

TIP SHEET

Talking with Tenants About Neighbourhood Disputes



This 'Tip Sheet' includes strategies and ideas on how Housing ACT can support tenants who are experiencing neighbourhood disputes (either the cause of the neighbourhood issue, or the neighbour affected by another tenant's behaviour).

Your challenge is to help the tenant help themselves resolve or manage the dispute and its impact. Remember not all disputes can be resolved...but at the very least they can be managed!

1. MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

Right from the start frame the discussion so that the tenant is clear about his/her responsibility to try to resolve/manage the issue...and not the responsibility of Housing ACT.

Questions to pose to the tenant:

- What do you think you will do about this?
- What have you tried so far?
- What could you try next?
- Have you thought about speaking with Conflict Resolution Service...they are able to give you tips and strategies to assist you improve the situation with your neighbour?

If the tenant returns to you with the same issue... ask *"What do you think you should do now the problem hasn't gone away?"*

2. IT TAKES AT LEAST TWO PEOPLE TO CREATE THE WORD 'NEIGHBOURS'.

Make the tenant aware that you know there are usually two sides to every dispute. Ask questions like, "If I spoke to your neighbour, what do you think he/she might say about this?"

This question will let the tenant know that Housing ACT may need to get some information from the other tenant about what has been happening.

But more importantly the question will also get the tenant to start thinking about the situation from the neighbour's perspective.

A good series of follow-up questions to create empathy:

- What impact has this situation had on you (the tenant)?
- What impact do you think the situation has had on your neighbour?

3. WHAT IF THE TENANT RETURNS?

Sometimes a tenant will contact you again about the same issue, empower the tenant again by:

- What do you think you should do, now that the problem hasn't gone away?
- What are your goals in regard to improving the situation with your neighbour? How are you going to go about achieving this?

4. KEEP TENANT SOLUTION FOCUSED

Avoid getting caught up in the 'story' and the 'history'. There is a fine line between needing to ask questions about some pertinent details for HACT purposes, and inviting the tenant to go into too much detail and become repetitious. Be clear about the type of information you need...and the purpose for asking the question/s; conversely be clear on the information you do not need.

Use paraphrasing or rounding up, to let the tenant know that you have listened (or read the file), but also to stop them going over the same information repeatedly, as this can entrench the grievance for the tenant.

E.g. "You have explained that your neighbour has been saying to you.....and I understand from what you have expressed that you are frustrated. So, what do you think you'll do about this?"

5. "IT'S HOUSING'S PROBLEM NOT MINE!"

So you have tried tips 1, 2 and 3 and the response you received was *"No...I'm not going to do anything about it...this is Housing's responsibility!"* You might start to feel frustrated and tempted to either put the tenant in the 'too hard basket'...or get too involved.

Stop and use the BIFF response: Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm. For example "It is not the role of Housing ACT as your landlord to resolve issues between neighbours. If you would like some more information on how you can go about resolving the issue with your neighbour contact the Conflict Resolution Service. I appreciate that you have taken the time to share the issues with me, however I will not be able to act on your concerns"

6. TO COMPLAIN OR REFRAIN?

Think carefully about whether you encourage the tenant to make a complaint, especially if they have complained before about the same issue/situation? Is the referral back to the Complaints Unit about a valid concern, new pertinent information...or is the tenant trying to move the responsibility for the resolution back onto Housing ACT?

7. WHEN IN DOUBT...SLOW IT DOWN!

If you are feeling pressured to give a response to the tenant, it's best to extricate yourself from the conversation so that you avoid things like making undertakings on behalf of Housing, or expressing a personal opinion, etc). Perhaps the tenant expects you to know all the details of the case, about Housing ACT policy...and you are just not sure...when in doubt, slow it down.

Let the tenant know you are going to read the case notes to better inform yourself and you will get back to them by xx/xx/xx (if appropriate to give a date). This statement stops the tenant from re-telling the story or going into more details and also you have set an outcome from your interaction with a follow-up date which may minimise the number of contacts you receive from the tenant in the interim.

8. WHAT IF THE TENANT DOES NOT WANT TO CONTACT CRS?

Some useful phrases to encourage the tenant to contact the CRS:

- You can discuss some ideas about how to resolve the matter yourself, or if that's not possible, how to manage the impact of it on your life.
- It's confidential, CRS does not share any information you give them with Housing ACT unless you give them permission to do so.
- There's no obligation to follow through unless you choose it for yourself.
- You have nothing to lose by just giving them a call.
- It's free and will cost you nothing.

9. HOW TO PREPARE FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION WITH A TENANT...THE 4 T'S.

- **Timing:** contact the tenant at a time that is likely to be suitable. Make the contact at an optimal time for you too, e.g. when you are fresh.
- **Topic:** before you make the call, make some notes about what you need to convey to the tenant, so that you don't forget things under pressure. It's OK to tell the tenant upfront what the purpose of the call is and stick to that purpose. Keep going back to the purpose of your call.

- **Tone:** keep a professional tone throughout the conversation. If necessary, end the conversation and tell the tenant you will contact him/her to discuss it further at another time (and do it!).
- **Tasks:** end the conversation by making clear what you are going to do, and/or what the tenant is going to do. Make notes about this, so you have a record.

10. WHEN CONFRONTED BY A VERY ANGRY PERSON, CALM YOURSELF

It's helpful to think about this before you have a difficult conversation by phone or in person, if possible. If you find yourself working with a very angry person and start to feel affected, perhaps losing your impartiality... while you're talking, think encouraging thoughts such as:

- It's not about me! It's about his/her difficulty managing him/herself.
- I don't have to defend myself, or Housing ACT. I'm doing fine as I am.
- I don't have to take on their feelings. I have my own feelings that are quite separate.
- I'm not responsible for their creation or the resolution of their problem
- I can be supportive without getting emotionally involved.
- Keep open body language (face-to-face) a smile in your voice (over the phone) respect in your words (email/letter)

How to respond in trying situations can be challenging as one can tend to feel personally under attack...and perhaps risk saying something just to extract yourself from the situation.

Be consistent and put the responsibility for the matter back to the tenant respectfully. Use de-escalating strategies to bring them down from their upset...you want the tenant to mirror your outer calmness, and respectful approach. For instance:

- "That sounds frustrating. What do you propose?"
- "That sounds like a difficult situation. What do you think you'll propose for resolving it?"

The techniques in this Tip Sheet are for circumstances where there is no significant risk of personal safety for the tenant or the Housing officer; where significant risks are identified, Housing ACT personnel should refer to their internal policies and procedures for addressing such circumstances.

If you would like further information about anything contained in this Fact Sheet, please contact CRS on 02 6190 7100 or healthynighbourhoods@crs.org.au. You can also visit the CRS website at www.crs.org.au.