

What the Cards Don't Say

A reading of Homes NSW Table Talk Cards as evidence of structural isolation in Australian social housing communities

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"When a system needs cards to prompt residents to speak to each other, the cards are not the solution. They are the evidence."

The Argument

Homes NSW produces a set of materials called Table Talk Cards: prompt cards designed to facilitate conversation between social housing residents at community events and engagement activities. The cards are well-intentioned. They are also, read carefully, a document of the problem they are attempting to solve.

This paper reads the cards not for what they say but for what their existence implies. It asks: what conditions would make these cards necessary? What does their design reveal about what Homes NSW believes is broken in social housing communities? And, most importantly, what do the cards not say, and why?

The answer, across seven card categories, is consistent: the cards document structural isolation without naming it. They attempt to remedy disconnection without addressing its causes. They ask residents to speak to each other about their experiences while the system that produced those experiences remains unexamined.

The Seven Categories: What They Reveal

1. Getting to Know Each Other

Icebreaker prompts such as 'How long have you lived around here?' The existence of this category documents that residents in the same building or estate often have no relationship with their neighbours. This is not a personality problem. It is an architectural and social design problem: the result of allocation systems that do

not consider community formation, high turnover, and the absence of shared communal infrastructure. When a question like this needs to be printed on a card, the honest answer for many residents is: not long. Or: long enough to stop expecting it to matter. The cards do not ask why residents don't know each other. They assume the answer is shyness.

2. Interests and Everyday Skills

Prompts such as 'What achievement are you most proud of?' and 'Is there something you like helping others with?' The category is right to look for capability. But years of being assessed for eligibility erode the part of a person that knows it is capable of contribution, and the cards try to restore something the system has taken without acknowledging the taking. Residents are asked what they can offer. They are not asked what has been withheld.

3. Looking Out for Each Other

Prompts such as 'What do you think is a small way neighbours can help each other?' This question is being asked of people who, in many cases, do not know their neighbours' names. The framing assumes that mutual care is a disposition residents either have or can develop, rather than a condition produced by structural factors. Research on social cohesion in public housing points repeatedly to residential turnover, the absence of shared infrastructure, and stigma. None of these appear in the cards. Nor does the word trauma, or any acknowledgement of the relationship between housing instability and health.

4. Home and Neighbourhood

Prompts such as 'What helps your place feel like home?' Notably absent: any prompt about security of tenure, fear of transfer, or experience of the allocation system. Residents are invited to describe their neighbourhood in positive terms. They are not invited to describe the experience of not knowing whether they will still be there next year. The cards construct a resident who has a stable relationship to place. Many do not. A tool that cannot hold that truth is a management tool, not a community engagement tool.

5. Community Rooms and Shared Spaces

Prompts such as 'Do you have a community room in your complex?' The room exists. Whether residents use it, feel welcome in it, or feel safe enough to share it with strangers are the real questions, and they turn on who controls the space. The cards ask how residents might use rooms that remain, structurally, the authority's rooms.

6. Gardens and Shared Spaces

Prompts such as ‘Do you enjoy being outdoors?’ Outdoor shared spaces are where community either forms or fails. A garden no one tends is a symptom, not a problem. The cards also leave out one of the most common ways residents care for living things: companion animals, which housing rules can force people to give up.

7. Getting Involved

Prompts such as ‘Do you like to participate in activities?’ This is the system’s formal acknowledgement that residents have something to offer and to say. It is also the most vulnerable to tokenism. Residents who share ideas in a facilitated session need to see those contributions documented, considered, and responded to. The cards do not say what happens to the ideas gathered, who sees them, or how they affect decisions. Without that, involvement is extractive. Community engagement that cannot accommodate institutional critique is not community engagement. It is community management.

The Questions That Are Not on the Cards

Read across all seven categories, a set of questions is consistently absent. These are the questions that would move the cards from engagement theatre to genuine structural inquiry:

- How long have you been on the social housing waitlist, and how has that wait affected your life?
- Have you ever been transferred to housing in an area you did not choose? What happened as a result?
- Do you feel secure in your tenancy? Do you know your rights if your tenancy is reviewed?
- Has Homes NSW ever made a decision about your housing that you disagreed with? Were you able to challenge it effectively?
- Do you feel that the feedback you have given to Homes NSW in the past has changed anything?
- What would need to change (in policy, in funding, or in the law) for your housing situation to be genuinely secure?

These questions are absent not because they are inappropriate but because they would require the system to account for itself. Community engagement that cannot ask residents to evaluate the system is not engagement. It is management.

Three Structural Corrections

1. Accountability structures for resident input

Every formal resident engagement activity should be documented, with a written response from Homes NSW to the input received, published within 90 days. Without this, engagement is extractive.

2. Resident representation in decision-making

A formal Resident Advisory Panel (with genuine deliberative power, not advisory status) would begin to address the fundamental asymmetry between Homes NSW and the people it houses.

3. Community infrastructure investment as policy priority

The conditions that produce isolation (architectural design, lack of communal space, high turnover, absent services) are policy choices. Community infrastructure investment produces measurable improvements in social cohesion and should be resourced as a standard component of social housing management.

Conclusion

The Table Talk Cards are not a bad idea. As a facilitation tool in a system that genuinely sought resident input, they would be useful. In the current system, where engagement is frequent and structural response is rare, they document the problem more clearly than any policy analysis could. The isolation they are trying to address is not a communication problem. It is a structural condition. The cards cannot fix that. Policy can.

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Card prompts quoted from Homes NSW Table Talk community engagement cards, for the purpose of discussion. This edition was revised in October 2026 to follow the seven categories of the published card set.