Community Housing: Can it Assist Tenants to Develop Labour Market Skills?

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Introduction

Currently, in Australia, the community housing sector consists of around 70,000 dwellings (SA 6,8001), provided by over 2,000 community housing organisations (Department of Family and Community Services 2003; Community Housing Council of South Australia 2004). They are generally grouped under the four organisational categories of Housing Cooperatives, Housing Associations, Community Service Organisations and housing provided by Local Government.

Housing cooperatives are not for profit housing organisations that are tenant managed but are generally financed through government. They are often developed for specific low-income groups such as the elderly or single women. Cooperatives are based on the principles of tenant/member participation and depend on the volunteer contributions of their tenants in order to function (Community Housing Federation of Australia 2001, p. 14). Generally, housing associations house tenants with more specific needs, such as women escaping domestic violence, the homeless and individuals with disabilities. The associations are managed by volunteers, who may be linked to service organisations, including churches and welfare agencies, or consist of friends and relatives of the tenants.

Community service organisations provide housing as part of their range of social services and some local governments also provide community housing for their local communities (Community Housing Federation of Australia 2001, p. 2). Community housing tenants and staff who participated in this study were from cooperative and association housing, and the Community Housing Council of South Australia, the peak body that represents community housing providers in South Australia, or from the South Australian Community Housing Authority (SACHA) which oversees all housing organisations registered under the South Australian Cooperative and Community Housing Act 1991.

In recent years, somewhat of a consensus has emerged amongst Australian community housing practitioners that tenant involvement in the management of housing results in broader social and economic benefits beyond the provision of housing, with opportunities for skills development and employment among them (see National Community Housing Forum 2003). Nonetheless, in Australia there is little empirical evidence in support of this assertion. A study conducted for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (Farrar, Barbbato & Phibbs 2003) examined the broader theme of how community management strengthens communities. Within the study, some examples were identified of how tenant participation in community housing can lead to self-reliance, confidence building and involvement in further training. In particular, tenants described participation in community housing as developing skills and confidence that were transferable to wider community activities and social participation (Farrar et al 2003). Hulse and Randolph (2004), while not specifically studying community housing tenants, highlighted the links between skills development, self-confidence and being work ready for low income tenants in public and private rental. Thus far, however, there is no Australian literature that specifically explores the question of whether there are particular aspects of community housing that may assist tenants in developing labour market skills.

This paper examines the key elements of this contention through reporting on the findings of case study research on housing cooperatives and housing associations conducted in metropolitan Adelaide. The research attempts to address the gap in the literature through examining the question of whether low-income tenants’ participation in the management of their
housing augments employment related skills and outcomes. The discussion of the findings is positioned within a broader context of new public management and reforms to social housing. These changes are briefly outlined in the next section, followed by the research findings and key conclusions.

**New Public Management and Social Housing Reforms**

Over the past two decades, the Australian public sector has undergone a series of reforms related to the principles of new public management - more commonly known as ‘managerialism’ (Osborne & Gaebler 1992). The reforms attempt to merge elements of private sector management with the traditional ethos and values underlying the public sector. Major changes have included: a focus on efficiency and effectiveness of policy outcomes through the use of performance indicators and standards of operation; decentralised decision making; adoption of private sector management techniques such as entrepreneurial approaches; increased financial accountability; and the introduction of markets and competition through the contracting out of service delivery and public sector employment.

Within the state social housing agencies specifically, organisational restructuring has been based on the adoption of commercial, market based directions with an increased role for the private sector and non profit organisations in meeting government objectives in the delivery of low income rental...
housing. The Industry Commission Inquiry into Public Housing (IC) provided a major impetus for these reforms (Industry Commission 1993). Despite the report's finding affirming public housing as the best option for low-income tenants, criticisms were levelled at housing authorities' for their inflexible, centralised, and bureaucratic management styles.

The IC particularly supported community housing as a way of broadening the range and choice of housing assistance available to low income people, and breaking the monopoly of the State Housing Authorities (SHAs) in providing that assistance. The initial emergence of community housing run by non-government organisations in the 1970s arose from similar critiques of SHAs as being centralised, bureaucratic and limiting the choices of housing available to low income earners. The IC also envisaged that community housing offered a way of harnessing additional resources, and possibly reducing the cost to governments of providing housing assistance (Industry Commission 1993, pp. 115-126). This is in contrast to the original impetus for the community housing movement which held an underlying assumption that government expenditure would grow, and that the social policy context in which community housing operated would assist with this growth (Bisset, Dalton & Lawson 1994, pp. 17). In the current public policy climate, the community housing sector is likely to be increasingly subject to managerialist reforms such as the adoption of performance indicators and a focus on improved client services. While support for community housing can be seen in some ways to complement the new public management agenda, to date there has been little Australian research examining the role of non-government agencies in delivering low-income rental housing.

Contemporary social housing is characterised by socioeconomically disadvantaged tenants experiencing low-incomes, poverty and high unemployment rates. The progressively tighter targeting of social housing along with broader social and economic changes has resulted in residualisation of the tenure as a whole. This situation is reflected in the finding that, compared to 1966, when over 80 per cent of tenants in social housing nationally were employed, by the mid 1980s a similar proportion, 84 per cent of tenants, were in receipt of welfare benefits. The proportion of tenants receiving welfare benefits had increased to 89 per cent by 2000 (Department of Housing and Regional Development 1995; Council of Australian Governments 1996; Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision 2001). In the face of these circumstances, contemporary housing policy is increasingly focused on the narrow issue of housing high need tenants, to the detriment of a long term vision for housing policy, and broader questions about sustainable cities and housing as a vehicle for social and economic growth (Burke 2001).

Funding levels under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) - the major mechanism through which government funding is provided for social housing, declined by around 15 per cent over the decade from 1989-1999 (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision 2000, pp. 1357). The current CSHA incorporates further changes to the financial and policy framework for social housing. The key changes encompass:

- Supporting alternative social housing providers including community housing, under the rationale of enhancing housing choice for tenants (Productivity Commission 2004: 16.21); and
- Linking housing assistance to the achievement of non-shelter outcomes. The particular focus is on supporting 'access to employment' and promoting tenants' 'social and economic participation' through reducing any workforce disincentives associated with the current income-base rent structures (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 1).

In order to circumvent the funding deficits and future uncertainty of the agreement, SHAs have by and large adopted the new directions proposed under the CSHA, including the transfer of some public housing stock to the community housing sector. (see Jacobs and Marston, forthcoming). As yet, there had been little assessment of whether the reforms have led to a more flexible housing system and better outcomes for 'clients'.

The next section considers the literature from the United Kingdom that explores the relationship between tenant control of housing and skills development.

Tenant Controlled Housing and Skills Development: UK Perspectives

Although there is a dearth of Australian studies, some key themes emerge from the United Kingdom (UK) literature that investigates the relationship between the level of tenant control and responsibility for administration of housing, and how this participation assists individuals in the development of employment related skills and outcomes.

A study by Price Waterhouse (1995) compared the performance of a range of models of low-income housing with different levels of tenant control. Whilst the study was not explicitly concerned with employment outcomes, it was interested in investigating the costs and benefits of housing cooperatives and other forms of tenant controlled housing compared to other social housing providers. The study was conducted over a three-year period, commencing in 1992 and re-assessing organisations’ performances in 1994. The four models of housing management that were investigated consisted of:
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1. Three cooperatives managed by tenants;
2. Three cooperatives owned by tenants;
3. Three landlord/tenant managed organisations; and
4. Housing estates that were managed by the best mainstream social housing providers.

The findings highlighted the importance of all forms of tenant control and ownership (i.e., cooperatives and tenant management organisations) for delivering wider non-quantifiable social and community benefits. Specifically, aspects of cooperative housing involvement, such as learning computing, basic bookkeeping and resources management led to the development of broader life skills. At that time, the Price Waterhouse report (1995) was the only qualitative piece of research into tenant control of social housing in England (Clapham, O'Neill and Bliss undated).

The Price Waterhouse research was followed by three other UK based studies. Gillanders and Balackaby (1999) also found benefits in tenant-controlled organisations in terms of tenant capacity building and building community sustainability. Another study found that resident control in community organisations, in particular cooperatives, led to increased knowledge, skills and control over one’s life (Elsdon, Reynolds & Stewart 1995). Likewise, in a study initiated by the UK Confederation of Cooperative Housing, Clapham, O’Neill and Bliss (undated, pp. 33-34) examined the ways that tenant control impacts on social exclusion. They utilised case studies where tenants described their experiences of what tenant-controlled organisations had achieved both for their lives and the wider community. Tenants variously described their participation in tenant-controlled organisations as creating confidence and a ‘sense of community, self responsibility and well-being’ and highlighted the importance of the training that was provided to support their roles (Clapham et al., p. 35). Based on these findings Clapham et al (undated, p. 35) concluded that the ‘development of self-worth and self motivation is a necessary and important part of tackling social exclusion’. Of relevance to the current research project, some of the smaller tenant controlled organisations that participated in the study provided examples whereby tenants had gained confidence and motivation, which in some instances led to paid employment. In contrast, however, the researchers also found that many of the larger tenant controlled organisations studied, which in fact had in their remit to provide tenants with training and employment opportunities, described the ‘key battle getting individuals past their front door and into the work culture’ (Clapham et al, undated, p. 29). In addition, it was only the larger tenant-controlled organisations that had a significant impact on dealing with tenant unemployment.

Due to the small number of studies undertaken, evidence concerning the relationship between tenant control of housing and labour market outcomes remains inconclusive. Nonetheless, two consistent themes emerge from the literature: that training provided for tenants has been a key element in supporting skills development and employment outcomes; and that the achievements of all the initiatives detailed in the literature were modest compared to the magnitude of the issue of tenant unemployment.

The Current Study Findings

The current study focused on association and cooperative housing in two case study areas, located in the south (Noarlunga) and north west (The Parks/Brompton) metropolitan regions of Adelaide. The areas were selected because both localities were characterised by high levels of unemployment and included a community housing presence. In each of the case study investigations, fifteen individual interviews were conducted with key policy makers and housing association staff, and focus groups were conducted with twenty cooperative and housing association tenants. Interviews and focus groups were tape-recorded and analysed thematically. The qualitative findings were supplemented by analysis of the limited secondary data, which was available, correlating community housing and labour force participation.

Association Housing

Respondents generally argued that compared to cooperatives, housing association tenants do not have as many opportunities to develop specific skills, as independent paid staff manage their housing externally. In addition, associations were viewed as more specialist in nature, catering primarily for slightly different target groups to cooperatives – associations focus on tenants who have special circumstances and requirements that go beyond an income-related need. Association tenants include people with disabilities, people in crisis, and those who are ‘chronically distressed and despairing’ (Association staff, S) and are predominantly people who cannot access other appropriate sources of low-income rental accommodation.

As a result of these circumstances, there is a strong emphasis in association housing on developing the basic ‘skills of daily living’. Priorities are successful personal and social development and maintaining successful tenancies. Some of the key life skills developed in association housing were identified as caring for one’s home; everyday coping mechanisms; social skills, for instance, using public transport and undertaking shopping and housework; and addressing health issues such as substance abuse.

As one of the association staff explained:
people with disabilities learn about responsibility, budgeting to pay rent, putting out the rubbish, the
consequences of not cleaning up. They learn about interaction with neighbours, respecting people’s rights, sharing stuff. (Association staff, S)

The association tenants who participated in the research also emphasised the sense of security and independence they gained through having a home, and the value in learning living skills and being able to look after themselves. It was commonly envisaged that once these basic requirements are achieved, then for some housing association tenants there might be possibilities for exploring future employment. ³

**Cooperative Housing**

Two major themes emerged in relation to cooperative housing. First that it provides opportunities for self-development, and second that for some tenants the skills and confidence gained can lead to paid employment.

**Opportunities for Self Development**

Respondents noted that there are numerous opportunities available for tenants to gain skills through participation in cooperative housing. The sorts of opportunities identified incorporated the wide range of training courses provided through SACHA, as well as the taking on of various formal roles within the cooperative.

SACHA training is targeted at core skills areas based on the key roles of each housing cooperative, specifically, the office bearer positions and the fundamental tasks associated with undertaking those roles. Other courses are developed as the need arises, and are more generalised for administration across the whole community housing sector. For instance, the Commonwealth Government’s introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) led to the requirement for a specific course on this topic. Tenants also have the opportunity to gain qualifications in housing management and policy to a certificate level through Swinburne Institute of Technology in Victoria, which provides opportunities for external off campus study.

The formal roles identified within the cooperatives and the types of skills they involve are summarised in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: The Range of Formal Roles in Cooperatives and the Types of Skills Involved**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Role</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treasurer</td>
<td>budgeting and financial record keeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance Officer</td>
<td>home maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenancy Officer</td>
<td>tenancy processes, such as preparing for inspections and managing rental properties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>reviewing policies and bylaws, and developing an understanding of bureaucratic structures and clerical and administrative skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>meeting procedures, learning to listen, cooperate, show tolerance, and not discriminate against others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental Officer</td>
<td>reviewing, maintaining and collecting rents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many respondents observed that the longer tenants live in the cooperative then the more likely they are to become involved in its management processes. A common reason identified for this was the iterative process whereby over time tenants are given support to take up opportunities, and to grow in confidence in a non-threatening environment. For instance, for one woman who was a victim of domestic violence, moving into a housing cooperative had ‘given her the confidence to go on and do bigger and better things’ (SACHA staff). She attended TAFE and Centrelink training, took on the role of chairperson of the cooperative, and eventually entered a fulltime clerical job within a cooperative. Her previous experience was as a fulltime housewife.

**Transfer of Skills to Paid Employment**

Analysis of data from the National Social Housing Survey: Community Housing (FACS 2002) tentatively supported the argument that community housing can confer labour force benefits on tenants. Forty-four per cent of community housing tenants, who responded, reported that their job situation had been assisted through residing in community housing and fifty-nine per cent said it had improved their education and training prospects. However, the data was not specific enough to assess the overall relative impacts of association and cooperative housing on tenants’ employment prospects and skills development. Likewise, the data sets available from SACHA did not contain information that could further elucidate these issues, as the questions were not devised with this study in mind.

In the current study, numerous examples were provided by tenants and housing workers where skills attained through involvement in cooperative housing were thought to have led to successful employment outcomes. For example, some
cooperative members have become education officers, and others have gained paid employment in IT and clerical or administrative roles:

When I joined the coop I couldn’t work, I suffered from anxiety and distress, and since I’ve joined the [....] housing coop, they’ve given me the confidence to. I look after the rents, and it’s given me confidence to think well yes, I can do some things, yeah it makes you feel good, and if you’re feeling good you’re feeling better about yourself, and it takes a lot of things away. (Cooperative tenant, S)

A common theme was that the ability to work with a broad range of people is important in any employment situation, and that living in a cooperative requires tenants to develop the pertinent skills:

In a sense what it does, it kind of gives people management skills more than anything else, even office management skills and people management skills. Good grief if you can manage a housing cooperative management committee you can do anything! (Former peak body staff)

Nonetheless, some respondents raised the broader issue that many employers are reluctant to take on workers over forty years of age. This was considered a key factor in whether skills development leads to paid employment in the broader labour market, at least for mature aged cooperative tenants. The chances of transferring skills gained through cooperative living to paid employment were thought by some respondents to be more applicable to young people in their twenties and thirties, who arguably were more likely to enter or re-enter the workforce:

SACHA core competencies is fantastic but that’s not going to get forty and fifty year olds back in the workforce...twenty to thirty year olds maybe but not forty to fifty year olds. (Former peak body staff)

The difficulties that middle age people may encounter in seeking employment is supported by the findings of other studies that investigate issues of early and involuntary retirement (see for instance, Encel and Studencki 1998; Encel 2001)

Another key issue raised by the study findings is whether tenants take their employment-relevant skills into cooperatives, or actually develop those skills through living in cooperative housing.

Developing New Skills or Bringing Existing Skills to the Cooperative?

A key difficulty raised in the current study was distinguishing whether cooperative tenants gain skills from their involvement in the sector, or whether they bring their existing skills into the cooperative. For some tenants, in particular women who take up roles on finance committees, looking at balance sheets and monthly expenditures were identified as novel experiences:

I mean, I learned more about all of that. It is very valuable, you never know when you are going to need it. (Previous peak body staff)

Others tenants who participated in the cooperative management committees also argued that this involved learning new skills such as:

Financial and IT skills, things you wouldn’t normally do. (Cooperative tenant, NW)

I’m minutes secretary at the minute, and that’s made demands on me that I wouldn’t have met if I were not in a coop... it’s a challenge and we rise to it. (Cooperative tenant, S)

In other situations, determining where the skills arose from was less straightforward. One tenant stated that:

I do the maintenance work for my cooperative but that’s something I already know about. (Cooperative tenant, NW)

In this situation, it seemed clear that the tenant had brought his existing maintenance skills into the cooperative, not vice versa. Nonetheless, the tenant clarified that in his experience he was still learning new skills through his involvement in cooperative housing and the maintenance role because:

There’s always situations I’ve never done before like fixing holes in roofs, so that sort of general skills I’ve learned a lot. Whether people are employed or not, they always have some sort of project they are involved in. (Cooperative tenant, NW)

Respondents also commonly pointed out that many cooperatives rely on retired or middle aged tenants to undertake the volunteer work of the cooperatives. In many cases while tenants have come into the cooperative with practical employment related skills, they often no longer use them to gain paid employment. For example, they may have become unemployed due to industrial accidents at work. In these situations: the skills come from employment in as much as anyone retiring takes their skills into the cooperative. (Former peak staff, NW)
This illustrates another kind of situation in which tenants bring certain skills to the housing cooperative rather than developing those skills through living there. The reliance of cooperative housing upon the time and skills of volunteers was noted by several study respondents, particularly in relation to the administrative and financial pressures the tenure is often under.

Reconciling the Business and Volunteer Aspects of Cooperatives

While recognising the various positive aspects of cooperatives, many respondents queried the ongoing financial viability and sustainability of the cooperative system. Numerous examples were cited of cooperatives that had experienced financial and other administrative difficulties. In some instances, this was due to rent arrears:

> It works really well but we’ve had financial problems...we’d had difficulty with people paying the rent; if people do pay the rent we have a surplus. (Cooperative member, NW)

Problems with rent arrears were compounded by ‘rising insurance costs’ and the latter factor impacted negatively on the finances of all cooperatives (SACHA staff). The resolution of this problem for some struggling cooperatives had been to transfer their tenure to associations, whereby they no longer operated as cooperatives:

> Two of them that weren’t operating successfully... One housing cooperative that went bankrupt and we took that over...that was a challenge we took them over with the tenants. (Association staff, NW)

In general for many respondents, cooperatives appeared to be struggling to reconcile the requirement to run cooperatives as efficient businesses, while relying on volunteer input:

> I think that’s something that hasn’t been thoroughly researched when coops have been established, the ability to run a business effectively. While they do run training courses, they’re really good training courses, at SACHA and they’re available. (Association staff, NW)

> We’re not a business but we’re expected to run like a business...we’re volunteers. (Cooperative member, NW)

The business objectives of cooperatives related to financial accountability, effectiveness and efficiency were often seen to conflict with the reliance of cooperatives upon volunteers. As respondents argued, there are numerous opportunities for tenants to participate in the running of the cooperatives but the system only works well if tenants are motivated, have time to contribute and are supported to learn the necessary skills. For one cooperative tenant the increased demands for accountability, efficiency and effectiveness and the related time and resource constraints seriously limited the prospects for trying new positions or learning new skills:

> The longer I’ve been in the cooperative the more I’ve come to realise how many pressures are on the cooperatives by the government. I’m not saying they’re not necessary; they are because anything to do with money is very important. (Cooperative member, NW)

Another tenant described this melding of business and volunteer objectives in cooperatives as:

> The world of capitalism meeting the world of communism. (Cooperative member, NW)

Respondents also identified the related issue that many cooperative tenants feel over-burdened by the accountability mechanisms and administrative requirements attached to running cooperatives as businesses. Specific issues respondents raised were of the need to fill out endless forms, and frustrations with having to deal with different organisations such as local councils, SA Water, SACHA and Comhouse⁴ - all of whom have different demands and different pro formas to complete.

Several respondents mentioned that the national standards for community housing are expected to be in place by June 2006. Implementation of the standards was seen to entail a lot more administrative work, particularly for volunteers in cooperative housing. One cooperative tenant feared that they would not have the armory.

> At the moment we’re battling to do the rents, we’re battling to do property inspections, and to evict people. And if we’re battling to do it now, when the national standards come in, we’re not going to have a hope in Hades. So I see that as a grave threat to coops. (Cooperative tenant, S)

Targeting of Access to Social Housing

There was a strong sentiment expressed amongst respondents that recent housing reform changes, which seek to restrict social housing allocations to tenants with complex needs, negatively impact on the ability of associations and cooperatives in particular to build sustainable tenancies that might eventually lead to employment outcomes. It was observed that increasingly, tenants with multifaceted needs and difficult behaviours were entering community housing:
the housing reforms of 1998 virtually ensured that the people who go into our properties are the most needy, homeless or pretty well low-income.....It's a bit sad in a way because it doesn't give you that mix, and you tend to have more social problems in your housing than before. (Association staff, NW)

The narrower targeting of social housing allocation was commonly envisaged as posing a significant threat to the ongoing viability and self-development aspects of the cooperative tenure, with cooperatives struggling with the issues of tenants with 'higher housing need and less wherewithal for skills development' (Peak body staff). The general feeling amongst respondents was that continuing down the current path would lead to the demise of cooperatives:

They're [the government] saying to us 'take lots of category ones'. It sounds great in theory but if you have lots of people coming out of DV [domestic violence] or drug rehabilitation or whatever drama has happened in their life and we've all been there... nothing against them, but they're not always in the position right at that time to start contributing, to come to meetings to do all that input you need to do in a cooperative. So if you have a mixture of people you can carry the others a bit and other people who are very elderly or disabled in such a way for whatever reason you always have people you've got to carry... you need a balance. (Cooperative member, NW)

Respondents noted that the Housing Trust's current waiting list of more than ten years, in conjunction with policy to decrease the amount of housing the SAHT owns, was placing pressure on the community housing sector to take tenants who previously would have moved into public housing. The general perception from within the community housing sector was that the SAHT is referring more clients than ever before to community housing. In particular, cooperative tenants suggested that for many individuals the present attraction to cooperatives is not necessarily the values and volunteer ethic attached to cooperatives, but basically that it provides one of the few available options to gain low-income housing. In one situation, a tenant had moved from poor quality private rental housing to a cooperative where the housing was of a much better quality. He felt however, that living in the cooperative required a degree of work for which he could not give the time commitment so he transferred to association housing, which was more suitable for his circumstances. As he described it '[the association housing has] given me time to do everything I need to do' (Association tenant, S). These types of consequences of stricter targeting were widely perceived as causing problems across the community housing sector, and negatively impacting upon the ongoing sustainability of cooperatives in particular.

Conclusion

This research is the first study of its kind in Australia and in this sense it is introductory. In Australia and internationally, solid empirical evidence on the impact of low-income tenants' participation in the management of housing upon employment related outcomes is scarce, and extensive further research is required on all aspects of this issue.

In summary, in the current study it was widely recognised that the main aim of housing associations is to sustain tenants in housing through providing stability and support services. Nevertheless, it was thought that these factors might indirectly lead to employment, where relevant, through tenants developing the requisite confidence and generic 'soft' skills such as communication and organisational skills that are precursors to employment. The activities undertaken by tenants involved in cooperative housing were seen to more directly involve the development of employment related skills, especially through the formalised roles within cooperatives such as finance and maintenance officer.

If indeed community housing is seen as a means by which low-income people develop skills and improve their employability and/or employment status, then the findings suggest that the most pressing issue is the viability of community housing, and the social policy context and financial and administrative constraints in which it operates. The current social housing policy of narrowly targeting social housing to individuals in highest need appears counterproductive to this aim.

Cooperative housing in particular and the volunteer responsibilities associated with it make it difficult to take on large numbers of tenants with complex problems and behavioural issues. People in crisis are unlikely to be concerned with participating in the management of cooperatives. Neither might they be in a position to manage their finances to ensure the cooperative can balance its books. The increasing pressure for community housing to house high needs and complex tenants is coupled with heightened requirements to complete complex administrative routines to particular standards and also be financially viable. It appears important to simplify the management of community housing wherever possible, for example in terms of negotiating GST or rental issues, so that tenants have more time to focus on paid employment and supporting other tenants to take on and learn new roles.

Overall, the findings suggest that there is a pressing need to review and evaluate how policies such as narrow targeting of social housing allocations and financial performance requirements impact upon the operation of community housing, and its very ability to engage individuals in skill developing activities.
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Surely the policy aim should be for community housing that is 'supportive' and sustainable with a mix of tenants, where people can contribute and learn as compared to 'supported' housing or 'housing of the last resort'.

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NOTES

1 This figure includes local government and community service organisations.

2 Provisions are included within the agreement to penalise social housing authorities that do not meet the performance indicators set to reduce work disincentives for tenants, through retaining up to 5 per cent of CSHA funds.

3 While is not generally a feature of housing associations, some associations run specific employment initiatives and businesses targeted for their tenants (see Arthurson, Ziersch, Ray & Carson 2004). However, these initiatives are not discussed in the current paper as the focus is the tenant management aspects of housing and how these might develop employment related skills.

4 Comhouse is a cooperative that assists community housing organisations with the maintenance of their properties.

5 Category one tenants are applicants for SAHT housing who are considered in urgent need of housing. At one stage community housing organisations were required to house category 1 tenants in order to receive new housing allocations. However, this is no longer enforced although based on the findings of the research this appears not to be common knowledge within the sector.