

One Bite at a Time

At the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane is an alfresco cafe. I always try to have meetings there, because in sight of the diners is a life-size sculpture of an elephant. It's pretty striking. But what's even more striking is the way it's positioned. The artist has tipped the sculpture up so that the elephant is standing on its head. An elephant, in the room, standing on its head.

Welcome everyone to this discussion on tenant participation. My comments today are limited by my lived experience as a tenant and my engagement with the social and community housing system in Queensland. I don't claim it is everybody's experience because I don't know. And, in fact, no one knows. Because tenants, who are the end users of the system, have no formal role in it.

Queensland is a part of the National Regulatory System for Social and Community Housing, or NRSCH. All states and territories other than Victoria and Western Australia belong to the national system which is governed by a national law and underpinned by a national regulatory code.

I'll leave it to the Victorians to explain, if they feel the need to, why Victoria has not signed up to the national system. But suffice to say, both systems complement each other in certain areas. In other areas, they diverge, no more so than in the area of tenant engagement.

This is my stripped back version of how social and community housing services operate in Queensland, as I understand it.

The Government, through the department, contracts out social and community housing to housing providers. Almost all providers are registered with the NRSCH. In order to meet the criteria for registration, providers have to be legally constituted corporate bodies. To understand one of the implications of this, I want to read a statement from the audited, annual accounts of one such provider.

"The company is a non-for-profit public sector entity which is not publicly accountable." It begs the question. Who is it accountable to then? The answer? To itself.

While this has got to be a good thing for the organisation, let me explain what it means for tenants. If a tenant or tenants collectively have a problem or complaint with the way a service is being run or an issue is being managed, the ultimate decision-making authority in respect of that complaint is the Management Committee or Board of the company. And their decision is final. The department cannot and will not intervene. I know this as a fact.

In the presence of a very senior member of the department, I was told the following from the chair of a provider. "When you are speaking to the CEO, you are speaking to me. When you are speaking to me, you are speaking to the CEO. There is no difference between us." I was shocked, as was my advocate because anyone who knows anything about good corporate governance knows boards have a responsibility to be independent of their executive arms.

Yet, nothing was said and nothing was done, because nothing could be done once the contract between the department and the provider was signed.

Now, to be fair, in relation to the actual matter I was dealing with, the office of the regulator (the Queensland Housing Registrar) did everything they were able to do within their very limited powers and resources. This included making specific recommendations for changes to the organisation's governance policies and procedures. But it didn't change anything. Because while words are important, only actions make a difference.

Nothing in the regulatory system compels organisations to act on the words they publish in the documents the NRSCH relies on as evidence of their compliance. And no independent evidence from tenants is required to corroborate what these documents say. This is a very big elephant in the room. A room, by the way, tenants are not invited into.

Just over 20 years ago, the Scottish Government determined that the only way they could ever improve the standard of housing conditions and services in their jurisdiction, which was at rock bottom, was to share information, ideas and power with tenants.

Not only did they name the elephant in the room, they set about tipping the whole thing on its head by making tenant participation a legal requirement throughout the entire system, from the regulator through to the provider. Providers not only had to have tenant participation strategies, they had to provide the resources and funds to make it happen.

The Scottish system is not perfect. No system ever will be, but it has achieved what it set out to achieve. It has improved housing conditions and services for tenants. In the process it's done something else that is in everybody's interests, (the government, departments, regulators, providers, tenants). It's decreased the amount of stress, frustration, anger, resigned helplessness and fear that had previously been felt at all levels of the housing system.

When I raise tenant participation in decision-making as a solution to many of our housing problems, people come up with all manner of reasons why it could never happen here. It's never been part of the department's culture. The tenant cohort is far too complex. Things will get out of control. It'll be too time-consuming to manage. Too costly. It's been tried before and it hasn't worked. We're not Scotland.

There are always a hundred reasons not to do something. But why spend any time there, especially when, from any perspective, there is only one reason to do this. Without end user participation continuous improvement, which is what everyone says they want, and practical solutions to what at times feel like intractable problems will be impossible.

It took a long time for the culture to change in Scotland. For a start, everyone had to learn how to do this stuff. But they managed to succeed because at the very beginning they had leaders who had the courage to act and persist despite their reservations and fears.

I'm sure there will be people out there who just don't want something like this to happen because it is not in their self-interest. And there will be others who, because of their experience, remain unconvinced it can happen at all.

For the latter group, especially, let me finish by sharing a joke Desmond Tutu use to tell. For those of you who may not know, Tutu was the Archbishop of South Africa, who, along with Nelson Mandela and others, after decades of struggle, turned the long-standing apartheid system on its head.

“How do you eat an elephant?” he said.

“One bite at a time.”