Living Spaces

A framework for community-led hubs within social housing estates: turning tenant talent into community strength

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Art and Making · Gardens and Growing · Music and Sound · Resident-Led

What Living Spaces Is

Every social housing estate in NSW contains people of real talent and capability. Artists. Gardeners. Musicians. Cooks. Craftspeople. Storytellers. People who have built things, grown things and made things, often despite significant adversity. These people are invisible in the public conversation about social housing, which is dominated almost entirely by narratives of need, deficit and dysfunction.

Living Spaces is a framework for changing that, by creating activated community hubs within social housing estates that are designed, led and shaped by the tenants themselves. Not managed activities handed down by an authority. Not programming that requires residents to be grateful recipients. Genuine, tenant-led spaces that show what is actually there: capability, creativity, generosity and community.

Community cohesion, resident agency and access to meaningful activity are consistently linked with less isolation and better wellbeing. Living Spaces is designed to test what that looks like in NSW social housing, with evaluation built in from the start, while creating something immediate and real for the people who live there now.

> *"The narrative about social housing has been written by people who don't live there. Living Spaces lets residents write it themselves."*

> This concept grows from the author's own experience as a social housing tenant in Newcastle, from participation in the Homes NSW Newcastle Tenant Action Group, and from conversations with other residents. It responds to what tenants say they need, and to the link between community life and long-term tenancy stability.

The Problem This Solves

The narrative problem

Social housing communities are consistently represented in news coverage, social media and political debate through a narrow lens: crime, disadvantage, dysfunction, complaint. This representation is not only inaccurate, it is harmful. It shapes how residents see themselves, how neighbours view them, how decisions are made about them, and how prospective tenants feel about living there.

The stories that don't get told are the ones that would change the conversation: a community garden that feeds a dozen households; a neighbour who teaches piano from her unit; a young man whose murals transform a corridor; tenants who check in on each other every morning. Stories like these exist in estates everywhere. They are simply not visible.

The isolation problem

As the Homes NSW Table Talk cards themselves acknowledge, isolation is common in social housing estates. High tenancy turnover, concentrated disadvantage and the absence of genuine shared infrastructure all mean that neighbours can remain strangers and mutual support is rare.

The consequences are not only social. Social isolation is associated with poorer physical and mental health and greater reliance on crisis services. A resident who feels connected to their community is more likely to sustain their tenancy and to contribute to the estate.

The capacity problem

Homes NSW does not need to create community in social housing estates. It is already there. What it needs to do is make it visible, support it, and step back. Living Spaces is designed around tenant capability rather than institutional delivery, because the expertise, creativity and energy already exist within the community. The role of Homes NSW is to provide the space, the basic resources and the trust.

Three Pillars of a Living Space

A Living Space is built around three areas of resident talent and activity. These are starting points that each community adapts to what is actually present and wanted, not fixed categories.

ART AND MAKING

- Painting, drawing, sculpture
- Textiles, sewing, craft, ceramics
- Photography and digital media
- Mural and public art
- Resident-led workshops
- Exhibitions of local work

GARDENS AND GROWING

- Shared food gardens
- Native and medicinal plants
- Composting and sustainability
- Therapeutic gardening
- Seed swaps and skill sharing
- Pet-friendly outdoor areas

MUSIC AND SOUND

- Informal music and jamming
- Singing groups and choirs
- Instrument lending and lessons
- Storytelling and spoken word
- Recording and podcasting
- Intergenerational exchange

What makes it different

Most community programming in social housing is designed by people outside the community and delivered to residents as passive recipients. Living Spaces inverts this. Residents are the designers, makers, teachers and curators. The role of Homes NSW and any partner organisations is to provide the conditions for this to happen, not to decide what it looks like.

- Residents propose and lead activities, not administrators
- Participation is voluntary: no obligation, no assessment, no gatekeeping
- The hub is a shared space, not a managed facility, and residents have genuine ownership
- What gets made, grown or performed is decided by the community, not a program officer
- Residents who lead activities receive recognition and, where possible, payment
- The hub produces positive stories, photographs and media that residents control

What a Living Space Looks Like

A Living Space does not need significant capital spending. Many social housing estates already have community rooms that are underused, under-resourced, and feel managed rather than owned. The model transforms an existing room through resident design input, modest investment in basic equipment, and a clear handover of agency to tenants.

THE STUDIO CORNER

• Art materials, work surfaces and storage, a display wall for resident work, easels and a large shared table. Designed with resident artists around what they need to make their work.

THE GARDEN THRESHOLD

• The outdoor entry to the hub is a resident-tended garden: planters, raised beds or a courtyard. It is the first thing visitors see, and it signals a community that grows and cares for living things.

THE SOUND NOOK

• A corner for music-making: a keyboard or second-hand instruments, chairs for playing or listening, acoustic treatment where possible, and a simple recording setup.

THE STORY WALL

• A central display of resident stories, photographs, artworks and milestones, updated by residents. Not a noticeboard of rules and announcements, but a living record of who this community is and what it makes.

> The physical space is a starting point, not a fixed design. Every Living Space begins with a resident design session: What do you want this to look like? What does it need? What would make you want to be here? The answers decide what goes in.

What Tenants Do, and How It Is Recognised

Living Spaces rests on a principle that runs counter to most community programming: residents are not the audience. They are the creators, teachers, curators and stewards. That needs a structure that recognises their contribution as expertise, not just volunteering.

The Resident Creative Collective

Each Living Space is guided by a small Resident Creative Collective of four to eight people from different parts of the estate and different interests. The Collective does not administer the hub. It shapes its direction, decides what happens, invites

others in, and represents the community in conversations with Homes NSW and partners. Members receive formal recognition, a modest honorarium where funding allows, and genuine decision-making authority over the space. It is not a consultative committee. It has real say.

Resident Facilitators

Residents who run regular activities, such as a weekly art session, a monthly music morning or a gardening roster, are Resident Facilitators. They receive facilitation training if they want it, access to materials and equipment, and recognition in all Living Spaces communications. Paid arrangements through local arts organisations or community service providers are pursued wherever possible.

The Living Spaces Showcase

Every six months, each Living Space holds a Showcase: an open day for the estate and the wider neighbourhood. Residents display artwork, share the garden harvest, perform music and tell their own stories. The Showcase creates an occasion, a point of pride, and a reason for people outside the estate to see what is actually there.

Imagined examples

To show how these roles might work in practice (these are illustrations, not real people): a retired watercolour painter runs a Thursday morning class for a handful of neighbours, and the group's work goes on show at the local library; a tenant who grew up on a farm builds raised beds from recycled pallets and leads a summer vegetable roster; a former professional pianist, returning to music after years of illness, plays a weekly session that neighbours stop in the hallway to hear.

Changing What Gets Said About Social Housing

The most damaging thing about deficit-focused coverage is not what it says about any single estate, but what it implies about the people who live there: that they are defined by what they lack, what they cost and what problems they create. Living Spaces answers this not by arguing in the abstract but by creating an alternative that is visible, shareable and undeniably real.

What gets created

- Photographs of harvests, artworks and performances, taken and owned by residents
- Short video stories of Resident Facilitators talking about what they do and why
- Social media for each hub, run by residents
- Twice-yearly Showcases that bring local media in on residents' terms

- An annual Living Spaces publication featuring the best of each hub
- Stories that Homes NSW can share in its own communications, with residents' permission

When an estate is known for a beautiful garden, a regular music morning and a wall of striking paintings by a resident in her sixties, the frame shifts. The estate is no longer only a problem to be managed. It is a place where things are made and people know each other. That shift can reduce stigma, improve relationships with neighbours and local services, and build residents' pride in where they live.

"What you fund is what you believe people deserve. Living Spaces says these communities deserve to be seen at their best."

How to Start: A Phased Pilot

Living Spaces is designed to begin small, prove itself in practice and grow on the strength of what residents build. A pilot at two or three sites, for example one in the Hunter, one in greater Sydney and one in regional NSW, would build the evidence for wider rollout within twelve months.

1. LISTEN (MONTHS 1–2)

- Conversations at pilot sites
- Find resident talent and interest
- Map what already happens
- Form the first Collective
- Assess the existing space

2. DESIGN (MONTHS 2–4)

- Collective designs the hub
- Basic equipment identified
- Partners approached
- Facilitation training offered
- First activities planned

3. ACTIVATE AND SHOWCASE (MONTHS 4–12)

- Hub opens, weekly activities begin
- Garden established
- Resident media starts
- First Showcase open day
- Evaluation: what worked, what to change

What Homes NSW would provide

Space	A designated community room, or part of one, reliably accessible to residents. Existing infrastructure.
Seed materials	Art supplies, garden tools, second-hand instruments and storage. Indicatively $2,000 to $5,000 per site to establish.
Facilitation support	One part-time community connector per pilot site, possibly from existing staff. Indicatively $25,000 to $35,000 a year per site if new.

Recognition	Honoraria for Collective members where funded. Indicatively $500 to $1,000 per member a year.
Publication and photography	Annual publication and Showcase photography. Indicatively $6,000 to $10,000 a year across pilot sites.

All costs are indicative estimates for planning discussion, not quotes.

Who Else Belongs in This

Living Spaces is strongest when it is embedded in the wider community, so that schools, arts organisations, councils and health services see the hub as a resource and a partner. These relationships begin with a conversation and a shared interest.

- **Local arts organisations:** regional galleries, community arts centres and councils can offer mentoring, exhibition opportunities and professional development for Resident Facilitators.
- **Schools:** intergenerational programs, such as older residents teaching craft or gardening to primary students, or young people recording elders' stories, benefit both sides.
- **Community health:** social prescribing, where GPs and mental health practitioners refer people to community activities, could make each hub a referral destination for residents experiencing isolation.
- **Companion animals:** Project Humanity's KITen concept, a mutual-rescue model pairing people and shelter animals, fits naturally with pet-friendly garden spaces.

What This Really Is

Living Spaces is not a program. It is a recognition that the people who live in social housing have always been building community, making things and looking out for each other, without support, without resources and against a public story that denies their capability.

What Homes NSW can do is simple: provide the space, step back, and let the community show what it is. The art is already there. The gardens want to grow. The music wants to be heard. The stories want to be told.

"Communities don't need to be built. They need to be trusted."

Suggested next steps

- Share the concept with Homes NSW and tenant groups for feedback
- Identify two or three pilot sites across the Hunter, Sydney and regional NSW
- Hold a small resident design session at each site
- Agree a pilot timeline and evaluation approach

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