renter voice

Guide - Supporting Renters to Have Their Say

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# OVERVIEW

This guide contains resources that CHOs might wish to use to support renters in having a say about their housing. These resources can be:

* Included as part of an information pack provided to renters early in the tenancy (noting that it is important not to overwhelm or bombard renters with information at the outset);
* Used to check in with existing, longer-term renters, to remind them of opportunities available for providing feedback and having a say;
* Published on the CHO’s website in the ‘For Renters’ portal.

There are many types of resources that you can provide to renters including:

* [Commitment statement](#_Customer_Service_Charter)
* [How to have your say – the ‘must haves’ and options](#_Having_A_Say)
* [Renter-led guide](#_Renter-Led_Models)
* Your CHO Policies:
  + Renter Voice policy
  + Complaints policy
  + Neighbourly behaviour policy
* [Training – modules that CHOs might support renters to undertake to build and enhance participation skills.](#_Training)
* [Other resources, including materials produced by advocacy organisations.](#_Other_resources_and)

## Customer Service Charter and Model Renter Voice Commitment

A client or customer service charter (or statement or commitment) is key to accountable and transparent service delivery. It sets out the standards of service that clients – in this case renters – can expect to receive from an organisation, as well as the client’s rights and responsibilities. The charter should invite client scrutiny by being transparent about how service delivery is measured. The charter also invites client feedback and provides information about how to make a complaint, and how the complaint will be handled.

Most community housing organisations have customer or client service charters or statements publicly available. Examples include:

* Aboriginal Housing Victoria’s Customer Service Charter <https://ahvic.org.au/cms_uploads/docs/ahv-customer-service.pdf>
* Community Housing (Victoria) Ltd’s Customer Promise <https://chl.org.au/wp-content/uploads/CHVL-Customer-Promise-Brochure.pdf>
* Common Equity Housing Ltd.’s Member Value Statement <https://www.cehl.com.au/HaveYourSay/Attachment?Action=Download&Attachment_id=15777>

A CHO’s customer charter or statement should also incorporate a clear commitment to Renter Voice, ideally published on the organisation’s website, as well as being made available to renters in hard copy. This will refer renters to the organisation’s *Renter Voice policy* and will commit to providing renters with all the information they need about their tenancy, but also invite them to have a say, provide feedback and, when necessary, make a complaint.

### Model Renter Voice Commitment template

*CHO welcomes and values your views, suggestions, feedback, and complaints about your housing – these provide us with important information that helps us to improve our services to you. You have a right to express your views, make complaints, and request repairs and maintenance to your home. Having a say, making a complaint, or asking for something to be fixed will not negatively impact your tenancy in any way. CHO will provide you with clear information about your tenancy, and provision of housing services including:*

* *Your rights and responsibilities as a renter*
* *How your rent is set and when it will be reviewed*
* *How and when to request repairs and maintenance*
* *Use of common areas*
* *Neighbourly behaviour and quiet enjoyment of your home*
* *Opportunities for you to participate and provide your views and feedback about your housing*
* *Provide you with clear information about how your views will be considered and used in decision-making, but also why this is not always possible*
* *Provide you with assistance to have a say, if you need translation or interpreting services, help with reading or writing, or you need someone to act on your behalf*
* *Respond to complaints in a timely manner (refer to CHO complaints policy)*
* *Respect your privacy and confidentiality when you provide your feedback / input / views*
* *Always treat you in a way that is objective, respectful, and fair including consideration of your human rights*
* *Be accountable to you by providing timely information on actions taken in response to your feedback, including explanations where actions taken are unable to meet your hopes or expectations*
* *Where possible, use the information you have provided to improve service delivery.*

## Having A Say

*(This content can be edited and used in a letter / email or brochure to renters)*

***How to have your say***

*All feedback that you provide to your residential rental provider is valuable. Suggestions, complaints, or requests for repairs and maintenance all provide important information that can help improve your housing. You have a right to provide feedback and your tenancy will not be negatively affected.*

***Informal feedback:*** *this can be provided as part of your regular engagement with your tenancy worker – it might be your preferences for how you’d like to be communicated with, ideas about how to use communal spaces, or concerns about safety hazards such as poor lighting or trip hazards.*

***Repair requests:*** *you have a right to request repairs and maintenance of your home. Certain types of repairs, such as a blocked toilet, a gas leak, or a faulty electrical supply, are urgent, and your rental provider is required to have these fixed immediately – but you need to tell them about it! It is also important to make non-urgent requests as soon as possible – this helps to prevent small problems becoming much larger and more expensive to fix.* [*The Consumer Affairs Website*](https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/housing/renting/repairs-alterations-safety-and-pets/repairs/repairs-in-rental-properties) *has further information about repairs.*

***Surveys:*** *your community housing rental provider will conduct a survey at least once every two years, to ask you about how satisfied you are with your housing, the timeliness and quality of repairs and maintenance, and whether you feel your views are being considered in decisions about your housing. Surveys are anonymous and are a great opportunity to provide valuable feedback to your rental provider.*

***Complaints:*** *your community housing rental provider is required to have a complaints policy and procedure. It is your right to make a complaint about the way your rental provider has gone about delivering housing or related services. Complaints are a valuable source of information for rental providers to use in improving housing services. Refer to Complaints policy.*

***Other opportunities:*** *Your community housing rental provider may also offer some or a combination of the following opportunities for having a say and participating:*

* ***Information-sharing sessions*** *– for example, about policy changes, upgrade programs, or new building developments*
* ***Invitations to provide input*** *– for example, into policy reviews, physical upgrades, outdoor spaces and common areas*
* ***Suggestion boxes*** *in building foyers, and at the CHO offices – where suggested improvements can be made in writing.*
* ***Pulse check events*** *– such as ‘town hall’ forums, barbecues, local community festivals provide an opportunity for renters to meet with staff and leaders from the organisation, and provide feedback.*
* ***Advisory committees and panels*** *– providing lived experience advice for specific projects such as policy reviews or upgrades, or procurement of services; or as a standing committee or panel advising the Board or senior leadership.*
* ***Governance*** *– some community housing organisations reserve a number of positions on their boards for renters. This provides the opportunity to participate directly in the decision-making about how the organisation is run, and how services are delivered.*
* ***Housing cooperatives*** *– a model of community housing organisation where renters are the owners and managers of the housing stock and work together to run efficient, effective housing that meets the needs of their members. The* [*CHIA Vic website*](https://chiavic.com.au/community-housing/community-housing-models/) *provides more detail about housing cooperatives:*
* ***Renter-led models*** *– where renters initiate and run the committee, group, or association. Renters determine the purpose of the group, and the issues it will address. The group may provide advice or recommendations to senior management and the board, or be constituted as a formal Renter Voice to the board. The group may have an advocacy role, and seek to influence policy reforms on behalf of other renters. See the guide to renter-led models below.*

## Renter-Led Models

Renter-led models of participation include renter associations that might be focussed on a geographical area, or a housing estate or a building, or might involve all the renters of a particular CHO. They might also be renter-advisory groups, set up for a specific purpose, for example, to provide advice and feedback on proposed policy changes, or new developments or upgrades.

A key benefit or ‘’by-product’’ of renter-led models of engagement is that they provide an opportunity for renters to use and develop skills that can be used in other aspects of their lives, as well as equipping them to take up paid roles within the community housing sector.

Successful renter groups are supported by their CHOs – this might include material support, such as direct or in-kind resources such as an establishment grant, use of a space to meet, and use of computers. It also means that the CHO recognises, listens to, and respects the renter group, seeks its input, and involves it in decision-making.

The steps below are drawn and adapted from the [*Guide to Successful Tenant Participation*](https://www.gov.scot/publications/guide-successful-tenant-participation), published by the Scottish Government. **CHOs can share these steps with renters interested in forming a renter group.**

### Setting up a renter group

1. ***Reasons*** – a group is usually set up in response to a particular issue or a set of related issues. It could be use of a common area, cleaning, safety-related concerns, or desire to establish a social group.
2. ***Contact other renters and collect their views*** – are there other renters who are concerned about the same issue? Consider a letter drop, foyer posters, or social media (for example there might be a Facebook or WhatsApp group for your building). A core group might meet informally at an individual’s home or a community facility to plan how to proceed.
3. ***Support from CHO*** – let the CHO know that you are planning to set up a renters’ group, and why. And that you would welcome support, for example a place to meet, assistance with printing and copying letters and notices, etc.
4. ***Plan first meeting*** – when will it be held? It’s important to meet at a time that will suit most renters, depending on whether they are working, are retired, and / or have young children or other caring responsibilities. Be clear about the purpose of the first meeting – it might be to see whether there is interest in setting up a renters’ group to discuss particular issues and concerns.
5. ***Venue*** – the CHO may have a meeting room that you can use, or can assist you in finding a space at the local library or community centre. Make sure that it is accessible for people with mobility issues.
6. ***Running the first meeting*** –
   1. Be clear about what the group wants to achieve at the first meeting;
   2. Be friendly and welcoming;
   3. Introduce one another. This is very important if people do not know each other already;
   4. Make sure someone chairs the meeting or ensures the discussion focuses on the issues to be discussed;
   5. Take a note of who attended, the main points of discussion and any further actions that are decided;
   6. Ask for volunteers to form a steering group to work out how the group will be organised. Usually about six people will be required, but this can vary from one area to another;
   7. Agree who is responsible for future actions.
7. ***Steering group*** – this will be the core group of people that organises the meetings, and gets the group started.
8. ***Other considerations***:
   1. Public meetings
   2. Committee members’ roles – Chair, Secretary, Treasurer
   3. Constitution or Terms of Reference – the rules that guide the group’s operation
   4. Legal entity – will the group seek registration as an association?
   5. CHO – how will the group interact with the landlord? Landlords play a crucial role in helping develop and support successful groups.
   6. Supportive staff – a key staff member within the CHO whose role includes managing the relationship with the renters’ group and providing support.

### Successful renter groups

Like any successful group, a successful renters’ group will have the following characteristics:

* members respect each other;
* different views and opinions are welcome and encouraged;
* individuality is encouraged;
* aims and objectives are agreed but can be discussed and changed;
* aims and objectives are realistic and achievable;
* group members co-operate, rather than compete, to achieve goals;
* feelings can be expressed accurately and openly;
* positive feedback is given and valued;
* negative feedback is delivered in a constructive way;
* each member’s contribution is recognised and valued;
* problems are seen as normal and dealt with constructively;
* consensus is looked for in important decisions.

The roles and responsibilities of the group’s members may change on an annual basis or at a time period the group agrees, to enable individuals to develop new skills and take ownership of different activities.

Groups evaluate their progress and effectiveness and continually look for ways to improve and develop.

Successful groups do not emerge overnight. They take time to develop, encounter teething problems, learn from experience, and stay focused on their overall aims and objectives, while working with day-to-day issues.

## Training

CHOs may be able to support some renters, for example members of advisory committees or panels, or board representatives, to undertake training to build their skills to enhance participation.

### Training Specific to Renters and Household Members

* About Social Housing
  + How the Social Housing System works (applications, the Vic Housing Register, myth busting about queue-jumping, allocations, rent-setting, maintenance processes and how to report a repair / maintenance need)
  + Charter of Human Rights, inclusivity, anti-discrimination
* Communication skills
  + Communicating effectively with peers and agency staff
  + Public speaking
  + Listening skills
  + Basic literacy and numeracy – some residents may not be functionally literate in English or in their own language. This and fundamental numeracy will be useful skills for participation in this process and for general life
  + Basic computer literacy – as above
  + Basic financial literacy – in addition to numeracy, renters and residents involved in more formal consultation and advisory roles will need to be able to understand some basic financial information, such as costings for projects like maintenance. These skills will also be useful in other areas of life
* Meeting skills
  + Participating in meetings and workshops to provide ideas and discuss options and reach agreement on solutions
  + Use of mechanisms to manage dissent and off-topic comments (eg Parking Lot)
  + Team work – working with others
  + Basic leadership skills – accessing and supporting natural leaders among the renter/resident community will be an important component in the success of the program.
  + Governance practices – for those involved in Boards or Board committees. These practices might include an introduction to strategic and business planning.

## Other resources and advocacy organisations

### Renters’ Guide

[Consumer Affairs Victoria’s guide](https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/housing/renting/starting-and-changing-rental-agreements/resources-and-guides-for-renters/renters-guide) provides comprehensive information about all aspects of renting a home in Victoria.

### Commissioner for Residential Tenancies

The Commissioner for Residential Tenancies provides independent advice to the Victorian Government to recommend changes to renting laws, programs and services to improve the renting rights, practices and tenant experiences across Victoria.

Phone: 1300 029 783

Website: <https://www.rentingcommissioner.vic.gov.au/the-commissioner>

### Dear Landlord

Dear Landlord is a free self-help tool produced by Justice Connect, which is available to renters in Victoria. Dear Landlord can help you:

* Understand your options to stay safely in your home.
* Draft a letter to your rental provider to negotiate a payment plan or rent reduction.
* Prepare for VCAT or lodge a VCAT review application if you missed your hearing.
* Find important financial and legal help.

Website: <https://justiceconnect.org.au/help/dear-landlord/>

### Tenants Victoria

Tenants Victoria aims to inform and educate renters about their rights, improve renting conditions, improve the status of renters, and represent the collective interests of renters in law and policy making. There are resources available for people in different renting situations on the website.

Phone: 1800 068 860

Website: <https://tenantsvic.org.au/>