tenants know about, participate in, and prefer. Recognising that tenant engagement is embedded within a wider practice context, the research also examines what is done by CGQ to enable tenant engagement, what works well, and the barriers to achieving tenant engagement.

What did the research entail?

The research draws on a mixed method research design that utilises multiple data sources to build a picture of what tenant engagement does, and could, look like with CGQ.

Qualitative data: We draw on semi-structured interviews with tenants of CGQ (n=55) to understand what tenant engagement means to them, including what forms of engagement they do and do not want, and what does or does not work well in facilitating the engagement they are interested in having. We also draw on semi-structured interviews with professionals associated with CGQ (n=6), including a CGQ Board member, CGQ staff, and Micah Projects staff. Finally, we draw on participant observations (n=5) of tenant engagement activities with CGQ, including tenant engagement at tenant forums and tenant working group meetings.

Quantitative data: We also draw on and analyse tenant survey data. The survey was purposefully designed to capture tenants' views on, knowledge about, and interest in tenant engagement with CGQ. The survey analysis draws on responses from 72 CGQ tenants.

What did the research find?

We identify four key pillars of tenant engagement with housing providers.



PILLAR 1 **RIGHTS**

As their home, tenants have a right to influence their housing and living conditions.



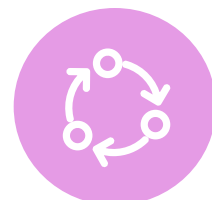
PILLAR 2 **KNOWLEDGE**

Tenants have unique knowledge and experience that comes from being a tenant.



PILLAR 3 **PURPOSE**

The purpose of housing providers is to exist for tenants.



PILLAR 4 **IMPROVEMENT**

Through engagement, a continuous improvement cycle is formed.

Forms of tenant engagement: Through our engagement with tenants and supportive housing providers, our research identifies four forms of tenant engagement. These include engagement that does occur with CGQ, along with future and ideal forms of tenant engagement to be realised. The forms of tenant engagement represent a suite of opportunities that tenants may pursue based on their experiences, priorities, and interests. We demonstrate that what is critical is not whether tenants do or do not engage, rather that active measures are taken by CGQ to create conditions for tenants to have opportunities to engage should they choose to do so. The housing provider organisational culture is critical to create conditions for tenant engagement.

Tenant survey: The survey found that tenants place importance on the need for CGQ to engage tenants in decisions that affect them (81%) and policies that affect tenant engagement and participation (83%). We also find that most tenants are familiar with tenant engagement initiatives (68%) and feel they have the opportunity to provide input into decisions that affect them (72%). Tenants are generally interested in being involved in tenant engagement initiatives (69%), although this interest varies slightly by demographic characteristics.

Tenant experiences: Drawing on in-depth tenant interviews, we find that tenant engagement is understood differently by different tenants. Regardless of what tenant engagement is understood to mean, however, tenants view tenant engagement initiatives as invitations to contribute, and they exercise agency in deciding the extent to which they choose to accept these invitations, if at all. To enable tenants to engage in a way that is meaningful to them, it is critical that tenants are made aware of engagement initiatives, where and when they are happening, and how to make contributions in a way that is accessible for them. Looking to the future, tenants foreground the importance of fostering a culture of mutual support, respect, and shared dignity.

Principles of tenant engagement: We identify seven principles that conceptualise tenant engagement with CGQ. These principles provide guidance that can be used to inform changes to broader social and supportive housing systems to facilitate tenant engagement. The principles illustrate that tenant engagement cannot meaningfully be imposed upon housing providers. Instead, it must be approached as a resource to enhance the interests of both tenants and housing providers.

7 Principles of tenant engagement

- 1 BELIEF** — A *belief* that tenants have a right to engage on the basis that housing is their home.
- 2 WILLINGNESS** — A *willingness* to change policies and procedures based on tenants' needs and preferences.
- 3 RESOURCES** — The provision of *resources* and plans dedicated to enabling tenant engagement.
- 4 DIVERSITY** — Appreciating and valuing the *diversity* of forms that tenant engagement can assume.
- 5 ACCESSIBILITY** — Ensuring *accessibility* to enable tenant engagement.
- 6 COMMUNICATION** — Providing systematic and transparent *communication* with tenants.
- 7 BALANCE** — Ensuring a *balance* of tenant engagement with other operational requirements.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Funded by the Queensland Mental Health Commission (QMHC), this report presents the findings of a study of tenant engagement with Common Ground Queensland (CGQ). The study seeks to generate knowledge about the nature, experience, and relevance of tenant engagement. In particular, it investigates what tenant engagement means to tenants, including what, if any, type of engagement they know about, participate in, and prefer.

Recognising that tenant engagement is embedded within a wider practice and resource ecosystem that includes the housing provider, the research also examines what is done by CGQ to enable tenant engagement, what works well, and what the barriers are to achieving tenant engagement. Central to the positioning of tenant engagement within an ecosystem is the necessity to identify the resources, practices, and culture required to enable tenant engagement.

The research positions tenant engagement as a dynamic between a tenant and the housing provider. Conceptualised as a dynamic, this means that tenant agency is important to understand and realise tenant engagement, and so too are the actions and steps taken by the housing provider to give meaning to and implement tenant engagement initiatives. Important to achieving tenant engagement is the manner in which the housing provider prioritises it as a policy and incorporates it into its core practices. The dynamic nature of tenant engagement requires an empirical investigation that includes both tenants and housing provider.

The following research questions are addressed in the empirical study:

- What tenant engagement initiatives do tenants know about, prefer, and participate in?
- How does CGQ create the conditions for tenant engagement, including practices, resourcing, and governance?
- What are the forms of tenant engagement with CGQ?
- What pillars underpin the realisation of tenant engagement?
- What principles inform tenant engagement?
- What lessons do the experiences of tenant engagement with CGQ represent for informing Queensland's broader social and supportive housing systems?

Addressing these research questions, the study aims to contribute to knowledge at three linked levels: (1) to CGQ as the housing provider where the study was conducted; (2) to the academic and practice literature on permanent supportive housing (this is timely as in September 2024 the Queensland Government (2024) released a supportive housing policy); and (3) to the social housing sector more broadly. Throughout this report, we use the term social housing to refer both public housing, where the property is owned and managed by the state, as well as community housing, where housing is managed by a community housing provider that is either owned by the community housing provider or the state.

Context and background

The study was conducted at Brisbane Common Ground (BCG). BCG is a single site model of permanent supportive housing (PSH) with onsite support. It is owned by the Queensland Government and the 146 tenancies include an approximate 50-50 social mix of tenants with low to moderate income and people who have exited chronic homelessness. As a model of PSH, there is an organisational separation between the housing provider – CGQ – and the onsite support provider – Micah Projects. The housing provider and support provider collaborate in a purposeful model to achieve PSH (Perales et al. 2024).

Central to BCG, and PSH more broadly, is the aim to represent a long-term solution to homelessness for people most excluded from mainstream housing, health, and support systems. Recognising this broader context, this study examines tenant engagement with CGQ.

Focusing on tenant engagement with CGQ is significant. There is a legislative imperative for community housing providers to engage tenants. Providers are required to demonstrate policies, procedures, or strategies for tenant engagement, as well as a variety of opportunities for feedback (National Regulatory System for Community Housing 2020, p. 15).

Research design

This mixed-methods research draws on and triangulates multiple data sources. First, we conducted participant observations (n=5) of tenant engagement activities with CGQ. These included observations of tenant engagement at tenant forums (n=2) lasting 90 minutes each and tenant working group meetings (n=3) lasting 60 minutes each. Participant observation is a research method that seeks to capture actions as they occur. This method of observing events that aim to foster tenant engagement are important to triangulate alongside the data sources from semi-structured interviews and surveys about the perceptions and ideas of tenant engagement as an ideal.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews (n=6) with professionals associated with CGQ, including a CGQ Board member (n=1), CGQ staff (n=4), and Micah Projects staff (n=1). To protect the anonymity of this small and potentially identifiable group of interview participants, in this report we refer to them using the broad title ‘supportive housing provider.’ Semi-structured interviews with supportive housing providers sought to examine (1) how they understood tenant engagement, (2) what they did, if anything, to facilitate tenant engagement, (3) what they observed as working well to enable tenant engagement, and (4) what ideas they had to improve tenant engagement.

Third, we conducted semi-structured interviews with tenants of CGQ (n=55). These interviews sought to understand what tenant engagement meant to tenants, including what forms of engagement they did and did not want, and what worked well and did not work well in facilitating any engagement they were interested in having. Through notices shared with all 146 CGQ tenants, we invited any tenant willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. The 55 tenant participants represent all tenants who volunteered to participate in an interview during the period interviews were conducted (July and August 2024). Tenants who did participate were provided a \$50 voucher for their time and contribution.

Fourth, we drew on and analysed tenant survey data. The survey instrument was purposefully designed to capture views on, knowledge about, and personal interest in tenant engagement with CGQ. A total of 72 tenants responded to the survey. The survey instrument was added to the two-

yearly tenant survey administered by CGQ in October 2024. In our analyses, we focus on categorical variables that reflect tenants' familiarity with, the importance of, and opportunities for participation, as well as personal interest in tenant engagement. We present results from bivariate analyses of tenant engagement by demographic characteristics and the duration of tenancy with CGQ.

The research design has benefited from generous and expert contributions from several people. First, the research project received significant enhancement from a Strategic Research Advisory Governance group. This group was comprised of membership from two tenants of CGQ, one social housing tenant outside of CGQ, along with staff members from CGQ, the QMHC, Q-Shelter, the Queensland Government, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Queensland. The group met four times and provided advice on the research design, data collection, analysis, writing, and dissemination.

Second, the broader study was demonstrably improved because of the deep collaboration with three tenants from the Strategic Research Advisory Governance group. Reflecting their contributions to this study, two of these tenants were employed as Research Assistants at The University of Queensland. All three tenants provided their time and knowledge to inform (1) the conceptualisation of the study, (2) the data collection instruments, and (3) data analysis and report writing. Two of the three tenants also contributed by co-conducting some of the semi-structured interviews with tenants. Consistent with The University of Queensland policy on authorship that is based on intellectual contribution, all three of these tenants are named as co-authors to this report.

Third, tenants were invited to provide feedback and advice on the preliminary findings through a tenant reflection workshop held in November 2024. All CGQ tenants were invited to attend the workshop and were provided a two-page summary of the preliminary findings prior to the workshop. Seven tenants attended; tenants who were unable to attend the reflection workshop were invited to provide written or oral feedback on the preliminary findings in either the week prior to or after the workshop.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Tenant engagement is increasingly identified in literature, policy, and practice as an important means of supporting tenants' participation in and satisfaction with their housing. Indeed, in Australia, there are system requirements for social housing providers to ensure that there are appropriate opportunities for tenants to engage in planning and housing service delivery (National Regulatory System Community Housing 2020). To set the context for the current research, this chapter provides a brief exploration of the concept of tenant engagement within social housing contexts¹, including: (1) how tenant engagement is defined and approached; (2) guidelines for effective tenant engagement; (3) the successes of tenant engagement; and (4) the challenges of tenant engagement. The chapter concludes by identifying a core gap in the research literature that has shaped our approach to the current research.

Defining and approaching tenant engagement

Although tenant engagement is increasingly recognised as an important activity that social housing providers should be facilitating, ideas on how best to conceptualise and progress tenant engagement are contested (Preece 2019). Despite no firmly agreed-on definition, existing literature broadly views tenant engagement as encompassing a range of activities and approaches that are intended to increase tenants' influence over, and satisfaction with, their housing (Condie and Ayres 2024).

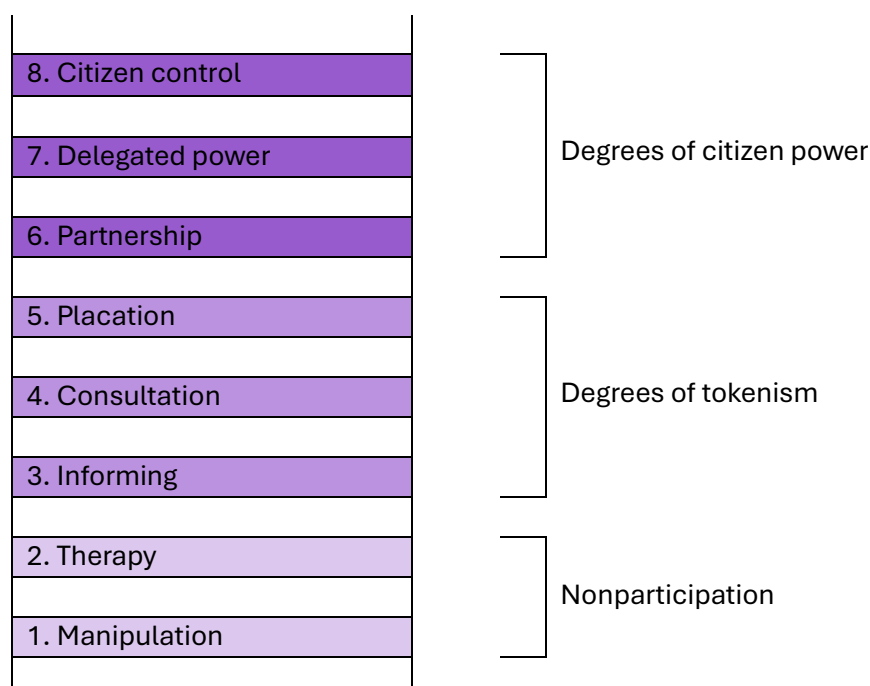
Just as there are variations in how tenant engagement is defined, so too are there variations in how tenant engagement is approached in practice (see for example Arnstein 1969; IAP2 International Federation 2018; Pawson et al. 2012; Redmond and Norris 2007). Models for engagement typically focus on the ways in which people can influence or direct the decisions that affect them. For example, the foundational framework that tenant engagement rests on is Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen empowerment (Figure 1). In this model, people are seen as having basic citizenship rights and the goal is to achieve the highest level of citizen power possible.

Therefore, there exists a vast range of tenant engagement activities that housing providers can facilitate, and these activities fall on different rungs of Arnstein's ladder depending largely on the extent to which participants are afforded power. Importantly, Redmond and Norris (2007) note that social housing providers and tenants must reach an explicit shared understanding of engagement activities and their meanings, as these can be interpreted very differently by different stakeholders. For example, although Arnstein conceptualises consultation as a tokenistic activity, consultation "may imply completely different things to tenants and [providers]; the

¹ Although the current research is focused specifically on tenant engagement in a permanent supportive housing program, there is extremely limited existing literature investigating tenant engagement in permanent supportive housing contexts (i.e., where tenants are providing social housing along with linked multidisciplinary supports). As such, this chapter relies predominantly on literature related to tenant engagement in the context of social housing, where tenants are provided with housing but not necessarily linked supports.

former may see it as conferring real power of decision, while the latter may merely see it as obtaining views and information” (Redmond and Norris 2007, p. 189).

Figure 1: Arnstein’ (1969) ladder of citizen empowerment



Overall, different models for tenant engagement, and the activities associated with them, do not provide guidance about how the extent of engagement is decided, and by whom. While the transfer of power is implicitly valued in models such as Arnstein’s ladder, these transfers of power also include related responsibilities which demand time, knowledge, and energy that the tenants might not have available or wish to offer (Huisman and Czischke 2022). Further, the items being made available for tenant engagement might not be considered priorities for the tenants that are intended to be engaged. It is therefore important to ensure that the forms and motivations for tenant engagement reflect the needs and priorities of the tenants themselves.

Guidelines for effective tenant engagement

Social housing providers in Australia (Believe Housing Australia n.d.; Unity Housing 2023; Women’s Housing Company 2020) and internationally (Corporation for Supportive Housing 2022; Tuath Housing 2022) are increasingly recognising the importance of adopting more effective practices of tenant engagement. Reflecting the previously discussed diversity and complexity involved in designing and approaching tenant engagement activities, various standards and guidelines for effective tenant engagement are increasingly being designed by and for these social housing providers. While these guidelines are diverse, they tend to provide relatively similar sets of recommendations to support social housing providers to engage more meaningfully with their tenants.

In Australia, for example, a recent publication by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute drew extensively on literature from a range of fields to produce recommendations for facilitating successful tenant engagement (Stone et al. 2024). These included providing formal opportunities for tenant participation through organisation-wide activities; ensuring tenant engagement is led through clear and transparent processes (including clearly setting out role

descriptions and remuneration issues); and making available ongoing support for individuals engaged in the participatory process (Stone et al. 2024).

In the United States, the Corporation for Supportive Housing (2022) published a similar guide, prioritising tenant voice and power. This guide highlights the importance of the housing provider ensuring that tenants have meaningful opportunities to engage in leadership; tenants are equally included in organisational processes; the housing provider clearly documents how feedback is incorporated into practice; and staff and tenant feedback is actively solicited, with tenants afforded the freedom to choose how they would like to provide feedback.

In Canada, Evans and MacDonald (2023) identified relationship-building and community-building as promising practices in permanent supportive housing that are associated with tenant retention and program success. Practices such as “a relentless effort to engage people and build relationships” (p. 146) and “trying to make sure that we are all being treated as equals and have the opportunity share and learn” (p. 147) were linked with the successes of permanent supportive housing. While these were not explicitly linked with formal tenant engagement programs, these values are likely to be well aligned with tenant engagement possibilities.

Although there are differences in the exact guidelines presented in the above examples, they highlight the importance of moving up Arnstein’s ladder, beyond degrees of tokenism and towards citizen power to ensure that tenant engagement achieves beneficial outcomes for tenants, as defined by them.

Benefits of tenant engagement

Although it is often argued that tenant engagement has benefits for both social housing tenants and housing providers, there is relatively little existing research exploring exactly what these benefits are, particularly from a tenant perspective (Preece 2019). However, the research that does exist shows that when done well, tenant engagement can result in tangible benefits for those involved. For example, Manzi et al.’s (2015) investigation into the benefits of tenant engagement in a London social housing provider found that as tenant engagement increased over a period of six years, there were also substantial improvements in tenant satisfaction and service efficiency.

Similar benefits were identified in an important study from Pawson et al. (2012), which investigated tenant engagement across England, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Tenants were found to benefit from the opportunities to have their voices heard and the related culture of mutual respect; organisations benefited from improved services and reduced complaints; and both tenants and the housing providers benefited from the tenants having a better quality of life. Importantly, tenants interviewed for Pawson et al.’s (2012) research also demonstrated that having a voice was important but it was not the only necessary factor in tenant engagement – they also “wanted their views to be treated seriously and for their contribution to result in real change” (p. 53). A further critical element of tenant engagement was identified that tenants, whether engaged or not, received adequate feedback about the results of their engagement (Pawson et al. 2012). This reflects many of the key guidelines for effective engagement outlined in the previous section and places the onus on the housing provider actively playing a role in the dynamic of tenant engagement.

Challenges of tenant engagement

In contrast to the very limited research on the successes of tenant engagement in the context of social housing, there is a small body of literature providing evidence on the challenges to successful tenant engagement.

One common challenge relates to different understandings held by providers and tenants about the purposes and strategies of engagement (Carr et al. 2022; Foroughi 2017; McKee and Cooper 2008; Stone et al. 2024; Zubrzycka-Czarnecka 2021). These issues are suggested to be based in, and/or exacerbated by, existing power differentials between the tenants and the social housing provider (Foroughi 2017; McKee and Cooper 2008; Preece 2019; Stone et al. 2024). For example, a review by Stone et al. (2024) found that tenants and housing providers have different views about what constitutes tenant participation, and that power differentials between the two cohorts shape what tenants' participation may look like in practice.

Similarly, Foroughi's (2017) analysis of tenant engagement in the form of participatory budgeting in a social housing provider in Canada found substantial challenges as a result of the lack of clear definitions and goals of engagement, mismatches between stakeholder expectations, and concerns about the capabilities of tenants. For example, Foroughi (2017) notes that engagement activities are sometimes seen by tenants as a "liberating and empowering tool... while others view it solely as a management strategy to channel, and sometimes abort, the tenants' complaints" (p. 2). Further, tenant representatives reported feeling that their opportunities for engagement were mediated by the organisation's priorities and interests.

Another challenge identified in the literature is the difficulty housing providers face in moving beyond tokenistic participation and towards citizen power. In a recent study from NSW, Condie and Ayres (2024) examined how social housing providers seek to engage their tenants through social media. They found that social housing providers are using social media to try and better engage with tenants. However, the engagement was assessed as tending towards the housing providers using social media platforms to provide information to tenants alongside some levels of consultation (e.g., tenant surveys, advisory boards), but demonstrating that they "often struggle to get to the final rung of 'empower'" (Condie and Ayres 2024, p. 15).

Another important theme in the literature identified by Stone et al. (2024) is that, even when tenant participation is broadly successful, there is a necessity to consider the reasons why some tenants do not engage. This is particularly important as Pawson et al. (2012) found that tenants had concerns that actively engaged tenants do not necessarily represent the views of those who are not engaged.

Research on Ireland's Tuath Housing provides some insight into the barriers preventing tenants from engaging in participatory opportunities even when these opportunities are made available to them. Although Tuath Housing takes an ambitious proactive approach to engagement, tenants who responded to their 2020 survey (1,770 of 5,648 households) reported barriers to engagement including that they were not aware of the tenant engagement initiative (52%); did not know how to get involved (48%); lacked the confidence and skills to get involved (45%); did not expect their engagement to make a difference (36%); and did not have the time for engagement activities (34%). Some respondents also indicated that they preferred to keep to themselves; that they felt powerless, apathetic, and/or that they would not be listened to; and that issues of stigma and mistrust prevented their engagement (Tuath Housing 2022).

Finally, it is important to note that research has not yet identified whether, or how, tenant engagement contributes to greater tenant influence in the decisions that affect their lives (Foroughi 2017; McKee and Cooper 2008; Preece 2019). In part, this is because across the contemporary research literature, there is a scarcity of literature that directly represents tenant perspectives. Indeed, much of the literature presents the perceptions of the housing providers, and some appear to assume the mis/alignment between housing provider perceptions and tenant expectations is about the level of engagement that is available and/or desirable. This is not to suggest that provider representations are unreliable but, considering that potential mismatches in expectation between housing providers and tenants has been identified as a substantial barrier to effective engagement (Carr et al. 2022; Stone et al. 2024; Zubrzycka-Czarnecka 2021), this is a significant gap in the current literature and speaks to the need for a greater engagement with tenant voices about their needs and preferences for tenant engagement opportunities.

A recent study argued that the failure of housing or homelessness service providers to deeply engage with and benefit from lived experience was a product of the stigma associated with social housing and homelessness (Martin et al. 2024). On the one hand, the research found that people with lived experience of social housing and homelessness were disempowered and unseen, and on the other, individuals with lived experience articulated a range of ways that they could contribute to policy and practice if the resources and systems enabled it (Martin et al. 2024).

Conclusion

While tenant engagement in social housing is not consistently defined, there are identifiable and important themes across the literature regarding its use, benefits, and challenges. In particular, sufficient evidence suggests that tenant engagement can increase tenant satisfaction and support the successful operation of housing organisations. Whether housing providers endorse the concept of tenant engagement as a requirement or principle, implementation challenges may undermine the effectiveness of tenant engagement in practice. In sum, much more research regarding the views and experiences of tenants themselves is necessary to form a more comprehensive picture of how tenant engagement can most effectively be used for the benefit of social housing tenants and providers alike.

Chapter 3: Forms of Tenant Engagement

Introduction

Through our deep engagement with tenants and supportive housing providers, our research has identified four forms of tenant engagement. These forms of tenant engagement include engagement that does occur with CGQ, along with engagement that both tenants and supportive housing providers identified as future and ideal forms of tenant engagement to strive for. The four forms of tenant engagement do not indicate a hierarchy of value. Rather, as we demonstrate in this chapter, the different forms of tenant engagement represent a suite of opportunities that some tenants may pursue based on their experiences, priorities, and interests.

We demonstrate that what is critical is not whether tenants do or do not engage in any of the four forms of tenant engagement. In the Stretch2Engage Framework championed by the Queensland Mental Health Commission (2017), the responsibility for engagement is placed clearly with organisations, rather than with people who use their services. Consistent with this principle, it is critical that the supportive housing provider takes active measures to create the conditions for tenants to have opportunities to engage.

Four forms of tenant engagement

We distinguish four forms of tenant engagement in terms of scope and direction of the relationship and in terms of whether this is current practice or a proposed innovation. Based on our data analysis these are: (1) tenant to tenancy manager, (2) tenant to housing provider, (3) potential tenant-led, and (4) potential tenants contributing to governance. We present these four forms in turn.

Tenant to tenancy manager engagement

The first form of engagement is tenant to tenancy manager. This includes the myriad instances of dialogue and exchange between tenant and tenancy manager that facilitate day to day living. It is engagement that fulfils practical necessities, particularly in terms of complying with tenancy obligations.

Thought about as a component of service delivery, tenant to tenancy manager engagement can take place along the continuum of a tenancy and can help tenants gain knowledge of housing systems and responsibilities. In turn, this can equip tenants with the knowledge they require to meet the obligations of their tenancies. A supportive housing provider explained the importance of this form of one-on-one engagement:

We have this concept of tenant engagement being a big group thing, or, you know, we collect massive data through surveys and facilitate groups and so forth. But no, underneath that, there's a lot of one-on-one. And that's feedback and engagement as well... It's literally every little detail of tenancy management is tenant engagement. So the allocation, the sign up, the induction, and then responding during tenancy.

Tenant to tenancy manager engagement is thus not a form of engagement where a tenant seeks to influence their housing. It is rather a form of engagement that provides tenants with knowledge about their housing through an information exchange.

The information exchange can and does occur in the other direction. Tenant to tenancy manager engagement also includes activities where tenancy managers develop more informed understanding of tenants, which in turn enables tenancy managers to deliver their services in a way that is congruent with tenant needs and preferences. This form of engagement is a knowledge exchange between the tenant and the tenancy manager that enables the latter to meet the needs of the former.

For people accessing permanent supportive housing or other models of social housing because of an assessment that their housing needs are not met through the market – which is a primary reason social housing and especially permanent supportive housing is currently allocated in Australia – the information exchange through this form of tenant engagement can be valuable. A tenant remarked upon their experiences:

They make it really easy for us, because there's reception here, you know, 24/7 you can always ask to see them during the day. And if [anyone is] available at Common Ground, or... anyone from Micah, they'll come and see you straight away, which is great. And if not, you can leave a message for them. ... anything to do with tenancy and the actual the room that I live in and stuff that's with Common Ground. If there's any maintenance issues or I asked to be transferred to a bigger room. And I spoke with [the] tenancy manager, and he saw me straight away.

Being able to access tenancy managers for tenancy-related questions and concerns was particularly valuable for supporting tenants to sustain their tenancies. A lack of understanding of tenancy obligations is a reason people lose housing involuntarily (Beer et al. 2006). Likewise, when tenancy managers have a limited or incorrect understanding of tenant needs it can lead to tenancy loss (Parsell et al. 2024). Thus, the two-way knowledge exchange that characterises tenant to tenancy manager engagement is a critical factor in facilitating its success.

Although this is a form of tenant engagement that is primarily an exchange of information from the tenancy manager to the tenant, this exchange can and is progressed by both the tenant approaching the tenancy manager as well as the tenancy manager proactively communicating information to tenants without their direct request. The latter involves the tenancy manager having a well-informed understanding of the critical information that tenants require to comply with their tenancy. It likewise requires the tenancy manager's understanding of the diverse ways that this critical information can most effectively flow back and forth between them and the tenants. A tenant described their experiences:

People have the option to go to Micah to get those things resolved anyway, because then people like [support workers] will take it on board and then take it to Common Ground.

In addition to the direct benefits this form of tenant engagement can achieve, the openness and responsiveness of tenancy managers to engage with tenants on a day-to-day basis can contribute to broader flow on benefits. For example, effective tenant to tenancy manager engagement can create open communication channels and trust so that tenants may be more willing and able to engage with their housing provider to influence change.

Tenant to housing provider engagement

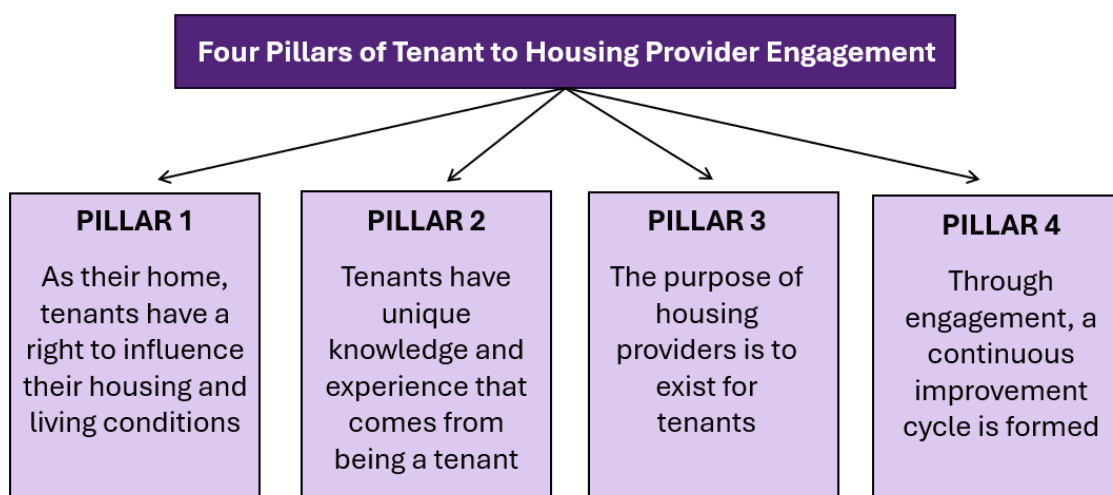
The second form of tenant engagement encompasses activities where tenants aim to influence procedures and policies that directly impact their housing and living environments. As opposed to tenant to tenancy manager engagement to foster mutual information exchange and knowledge

building, the tenant to housing provider engagement is about creating change beyond resolving pressing individual concerns. Indeed, our research found that this change is purposefully directed towards improving tenants' housing and living conditions. In other words, such transformative processes are not simply emergent or inevitable but rather represent positive improvements that are proactively worked towards. What is considered an improvement, moreover, is determined by tenants.

Examples of this engagement include tenants advising on changes to the complaints, compliments, and feedback procedures, as well as tenants changing the policy on visitors accessing the building. Which policies and procedures are earmarked for revisions is based on recommendations by tenants. Once a policy or procedure has been selected for improvement, a working group is formed where tenants provide advice about the precise nature of the desired changes. During one of the working groups on changing the visitor policy, two members of the research team observed how tenants debated the nature of the change. During the exchange, a tenant asked the CEO of CGQ what they thought. The CEO responded that it is up to the tenants to decide what visitor policy they wanted. This represents a practical example where the idea for change and improvement was led by tenants, and then the means of operationalising the change/improvement was similarly led by tenants.

Our research found that tenant to housing provider engagement is premised on four key pillars, as illustrated in Figure 2: (1) as their home, tenants have a right to influence their housing and living conditions; (2) tenants have unique knowledge and experience that comes from being a tenant that provides them with valuable information that should inform change; (3) housing providers exist for tenants; and (4) through engagement between tenant and housing providers, a continuous improvement cycle is formed. These four pillars drive the development of better procedures and policies, ultimately improving the lives of tenants, including through the empowered state obtained through active engagement.

Figure 2: The four key pillars of tenant to housing provider engagement



The first pillar is illustrated by the provocation that tenants have a right to engage with their housing provider because the issue at stake is their home. A supportive housing provider explained:

So they get an opportunity to give us some information up front and their perspectives on what they think we should do with the spaces in the building. You know, most of that stuff we don't, CGQ doesn't really care about, but this is tenants' home. So, they absolutely care about that kind of stuff.

The above supportive housing provider underlines the right of tenants to engage with their housing provider to progress change because the changes that are sought affect tenants in profound ways. Seen through this rationale, tenant to housing provider engagement is a means to realise changes that matter because it is not merely about housing; it is about home. Or more specifically, the matter at hand is housing for the service providers, and home for tenants.

The academic research literature demonstrates that having a degree of autonomy and control is essential to experiencing home and the value that people derive from the meaning of home (Mallett 2004). Indeed, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (2012) formal definition of homelessness takes into account a lack of control and a lack of autonomy to define homelessness. Tenants engaging with their housing provider is thus premised on the realisation that what is at stake is home, and through the tenant to housing provider engagement, there is a mechanism in place for tenants to exercise some of the fundamental elements of what home means, namely autonomy and control. This point is powerfully conveyed by the tenant quote below:

This is my home as it is everybody else's who live here. And to that end, we've also got a stake in what the place is like, and to that end, all who both have a right to participate, but also in participating, it will improve the place.

Autonomy and control are core concepts to the second pillar of the tenant to housing provider engagement logic that emphasises tenants have a knowledge perspective that is valuable. The value of tenant knowledge is obtained through the experiences of being a tenant. A supportive housing provider made this clear when they observed:

We're not the expert of being the tenant. In fact, some of us don't know what that has ever been like, and we'll never know what that's like. So we need to ask so that we understand what that's like.

The supportive housing provider went on to further highlight the knowledge limitations held by housing providers to give additional weight to the tenant perspective:

I only know how to be a [supportive housing provider] of an organisation. We need to ask people, ask the people that are receiving those services.

Whereas the first pillar highlights rights and the idea of home as the justification for tenant to housing provider engagement because it matters more for the former than the latter, the second pillar highlights the insights and perspectives that can only be gleaned from the experiences of being a tenant. Consistent with a moderate interpretation of standpoint theory (Mounk 2023), the second pillar engages with the understanding that it is difficult for a supportive housing provider to understand the challenges, realities, and priorities of being a social housing tenant if this has never been their experience.

Supportive housing providers can, however, understand tenants' experiences when tenants are afforded the opportunity to share the knowledge they have gained through the experience of being a tenant. The third pillar takes the first and second logics further and rests on the assumption that

tenant to housing provider engagement is necessary because housing providers only exist for tenants. A supportive housing provider explained:

Our whole sole purpose is for them. We don't exist. It's like any organisation, you don't exist without your customers. So if we don't have that engagement both ways and deliver what they're looking for, what's the point of being here? And that's the mindset we try to convey.

Having established that tenants have a right to engage (pillar 1) and a unique perspective (pillar 2), this third pillar highlights the housing provider's existence for tenants. The positioning of the housing provider as an entity that exists for tenants helps to outline a powerful justification for tenant to housing provider engagement. This justification is developed and extended through pillar 4 that conceptualises tenant to housing provider engagement as an intrinsic part of the continuous improvement of housing. The rights to engage and knowledge about housing that tenants possess, taken together with the principle that housing providers exist for tenants, propels the argument that tenant to housing provider engagement is about improvement to achieve excellence. A supportive housing provider remarked:

We want to be the best we can. And there's lots of aspects of that, but we want to deliver the best. We want to be the best community housing provider that we possibly can on a whole range of aspects, but particularly in terms of meeting our tenants' needs.

A different supportive housing provider went further to explain how there is no end point for improving their organisation. The organisation must be constantly facilitating opportunities for tenant engagement which will invariably mean there is always more potential for the housing provider to change and improve.

Because you never stop. It's always going to be changing. We'll never get to a point where we're like, yep, no, we know everything now. And that would be my intention to continue working on it.

The above is an important point as it moves beyond continuous improvement in an abstract sense. The remark highlights tenant engagement as authentically taking into account what tenants require and making changes accordingly. Because new people will also commence a tenancy over a period of time, and because existing tenants will very reasonably identify and value different needs over time or express different ideas about what they want from their housing, the statement about never stopping can be understood to reflect that there is no static state of outstanding housing. Rather what constitutes outstanding will change over time, to reflect the dynamic nature of ideas and priorities of tenants that evolve over time. It is then in turn the responsibility for housing providers to progress tenant engagement over the long term so that the changing perspectives and experiences of tenants – new and ongoing – can continue to inform and improve the delivery of housing.

Potential opportunities

The above presentation of tenant to tenancy manager and tenant to housing provider forms of engagement are based on the findings of what is occurring with CGQ. These two forms of engagement do not depict the experiences of all tenants, nevertheless they describe and conceptualise two prominent forms of engagement between tenants and CGQ that is taking place. In addition to these observed forms of tenant engagement, the research identified opportunities for two further forms of tenant engagement, namely tenant-led engagement, and tenant engagement at the governance level.

Tenant engagement in governance

Some supportive housing providers and tenants articulated these two forms of future tenant engagement as an ideal to progress and indeed as the logical progression from the achievements in tenant engagement already realised. There was a consistent sentiment expressed that tenant engagement was, as a supportive housing provider remarked, working well “at a very operational level. But eventually, maybe we need to look at our governance structures and think about how we hear tenant voices at that governance level.” Another supportive housing provider likewise spoke of the importance of tenants contributing to CGQ at the governance level: “So yeah, that governance thing will be the next piece.” The supportive housing provider explained that diversifying the Board to include tenant voices was a priority to progress, and this needs to be progressed through a structure that maintains the confidentiality of all tenants.

Concerns were expressed that tenant membership on the Board would have the consequence of disclosing personal tenant information to tenant Board members. To prevent this breach of privacy, a supportive housing provider articulated that the Board was “setting high expectations” for tenant contributions to governance, which included exploring the establishment of a tenant group, such as a sub-committee, that formally advised the Board. This potential form of tenant engagement is consistent with the Evidence Guidelines for the National Regulatory System Community Housing (2020) that identifies “formal tenant/resident engagement mechanisms such as governing body position(s)” as a threshold for performance requirements.

If a tenant sub-committee to the CGQ Board or another tenant group is formed that is mandated with advising the CGQ Board with tenant perspectives, it will be critical that the diversity of tenant voice is represented. Although the survey data presented in the next chapter illustrates that a majority of tenants are familiar with and value the importance of tenant engagement, there are a number of tenants that do not engage. Or to state this more accurately by drawing on the observations of a supportive housing provider, there are some tenants who do not engage by “using the current methods we have available to them.”

For a tenant sub-committee or tenant group to most optimally advise the CGQ Board, it needs to be formed and structured in a way that reflects the diversity of tenants. If the very structure of a tenant sub-committee or formal tenant group excludes some tenants, for example, because some tenants do not want to participate in formal groups, then it is critical that any group has an explicit obligation to actively seek out the views of the entire tenant cohort so that the group’s advice to the Board is representative of all tenants.

Tenant-led engagement

The research also found that tenant-led engagement was identified as a future potential to progress at CGQ. Indeed, and reflecting the observations reported earlier in the chapter, tenant-led engagement was presented as part of a progression that reflected the aspiration of tenant engagement as part of a continuous improvement agenda. Outlining a future vision for tenant-led engagement vis-à-vis the delivery of housing continuously improving, a supportive housing provider explained:

We need to keep evolving and mixing it up and finding new and different ways of creating opportunities for people to give us feedback. And I don't know what they are at the moment... Another evolution, hopefully, might be tenant-led engagement. I think it would be fantastic if we didn't have to lead this all the time and initiate this, that tenants were able to kind of come together, you know, form their own kind of groups, their own meetings, ways of feeding back information, sharing information. And you know, they

might come to us as a group and say, Hey, we've been talking about this thing that really irks us. Could we have a conversation with you about it? This is what we're thinking might be a solution to this issue. So rather than us leading all of that, you know, a great iteration down the track that would tell me we're doing really well, [is] tenants felt like they had the ability to bring this stuff forward to us.

The opportunity for potential tenant-led engagement is a quintessential example of the dynamic nature of tenant engagement embedded within an ecosystem. By definition, tenant-led engagement gives emphasis to tenant agency and tenants driving the changes they want. At the same time, the realisation of tenant-led engagement will be influenced by the capacity of the housing provider to resource, support, and collaboratively work with tenants to foster the conditions for their led engagement.

Although we have argued that the four forms of tenant engagement do not constitute a hierarchy of value, it is important to identify how they are linked. In particular, it is reasonable to assume that the responsiveness to tenant need that characterises tenant to tenancy management engagement creates optimal conditions where tenants can lead engagement.

Choosing not to engage

We iterate that the proposed forms of tenant engagement are considered complementary to one another rather than representing an ordering based on their perceived value. Indeed, the underlying ambition for diverse forms of engagement is to create the conditions for all tenants to engage with their housing provider, if they so wish. Thus, we emphasise that a tenant not participating in any or all of the identified forms of engagement may not represent a problem. As a supportive housing provider remarked:

[There are] definitely some [tenants] that will never engage, but in a way that can be a good thing. That just means they're living their private life, and they're getting on with it, and that's, that's fine.

Likewise, some tenants explained:

I'm pretty alright with everything... I don't get involved in those things... Sometimes I'll go to the library upstairs and get a book there. I'm happy here and you know, I've got nothing to complain. This is my place here.

I feel like, safe and happy. So like, I don't really want to, like, change anything.

The ways in which tenants engage and to what extent may reflect their preferences and immediate concerns. Indeed, abstaining from tenant engagement may be explained by a tenant being satisfied with, or an absence of concern about, their housing and living conditions.

Conclusion

The willingness and capacity for tenants to take on opportunities to lead engagement in ways that reflect their priorities will likely be enabled when they can engage with their tenancy manager and, moreover, housing providers in ways that convey respect. Being in a position for tenants to lead engagement and contribute to governance requires tenants knowing that their leadership will be taken seriously and acted upon. Seen in this way, moving beyond the current tenant to tenancy manager and tenant to housing provider engagement practices and towards more tenant-led engagement and governance not only requires tenant agency, but also the agency and capacity of the housing provider to show they exist for tenants in both word and deed.

Chapter 4: Tenant Survey

Introduction

This chapter focuses on quantitative data from the CGQ Tenant Survey 2024. Additional information about survey data and analysis is presented in Chapter 1. Surveys are an important method to quantitatively measure and analyse perceptions, preferences, and experiences. After presenting the survey analysis in this chapter, in the following chapter we augment the findings from the survey data with qualitative data from tenants' semi-structured interviews.

Tenants' characteristics

The results in this section focus on tenants' age, gender, indigeneity, native language and the duration of tenancy. Figure 3 below presents the key characteristics of the tenants who responded to the survey in 2024. Most respondents (58.3%) are 50-79 years old. There are also more women (52.8%) than men (44.4%) in our survey sample. Moreover, 18.1% of respondents identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

The survey also asked tenants about their native language. Respondents whose native language is English are referred to as those from an English-speaking background (ESB). Those with a native language other than English are categorised as non-English speaking background (NESB) respondents. There are 15.3% NESB respondents compared with 84.7% ESB respondents.

We also investigated the duration of respondents' tenancies with CGQ. Most respondents (55.6%) have been tenants for more than six years. We found that 44.4% of respondents have been CGQ tenants for less than six years and of these, only 12.5% have been tenants for 12 months or less.

Familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives

This section focuses on tenants' familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives at CGQ. We first review the overall familiarity within the survey sample and then investigate if it varies by tenancy duration, tenants' native language, or gender.

Figure 4 shows that most respondents (68.1%) are familiar with tenant engagement initiatives with CGQ. One-fifth of the respondents (20.8%) are not familiar with the initiatives and another 11.1% did not know the answer to the survey question.

Figure 3: Age, gender, cultural background, and tenancy duration of respondents

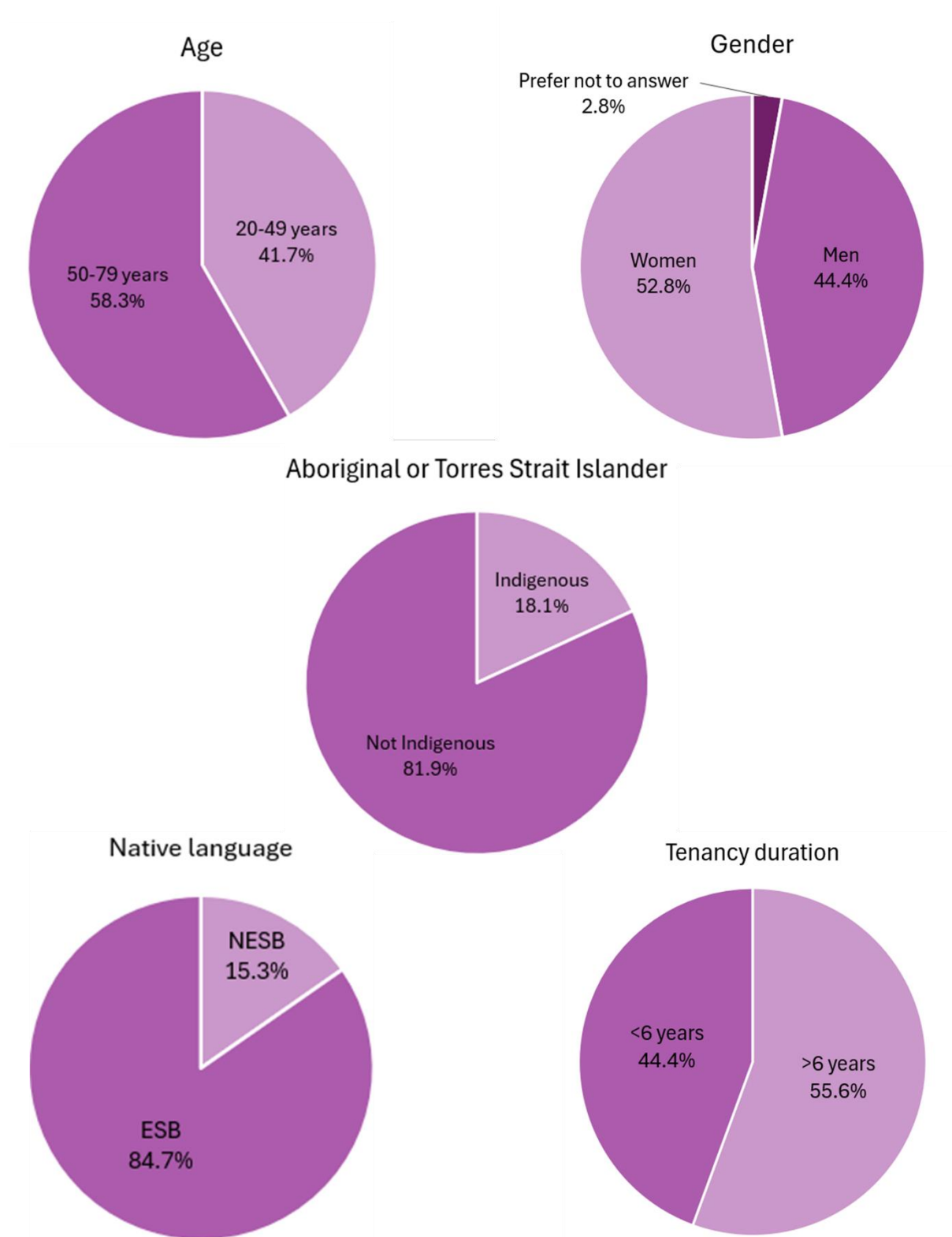


Figure 4: Familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives

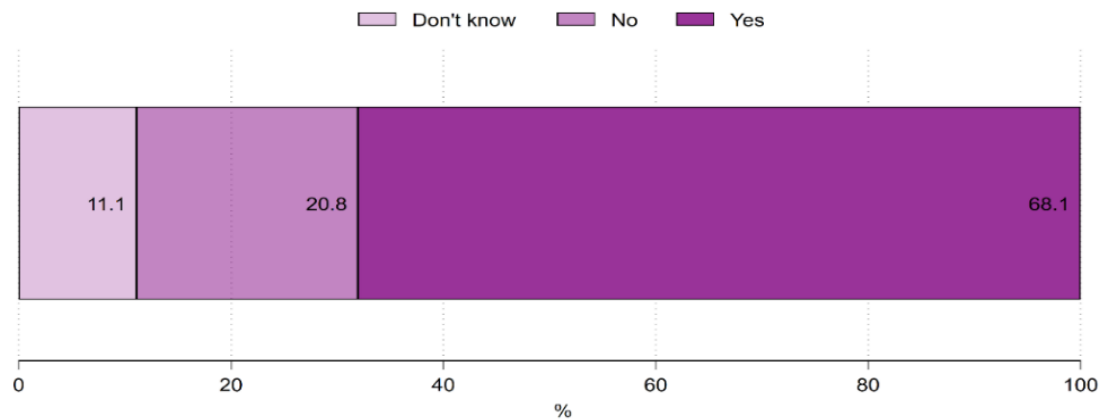
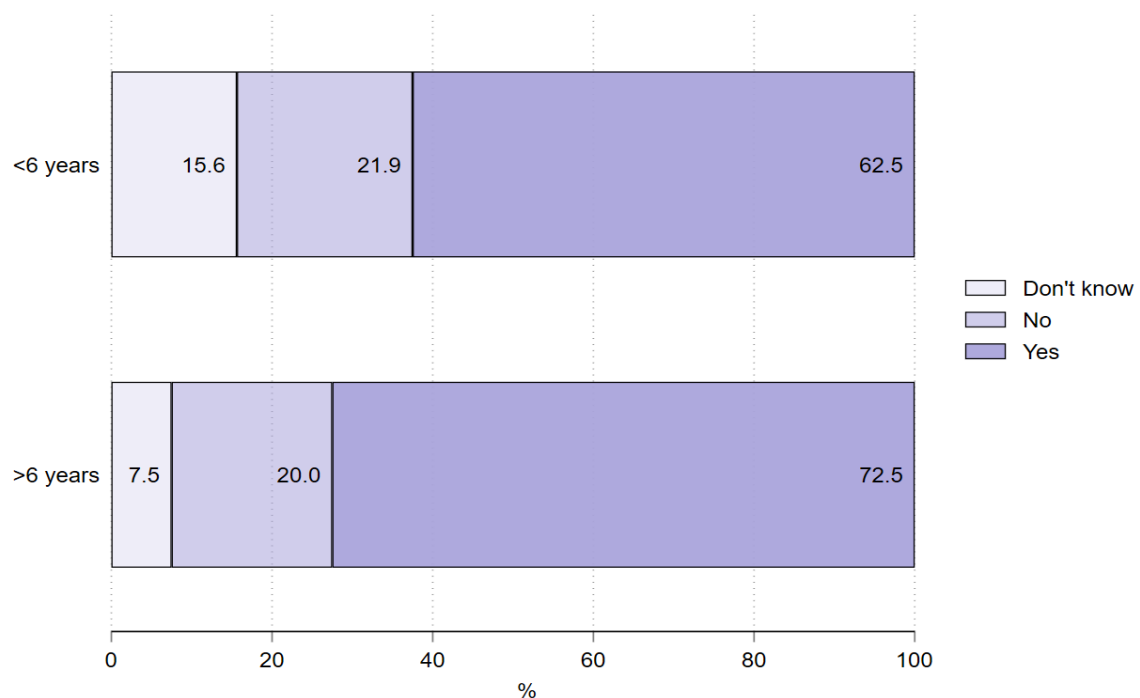


Figure 5 below shows how familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives varies by the duration of tenancy. The graph reveals that a greater percentage of respondents (72.5%) who have a longer tenancy duration (>6 years) reported familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives with CGQ compared with respondents who have been tenants for less than six years (62.5%).

Figure 5: Familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives by duration of tenancy



We also examined if familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives varies by respondents' native language (Figure 6). Most NESB respondents (90.9%) are familiar with tenant engagement initiatives, whereas 9.1% did not know about them. Among ESB respondents, 63.9% reported that they are familiar and another 24.6% were unfamiliar with the tenant engagement initiatives. Tenants with a native language other than English are more likely to be familiar with tenant engagement initiatives compared to tenants whose native language is English.

Figure 6: Familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives by native language

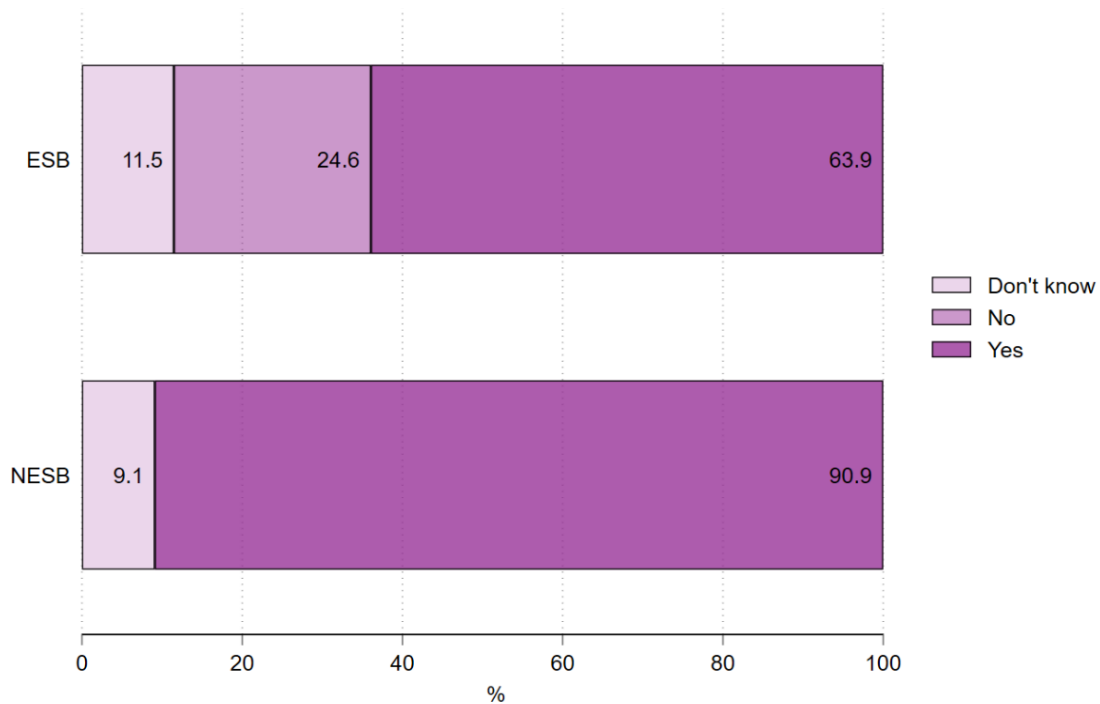
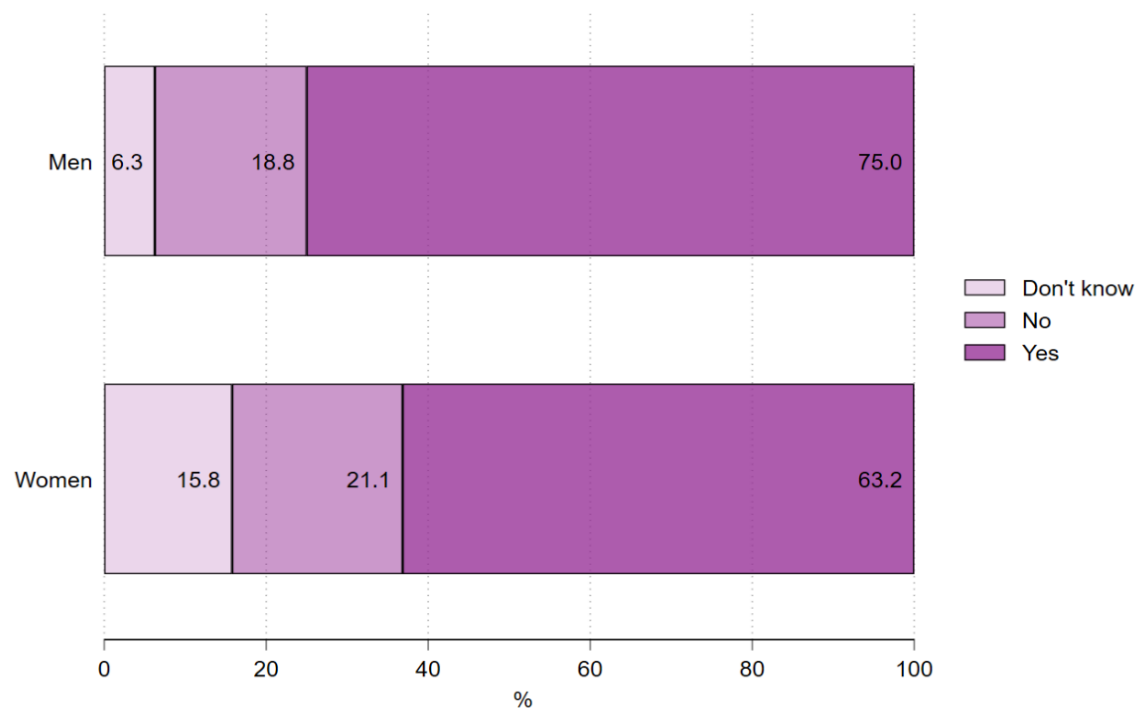


Figure 7 reveals how familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives varies by gender. The graph shows that a lower percentage of women (63.2%) are familiar with tenant engagement initiatives compared with men (75%). Additionally, 21.1% of women were not familiar whereas 18.8 percent of men were not familiar.

Figure 7: Familiarity with tenant engagement initiatives by gender

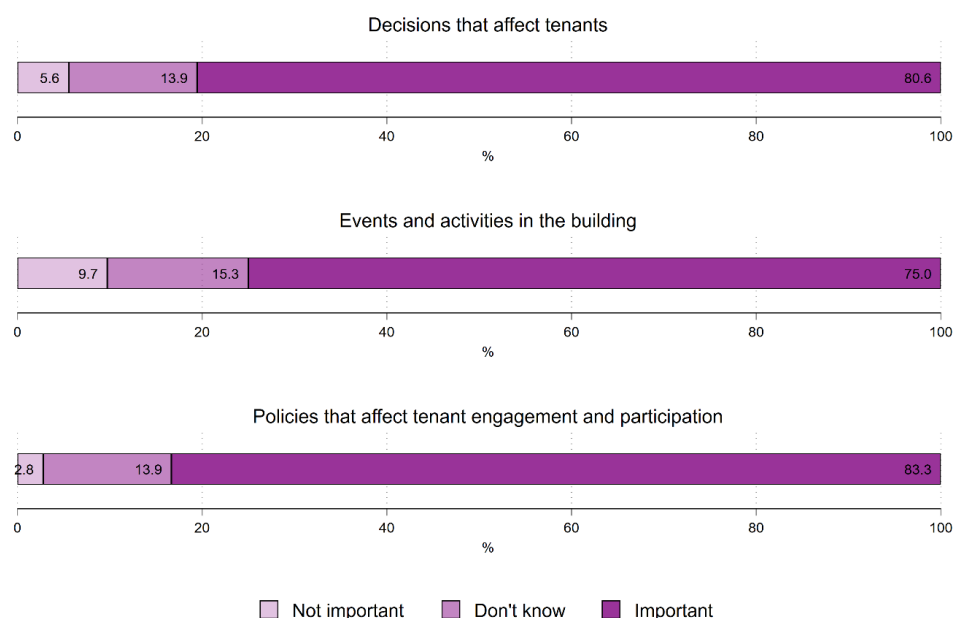


The remainder of this chapter focuses on different forms of tenant engagement – being involved in decision-making, participating in events and activities in the building, and being involved in policies that affect tenant participation and engagement with CGQ. Specifically, we study the importance of, opportunities for, and personal interest in these tenant engagement initiatives.

Importance of involvement in tenant engagement

We now interrogate the importance of tenants' involvement in decisions that affect them, events and activities in the building, and policies that affect tenant engagement and participation. Tenants' responses to the importance of involvement in tenant engagement was measured on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Figure 8 below demonstrates that there is wide endorsement of the importance of tenant engagement. This includes in decisions that affect tenants (80.6%), events and activities in the building (75%), and policies that affect tenant engagement and participation (83.3%).

Figure 8: Importance of involvement in tenant engagement



We now scrutinise the data to examine how this overall response sits among specific cohorts. All analyses that examine the relationship between tenant characteristics and engagement focus on 'mean' i.e., the statistical average of the tenant engagement variable. In this section, a higher average score denotes greater importance.

Figure 9 below shows the average scores that reflect the importance of involvement in initiatives by respondents' gender. Overall, women placed greater importance than men on being involved in all three initiatives – decision-making, events and activities, and policy development related to tenant engagement. This is reflected in the higher average scores for women in the graph below.

Figure 9: Gender and importance of involvement in tenant engagement

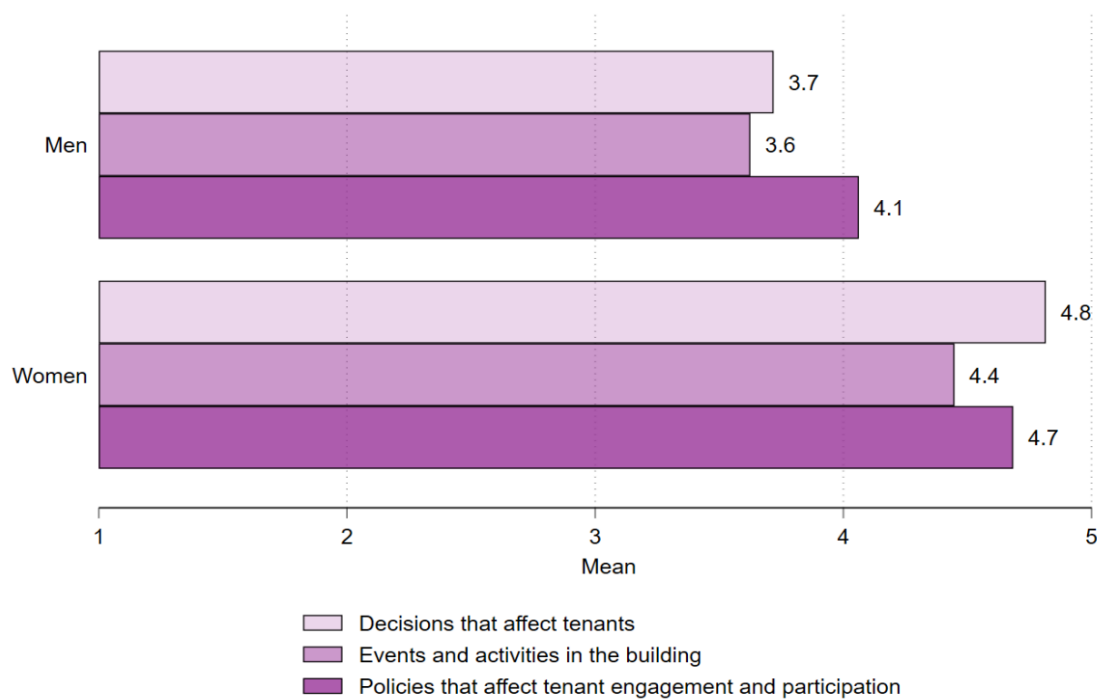
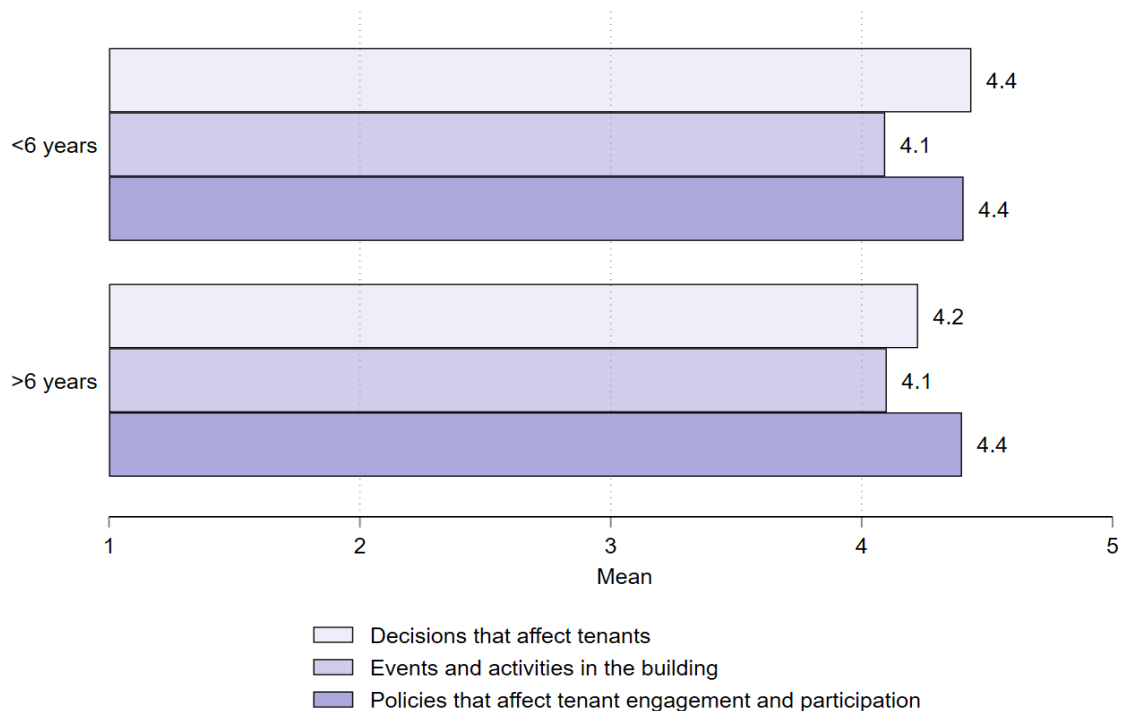


Figure 10 below shows tenants' rating of the importance of involvement in tenant engagement with CGQ by the duration of tenancy. We found that the importance of being involved in events and activities, and policies that affect tenant engagement does not vary by the duration of respondents' tenancy.

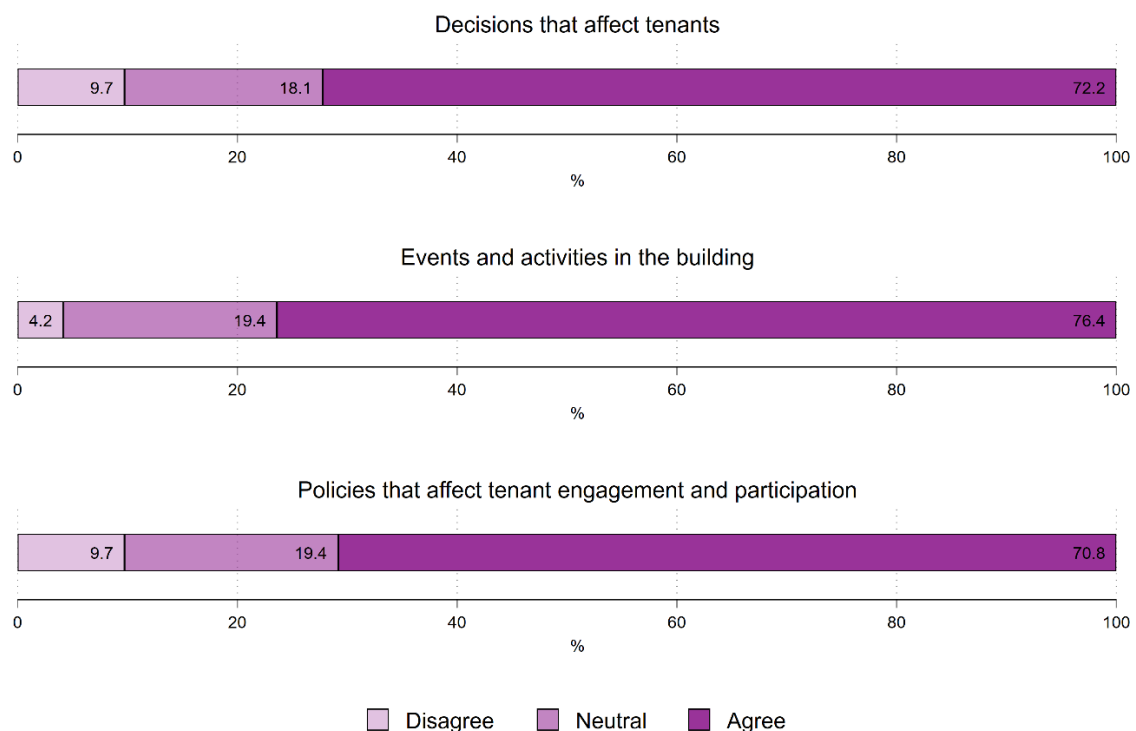
Figure 10: Tenancy duration and importance of involvement in tenant engagement



Opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement

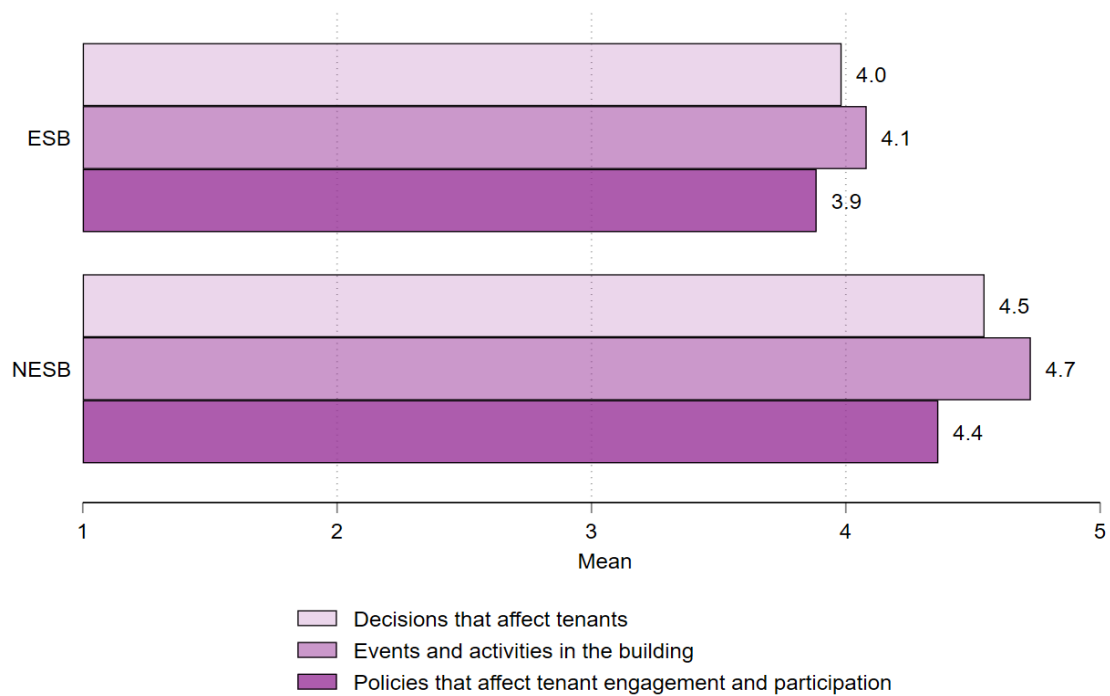
This section examines whether tenants feel they have opportunities to be involved in the following: decisions that affect tenants, events and activities in the building, and policies that affect tenant engagement and participation. The response ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The results presented in Figure 11 revealed that 72.2% of respondents agree that tenants have opportunities to be involved in decisions that affect them. Most respondents also expressed agreement that tenants have opportunities to be involved in events and activities (76.4%) and policies that influence tenant engagement and participation (70.8%). The high percentage of agreement suggests that most respondents acknowledge the available avenues for tenant engagement, including opportunities to provide input into decisions that affect them.

Figure 11: Opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement



We now dig deeper to identify how this data varies by tenant cohort and present average scores by tenants' demographic characteristics. Figure 12 below shows whether ESB and NESB tenants agree that they have opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement initiatives with CGQ. We found that tenants who have a native language other than English (NESB) reported higher average (mean) agreement scores that there are opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement than those from an English-speaking background. The findings suggest that speaking English as a second or additional language does not pose a challenge when it comes to opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement initiatives.

Figure 12: Native language and opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement



Next, we examine if opportunities for engagement vary by the duration of tenancy (Figure 13). Respondents who have been tenants with CGQ for less than six years reported higher average scores than respondents who have been tenants for a longer period, reflecting greater opportunities for tenants to be involved in engagement initiatives.

Figure 13: Tenancy duration and opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement

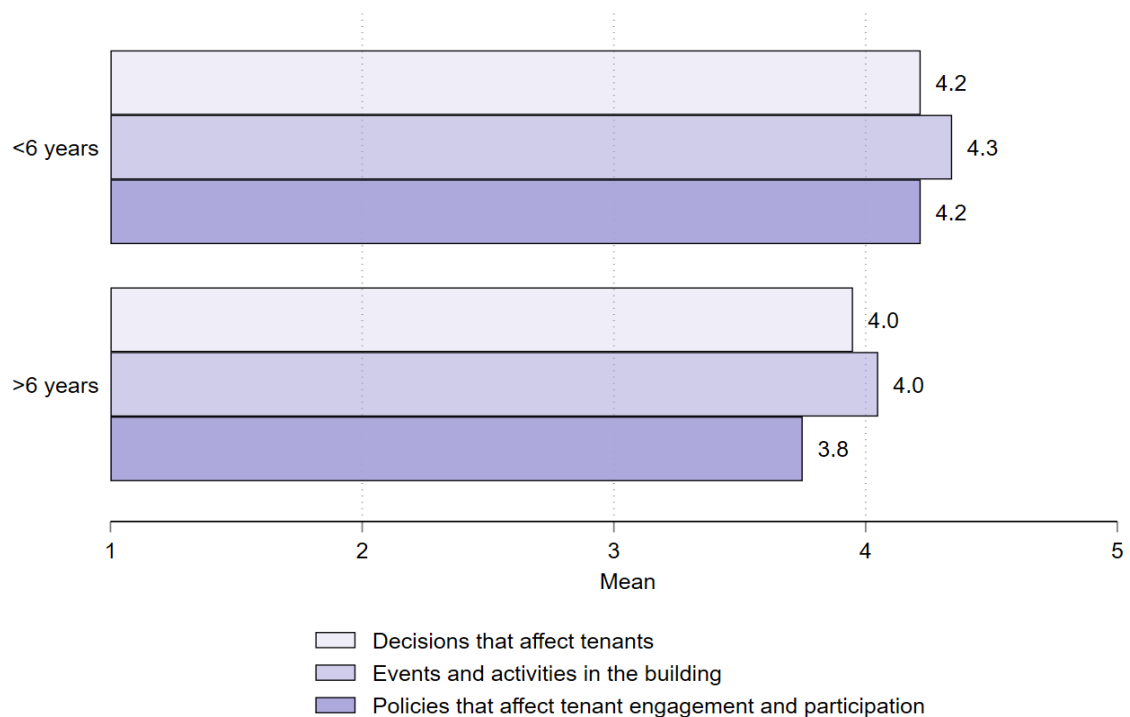
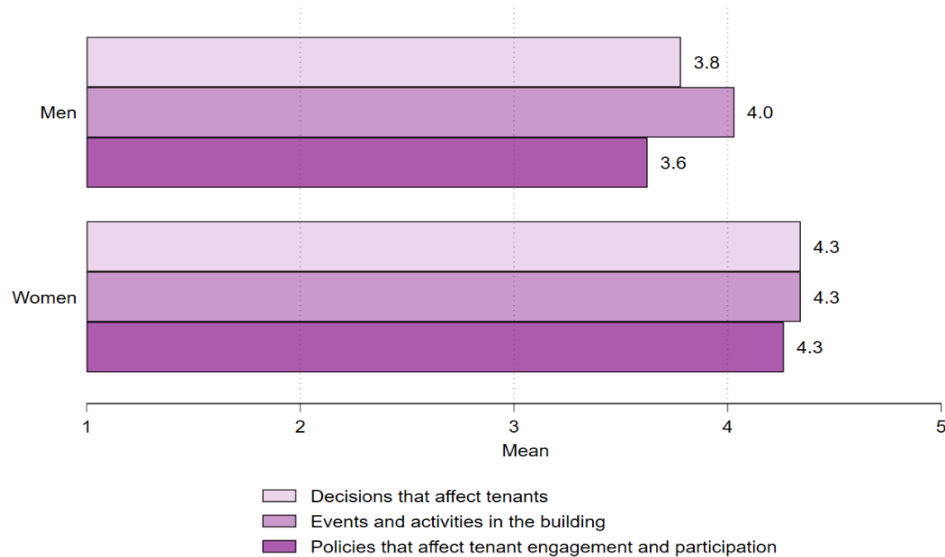


Figure 14 below shows that opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement vary by gender. Women reported higher average scores than men, indicating greater agreement that they have opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement initiatives.

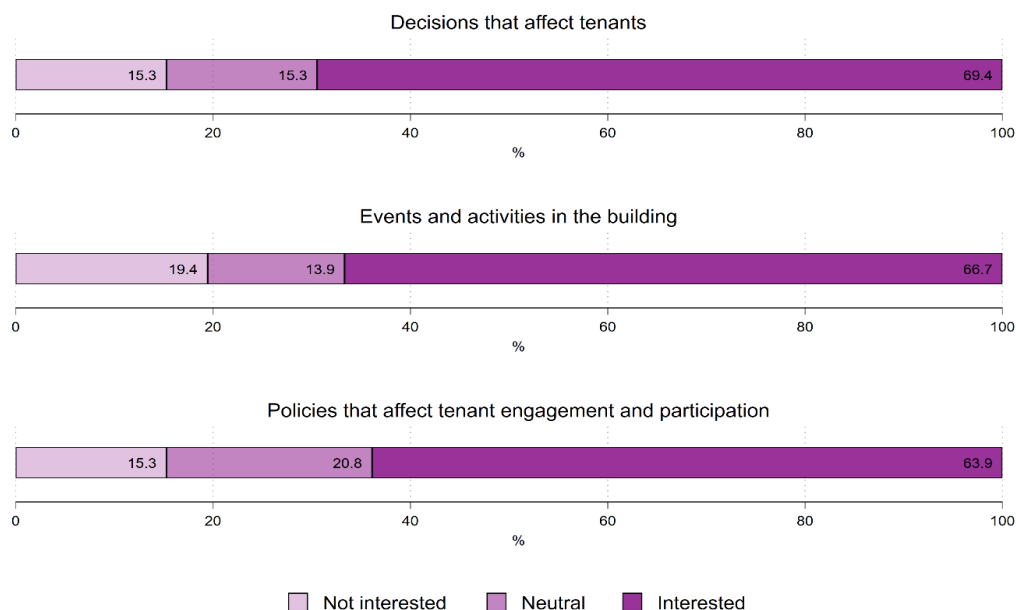
Figure 14: Gender and opportunities to be involved in tenant engagement



Personal interest in being involved in tenant engagement

This section focuses on respondents' personal interest in being involved in tenant engagement and the response is measured on a scale of 1 (not interested) to 4 (very interested). While 69.4% of respondents are interested in participating in decision-making, 15.3% are not interested in being involved in it. Most respondents are also interested in events and activities in the building (66.7%) and reviewing and designing policies that affect their engagement and participation (63.9%). This data is presented in Figure 15.

Figure 15: Personal interest in being involved in tenant engagement



We now look at how respondents' interest in being involved in tenant engagement varies by age, native language, and tenancy duration. Specifically, we examined if the average score for personal interest in being involved in different forms of tenant engagement initiatives varies by these characteristics.

The figure below illustrates respondents' personal interest in involvement in tenant engagement initiatives by their age (Figure 16). The graph shows that older tenants (50-79 years) reported slightly lower personal interest in getting involved in decision-making, events and activities, and policies that affect tenant engagement and initiatives than younger tenants (20-49 years). Despite the differences, both groups reported above-average interest in involvement in tenant engagement initiatives.

Figure 16: Tenants' age and personal interest in being involved in tenant engagement

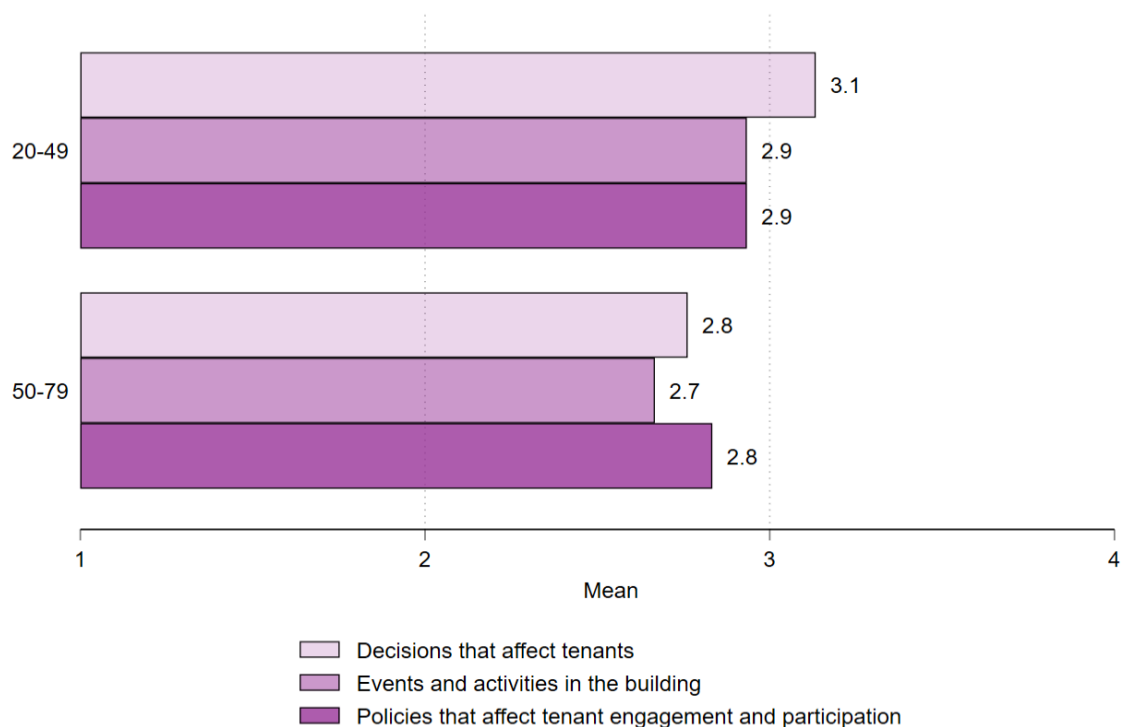
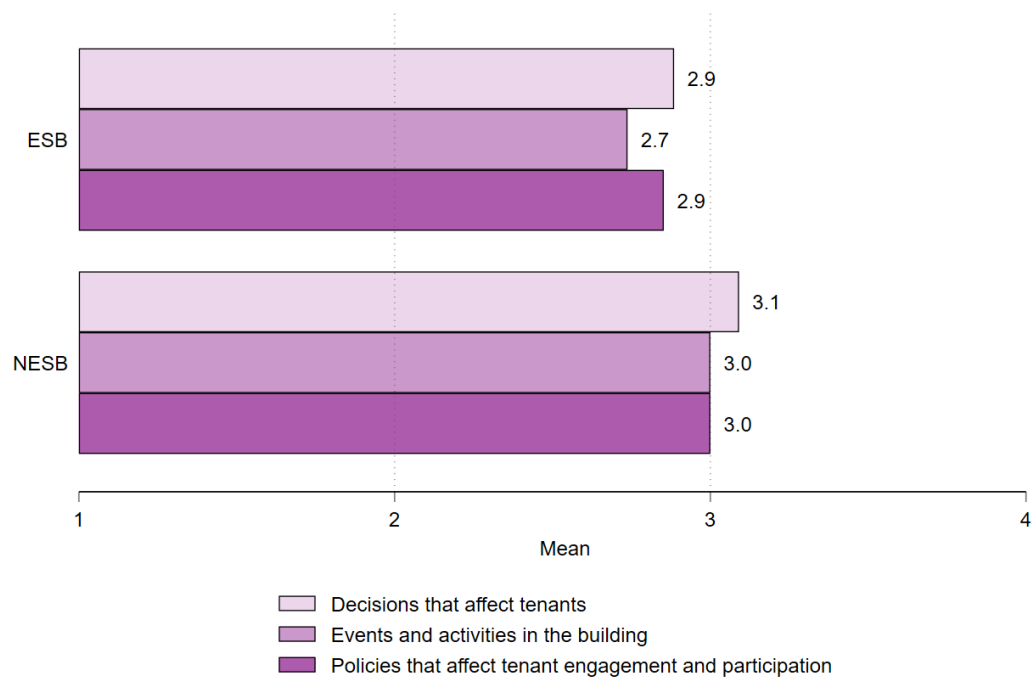


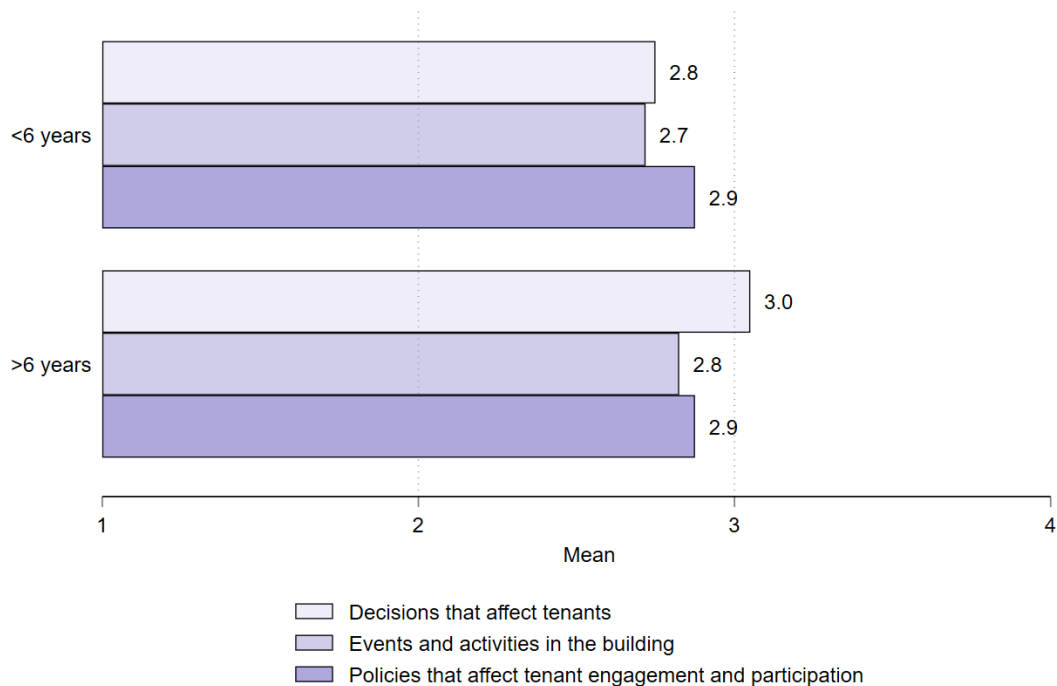
Figure 17 below reveals the variation in personal interest in involvement in tenant engagement by respondents' native language. NESB respondents reported slightly higher average scores for interest in involvement in tenant engagement compared with tenants whose native language is English (ESB). This suggests that language is not a major barrier to involvement in tenant engagement initiatives with CGQ.

Figure 17: Native language and personal interest in being involved in tenant engagement



We also examined how personal interest in being involved in tenant engagement varies by tenancy duration (Figure 18). Tenants who have lived at BCG for more than six years reported slightly higher mean scores for personal interest in being involved in decision-making, and events and activities in the building.

Figure 18: Tenancy duration and personal interest in being involved in tenant engagement



Conclusion

The survey respondents are a diverse group of people and most of them have been tenants of CGQ for many years. The results in this chapter emphasise respondents' familiarity with, the importance of, opportunities for, and personal interest in tenant engagement initiatives with CGQ. Overall, the findings are positive – the majority of respondents are familiar with tenant engagement initiatives, they place great importance on the need to engage tenants, and feel that they have the opportunities to participate in engagement initiatives. We also found that respondents are generally interested in being involved in tenant engagement initiatives, although this interest varies slightly by demographic characteristics. While a lack of familiarity with engagement initiatives can hinder tenant engagement, English as a second or additional language, respondents' age, and the duration of tenancy do not pose any real barriers to engagement.

Chapter 5: Tenant Experiences

Introduction

Drawing on the tenant semi-structured interviews, this chapter presents CGQ tenants' understandings, preferences, and vision for tenant engagement. In doing so, we identify five key themes surrounding how tenants understand tenant engagement; how tenants engage in tenant engagement to shape policies and procedures; how tenant engagement represents a choice; the importance of accessibility; and tenants' vision for engagement moving forward. Importantly, while there may not be great clarity regarding how tenant engagement is defined by tenants, most tenants we interviewed were aware of tenant engagement initiatives and believe that these are important to their lives at CGQ.

Understanding the meaning of tenant engagement

We asked all tenant interview participants what tenant engagement means to them. This question was frequently posed at the beginning of the interview. Responses to this question revealed that tenant engagement is not something that many tenants have explicitly thought about. More specifically, many had not thought about tenant engagement as a deliberate strategy to influence the nature of their housing or how their housing is delivered. Two tenants below illustrate this:

Interviewer: What does tenant engagement mean to you? Does it mean anything?

Participant: Yeah, I wasn't really sure like what this was about, I guess.

Tenant engagement?... Doesn't ring any bells for me. It means nothing.

However, throughout the interviews when prompted it became apparent that tenants could draw on their experiences with CGQ to fill the concept of tenant engagement with meaning that resonated with them. In the broadest sense, many understood tenant engagement to mean social activities and supports, while others thought of tenant engagement as neighbourly behaviour. The three tenant quotes below describe this view:

I also saw that programs [CGQ] bring in, like a traineeship and advertisement. They have shopping facilities. We've been shopping. There's the bus. And you can see on the timetables, they have activities where they engage everyone, yeah, like art, and I saw the drug help or something [alcohol and other drugs support worker]. Yeah, that's really good, engaging everyone [who] needs help.

Engaging your neighbours. Engaged in social networking... Working with your neighbours. Enjoying... Keep the peace.

Abiding by the tenancy charter. So the good neighbour charter, for me, it's being as friendly as I possibly can to all people that walk in and out of the lift. Mostly is where I see people having dinner. And you know we're all people with different stories and you don't know what's going on.

Few associated tenant engagement with influencing policies, procedures, or governance processes. Those few tenants that did, however, were proactively contributing to these activities, as we detail below:

I'm not too sure, but here at Common Ground, they do have, really, really good, engagement services. They have work groups, expression of interest, where you can apply for that. And it's basically like, you know, the engaging all the tenants together, and they discuss on issues that affect them within our facility here.

There was a range of perceptions about how tenant engagement evolved at CGQ. Some tenants noted, “it's all about the same, can't see much change,” while many tenants recognised how the promotion of tenant engagement is increasingly prioritised compared to previous years.

I've been in here since it opened; I've seen a lot of different changes lot of different people... they've changed the way that the tenant forum system, they've always done it over the years, but with [new CEO] now, it's a little bit different... they're trying to make it easier for tenants. So you go in and we can say what you need to.

It's very much an evolution... this is like a newish system, that [CEO] has been very much heroing, and so people are learning as they go, but previously, there wasn't that level of communication... they're kind of learning.

It's sort of a new energy that's in the building, and I'm assuming that that's got to do with our new CEO... someone who's really energetic and wants change, like wants to sort of disrupt the model, as it were... And that includes, you know, not the, not the patriarchal, patronising way of welfare, but something quite different. So it's something new and 21st century.

Tenants described how they experienced tenant engagement as an innovation at CGQ where different ways of engaging tenants in decisions that affect their tenancies were trialled, learnt from, and constantly adapted. An example we observed during a tenant forum discussion was a change to the visitor policy to allow tenants, rather than CGQ, to take responsibility for visitors accessing the building. After a diversity of concerns, experiences, and perspectives were heard with very different implications for the proposed policy change, rather than negotiating a definitive decision, an alternative approach was agreed:

The resolution of that issue... was to give it a trial, and everybody seemed happy with that at the time... and that's what's happening. That's the six-month trial going on now. Other people are still happy with that at the end of the six months. Who knows? People may get used to it. They may not. So it's a process and maybe this is the key.

There was an overall sense that tenant engagement is gaining momentum. Some attributed the evolution in tenant engagement to changes in organisational culture and leadership as well as being driven by a number of tenants' longstanding advocacy for a greater say.

Tenant engagement as a form of shaping policies and procedures

Where tenant engagement explicitly was approached as a form of shaping policies and procedures, these discussions were couched in terms such as to “have a say,” “getting involved,” deciding “how the place should be run,” proactively “make a contribution,” and to “be part of the decision making and implementation of the policies that affect our lives here at all levels.” While the organisational culture and CGQ leadership were recognised as crucial in promoting

opportunities to participate in policies and procedures, such as working groups, forums or by other means, these discussions also revealed some tensions. First, there is a grey area as to what constitutes an issue falling within the remit for tenant engagement as a collective process.

If it really affects me, I just go straight for the source... if I take anything to [tenancy manager] that that'll definitely be discussed within a forum, or he'll put it in his notes.

I'd rather keep it to myself. But if there was any problem, major problem, probably look, look it up with the concierge and report it to them.

This goes to show how important diverse modalities of tenant engagement are. While group settings offered opportunities for discussion, learning and adaption, for many tenants' daily lives it was equally important to have mechanisms to engage one-to-one with tenancy management, concierge, or support workers. This highlights that resolution pathways for individual issues must exist alongside tenant engagement as a form of contributing to policies and procedures.

Furthermore, coming to decisions when there is no consensus among tenants or between tenants and CGQ leadership can be challenging. One participant reflected on the decision process that led to locking out tenants and visitors from a shared yard space, a move that CGQ leadership felt reluctant to implement:

[CEO] went, "Well, this is a bit disappointing, because what you're suggesting is...", I mean, I think the term for it is hostile architecture, right, restricted, you know, when they put the steel things on seats to stop well, people are homeless so that people can't be doing that. A locked gate is the ultimate hostile architecture. And it's like going, "that's a bit of a shame", but [CEO] did it anyway [because tenants wanted it]. And that, to me, is the sort of thing that builds trust, right?

Transparency improves communication, and I don't think that's been a strong component of [CGQ] over the years, but it's becoming more so. And without it... I think it creates a culture of fear, both between tenants and management, but also between tenants themselves and maybe even between staff... People can handle the truth. What they can't handle is politics.

The transparency of communication is critical. As the tenants explained, this includes transparent communication to explain decision making where consensus is neither achieved nor desirable. This sentiment is critical to the principle of engaging tenants as partners, which is premised on breaking down distinctions of housing providers as decision makers and tenants as recipients of housing provider decisions. The interviews with tenants illustrate how transparent communication is an essential means to disrupt this distinction.

Tenant engagement as a choice

The extent to which tenants engaged to influence policies and procedures, through for example tenant forums, working groups, and other modalities, varied greatly. We identified a spectrum of tenant engagement ranging from passive ways of staying informed to regularly contributing to structured policy and procedural work.

You're never going to make it work for everybody, and you're never going to have everybody on the same team, you know, just, just doesn't happen like that. There's people here, but like me, that are quiet and that, but don't get involved in any of it. And

that's fine. You can't make people go and do anything or help out or go to the meetings or anything like that. They don't want to go. Well, then that's fine.

Notably, there was widespread awareness of group engagement activities and being left to choose the degree to which tenants wish to avail themselves of these opportunities. One tenant made this point clearly by asserting, “It’s up to the people.”

We found a substantial number of tenants who explained their preferences in this regard, as “I just do my own thing,” “I just stay away from everyone,” or “keep to themselves.” Some of these tenants nonetheless actively followed communications about tenant engagement, including scheduling and minutes, but opted not to attend meetings in person. Thus, some tenants were indeed engaged in matters about how their housing was delivered and the activities of the housing provider, yet they did not participate in collective engagement activities.

I can see on the minutes of the on the notes from the meetings that they raise things like visitors being able to be buzzed in and go upstairs, which is fine, but I don't have a lot of visitors. There's nothing really pressing that I need to speak to them.

No, I've never been involved in them, but I read the minutes of the tenant forums, because I'm interested in what they've got to say about dogs. Because there's a little dog... that comes out and barks and I don't like him.

The most common reasons for tenants to abstain from participating in forums or collective groups were personal circumstances, other tenants’ conduct, or a lack of interest in the issues slated for discussion.

Checking by the minutes they're put in the letter box, it looks like the three or four like people, amateur politicians, who just go on and on about the same shit every time.

I'm quite shy. And I can get a bit tongue tied, depending on who's in the room... someone that I don't like, I don't trust, I don't want them to hear me speak. I don't want to be the same room with them, and I don't trust them, I think that they have a potential for violence, okay? ... so if that person's in a room, I generally get a bit uncomfortable, so I won't say anything.

Few tenants identified barriers in organisational communication, such as uncertainty regarding the purpose of or agenda for tenant forums.

What a waste of time... they don't actually make decisions, because there's never an outcome... they're asking tenants to join this bloody group, but they didn't say, what would you like? What was the purpose? What are they trying to achieve? What's it about?

Even though the above reflects the views of one tenant, it does re-enforce the need for active and transparent (as above) communication about decisions from tenant engagement activities. Many tenants, on the other hand, highlighted the clarity around agenda items as comprehensive and helpful.

The meeting every three months is for the whole building. They talk about things that need doing. And people can have their say too... they send you a sheet out before the next meeting and tell you what's been done about what you spoke about last time, so you know exactly where you're going and that.

These diverse perceptions of group settings may be an outcome of the innovative nature of tenant engagement with CGQ. As we pointed out above, this was a dynamic space for experimenting with new ideas and models. There was scope to learn embedded within these processes, however, this also may foster a sense of uncertainty where some tenants would prefer definitive answers. It is also possible that previous bad experiences at tenant forums have been addressed, for example through the nomination of an external facilitator who stepped into the role of improving the tenant experiences in such group settings.

There's good chairing that happens... he's just employed separately as a contractor to come in and be that person... he does exactly what he's supposed to do, he facilitates the meeting.

Overall, there was a sense that CGQ encouraged participation in a range of engagement activities, which can be further promoted by clearly articulating how topics are put on the agenda, external facilitation of tenant meetings, and cultivating individual pathways to raise issues and provide input to complement group settings.

Accessibility as a necessary condition for tenant engagement

As noted, many tenants chose to stay informed without actively seeking out and participating in formal tenant engagement activities. We identified certain conditions for tenants to be able to participate to the extent that they wish. Tenants need to know what is happening, when it is happening, and how to make contributions in a way that is accessible for them. As one tenant quoted above, "We're all people with different stories." Another observed:

Everybody's different... there is a common respect you don't ask people what they've been through unless they volunteer it. There is that, we do have that sort of, it's an unwritten, sort of a rule. You don't say, "oh, what? What are you here?" You know, they never hear that, you know, you wait for people to volunteer it. So we do have respect for one another in a sort of a way.

Many tenants we interviewed were acutely aware of the many different physical, mental, and psychosocial health issues their neighbours or themselves experienced.

Some people... they wouldn't understand, really, what's happening... those people, yeah, are better off coming down to the counter and saying, "look, this is what the problem is."

Because with my autism... I need reminding of these things... we always get the notes for, "yep, okay, this is happening," and then I normally completely forget about it.

I get really nervous and anxious and stuff around larger groups... I've got a generalised anxiety disorder. So I just get, I start shaking and yeah, all the rest of it... I do it in writing. I did it. I've got a [degree].

I tend to ask other people to shorten it, because if I've got to read all of this, I kind of go [waves hand dismissively]... I've missed a forum, because... I don't come up at night because I'm too tired, and it is for me with, by the late of the day. I'm kind of my brain is too sore. The thing with aphasia is your brain is always in [waves hands around frantically]... I came up with strategies, yes, but it doesn't always work.

The issues that tenants described experiencing and thus influencing their capacity to engage include mobility or cognitive impairments, frailty due to age, mental health challenges, and substance use or physical disability. These conditions need to be accommodated in tenant engagement practice and policy, for example by providing synchronous and asynchronous as well as individual and group settings for tenant engagement, diverse and complementary communication strategies, in addition to targeted capability-building among CGQ staff and tenants.

Vision for tenant engagement

Prompted to think about what tenant engagement with CGQ should look like, we encountered once more a range of perspectives. Aligning with the theme of innovation, many tenants shared their experiences, some of which were satisfying, and included suggestions for change.

Critical feedback was framed by and large as part of a desire for improvements, rather than the existence of significant problems that needed to be addressed. Often these suggestions focussed on tenant engagement beyond governance to foster a culture of mutual support, respect, and shared dignity.

You could have a like a meeting, an open meeting for everyone to meet the staff or something, and over coffee or something... That would be nice so something to get to know each other... I'd like to do that where it wasn't specifically talking about issues, and then they'll probably come up themselves.

My vision would be to have people, if people wanted to be more, participate more in the garden, so a bigger garden with lots of raw produce... I don't think, I've got particular vision of anything [additional] to what's being done at the moment here. Really can't contribute anything more.

The vast majority of tenants did not have substantive suggestions for revising how tenant engagement should be done. The majority of tenants were satisfied with how tenant engagement occurred and they did not articulate a vision for change. One tenant, however, articulated a clear objective to enshrine and grow tenant engagement. The tenant remarked, “We've got to make it more sustainable.” This suggestion included the representation of tenants on the CGQ Board and the codification of tenant engagement as a value to be protected and enshrined in any future policies.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings in this chapter demonstrate that tenant engagement is understood differently by different tenants. Regardless of what tenant engagement is understood to mean, however, tenants view tenant engagement initiatives as invitations to contribute, and they exercise agency in deciding the extent to which they choose to accept these invitations, if at all. We found that to enable tenants to engage in a way that is meaningful to them, it is critical that tenants are made aware of engagement initiatives, where and when they are happening, and how to make contributions in a way that is accessible for them. Looking to the future, tenants highlighted the importance of tenant engagement moving beyond policies, procedures, and governance, and towards fostering a culture of mutual support, respect, and shared dignity.

Chapter 6: Principles of Tenant Engagement

Introduction

Based on all the data collected and analysed as part of this study, we now conclude this report with seven principles that can facilitate tenant engagement. The principles are derived from the research with tenants and supportive housing providers and articulate values and beliefs that guide practices of tenant engagement at CGQ. In this way, these principles can also inform tenant engagement in other PSH settings, and the social housing sector more broadly. It is not our intention here to convey that tenant engagement has reached a perfect state that reflects the experiences of all tenants at CGQ, but to propose a set of philosophies and logics for this dynamic area of practice. These principles are outlined as an invitation to others working to change social and supportive housing systems to create the conditions for tenants to engage with their housing in a way that is meaningful to them.

The seven principles

Principle 1: A *belief* that tenants have a right and the knowledge to engage with their tenancy manager and housing provider on the basis that housing is their home. The significance of home, and the manner in which home is subjectively experienced and personally made meaning of, underscores the need to appreciate and take account of the unique perspectives and indeed knowledge of home that tenants have. This perspective and knowledge source can add value and inform the delivery and nature of housing. The advancement of this principle of tenants' right to engage, underpinned by the dual domains that housing is home and tenants have a unique perspective and knowledge source, requires trust and respect.

Principle 2: A *willingness* of the housing provider to make changes to housing policies and procedures based on tenants' needs and preferences. This includes preventing foreseeable problems from occurring or indeed escalating, but more fundamentally, it is about ensuring tenants live in housing that works best for them as defined by them. Opportunities for tenant engagement are thus beneficial to tenants by enabling autonomy and control as core elements of home, and they are likewise beneficial to housing providers by creating mechanisms for tenants to contribute toward excellence in housing provision.

Principle 3: The provision of *resources* and plans dedicated to enable tenant engagement. Resourcing and planning are critical; they not only provide practical means and staffing for tenants to engage with one another, such as through working groups, forums, and committees, they also mean that housing providers have the essential capacity to respond to tenant engagement. The resourcing and planning that foster conditions for tenant engagement are at the same time resources and plans that contribute to continuous improvement. Thus, adequate resourcing and planning for tenant engagement can indicate a housing provider's commitment to continuously improve housing services based on tenants' needs and preferences.

Principle 4: An appreciation and valuing of the *diverse* forms that tenant engagement can assume. Central to this principle of diversity in engagement is tenants being afforded the

opportunity to decide what their engagement entails, which includes deciding to abstain from engaging with their housing provider. Further, the realisation of this principle requires housing providers to make available a broad suite of opportunities to engage. The appreciation of diverse forms of engagement requires sufficient resourcing to housing providers so that multiple offerings are available to tenants. In addition to this emphasis on the housing provider, the appreciation of diverse views on engagement and means to engage relies upon tenants being supported to have their views and preferences put forward. Active and strategic efforts are required to create the conditions for all tenants to engage, based on how they want to engage and to what extent. This means a passive approach that relies on engagement among those who engage under current conditions is insufficient.

Principle 5: *Accessibility* to engage. Building on the principle to value a diversity of engagement preferences, accessibility to engage is part of a reflective and ongoing process to ensure that all tenants can engage in ways that accommodate their positions and realities. A proactive approach is required of the housing provider to identify what tenants need to lay out accessible pathways to tenant engagement suitable for all tenants.

Principle 6: Systematic and transparent *communication* between tenants and housing provider. This principle has practical and relational dimensions. Practically, systematic and transparent communication is a part of good practice that ensures tenants know about their housing obligations and rights, that they know about engagement opportunities, and critically, it ensures that tenants know how their engagement is used by the housing provider. From a relational perspective, systematic and transparent communication is a practice that demonstrates tenants are valued and trusted partners. It shows respect, including the respect that tenants can know when their contributions do not lead to their desired change. In this way, the practice dimensions to effective communication show that tenants are partners in the broader enterprise that breaks down us and them distinctions in the social housing sector.

Principle 7: A robust *balancing* of tenant engagement with other housing operational and legislative requirements. This principle recognises that tenants may engage to advocate for changes that cannot be reasonably, or legally, actioned. Housing providers need to both engage with their tenants and comply with contractual, funding, and legal conditions. When there is a tension between tenants' needs and preferences and what housing providers can do, communication is important, but more fundamentally, an approach predicated on tenants and housing providers as partners, not opposing groups, is central to achieving the optimal balance.

Conclusion

When thinking about how the above seven principles may apply to and be relevant for tenants and housing providers at and beyond CGQ, value-driven leadership and a culture of mutual trust and respect are critical components if tenant engagement is to flourish. The leadership we observed in this research manifests in a culture based on the understanding that tenant engagement is part of CGQ's core business. In turn, this shared understanding underpins most tenants' perception that they can avail themselves of opportunities to meaningfully engage with CGQ in a way that resonates with their needs and preferences. A fundamental implication of this research for broader social and supportive housing systems is that tenant engagement is not only appealing from a moral perspective, but also achievable and impactful for both tenants and housing providers alike.

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