

# Tenant resources on sustainable living and everyday climate change adaptations

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## SUSTAINING RENTAL LIFE SERIES NOTE

The Briefing Paper series of the '**Rental housing, climate change and adaptive capacity: a case study of Newcastle NSW**' project seeks to provide readers with access to current research on rental sector adaptation to climate change. Briefing Papers produced by the project team are working documents that provide a forum on theoretical, methodological and practical issues related to climate change adaption in rental housing. The project is funded by the National Climate change Adaptation Facility (NCCARF) for 2012. The publication as a 'Briefing Paper' does not preclude subsequent publication in scholarly journals, books or reports. Unless otherwise stated, 'Rental housing, climate change and adaptive capacity' publications are presented as contributions to debate and discussion and represent our developing thinking about the research. We are hoping that they may facilitate feedback from readers, researchers, renters and housing managers.

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Renters Guide to Sustainable Living. Source: Alternative Technology Association  
<[http://www.ata.org.au/wp-content/sustainability/ata\\_renters\\_guide\\_sustainability.pdf](http://www.ata.org.au/wp-content/sustainability/ata_renters_guide_sustainability.pdf)>

NSW Sustainable Renting Guide. Source: Nature Conservation Council NSW  
<<http://nccnsw.org.au/sites/default/files/NSW%20Sustainable%20Renting%20Guide%20w%20NRMA%20logo.pdf>>

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### 1. Summary

The information resources available for renters can be categorised as guides, websites and information provided by government. The majority of sustainability practices listed in the resources and guides are not renter-specific; but the resources have been produced specifically in order to empower tenants to act.

Tenant guides often indicate which sustainability changes can be undertaken without or with landlord/housing manager approval.

Sustainability changes to rental housing by landlords could however dramatically reduce the amount of money spent by tenants on water and electricity.

Resources specifically targeting tenants are perhaps important to counter prevailing understandings of the passivity of tenants in sustainability. Most resources for tenants however do not specifically address climate change adaptation and that this is a gap that needs to be filled. Questions emerging from this review of tenant resources include:

- What other adaptation practices will tenants need to adopt in a climate changing world that are specific to their position as tenant?
- How might regulations and legislation assist them to adapt in ways beyond adopting more sustainable living practices?

Briefing Papers 5-8 in this series address these questions.

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### 2. Introduction

This briefing paper is the sixth in a series of briefing papers on our research project which is looking at the adaptive capacity of rental housing in Newcastle, NSW. This research project seeks to understand the adaptive capacity of public and private tenants by asking:

What adaptation strategies are tenants, housing managers and landlords currently undertaking?

What assets do tenants, housing managers and landlords bring to adaptation?

What are some of the barriers to tenants being able to better adapt?

How might landlords, renters, governments, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and housing managers work together to strengthen the adaptive capacity of low-income tenants in Australia?

These questions come out of an understanding of public and private housing tenants (as well as their landlords and housing managers) as active agents (Mee 2009) with the capacities, skills and assets that can assist in their ability to adapt to climate change. This project adopts an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and a Pro-Poor Asset-based Climate Change Adaptation (PACCA) approach and focuses on the assets of tenants, understood in the broadest sense. We approach tenants as active, with skills, gifts and capabilities. The purpose of the research is to strengthen the capacity of public and private housing tenants to adapt to climate change.

This briefing paper scopes the resources available to tenants about how they can make their homes more sustainable. It helps us contextualise pertinent questions such as:

What type of information is out there?

How might we tailor the information we provide to tenants as part of this research project to account for this?

The information resources that are available for renters can be categorised as guides, websites and information provided by local government. Within these categories of information there is:

information on the changes that landlords could make that is available to renters but requires landlord investment and participation in changing the physical assets of the building

information on how tenants can shift their everyday practices and habits to make their homes more sustainable. These types of information can be categorised as information on water saving, energy saving, food/consumption practices and gardening.

Interestingly, the majority of practices listed in the resources and guides are not renter-specific; such practices can be adopted by anyone independent of tenure type, but the resources have been produced specifically in order to empower tenants to act.

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### 3. Information Context

A number of information guides and brochures exist that inform tenants about how they can make their homes and lives more sustainable. However these information sources rarely mention climate change adaptation, instead focusing on sustainability tips and cost-saving measures, which will, we can assume, assist tenants adapt to the specific and multiple impacts of climate change. For example, it may assist them to adapt to increasing costs and reduction in the availability of resources (energy, water) and an increase in the number of extreme weather events such as heatwaves (NSW Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency 2012).

The information made available to tenants is often obtainable via the internet which limits the access of low-income tenants who potentially have restricted internet access. At the same time, some information has appeared in sustainability magazines such as *G* magazine, which had a feature on 'Green Living for Renters' (McCann 2010). Most information comes in the form of a guide or website, or as more general information on sustainable living from local councils, which we explore below.

### 4. Guides

Sustainable renters guides are most often produced by local and state government departments (for example 'The Victorian Green Renters' Guide 2010, by Environment Victoria) or NGOs that have a specific goal of reducing environmental impacts and focus on mitigation, such as the Nature Conservation Council of NSW. These

organisations and government departments have compiled collections of tips and practices for renters that sketch out what they need to ask their landlords permission to do, and what they do not need permission to do.

This is particularly pertinent as the NSW Residential Tenancies ACT 2010 affects what tenants are able to do in their homes in that most minor changes that tenants make need to be approved by their landlord (NCC NSW 2012). For example, tenants are required to ask their landlord's permission to install a water-saving shower head or build a vegetable garden. Tenants can access information on what they can and cannot do during their tenancy through the NSW Fair Trading website which provides a number of guides based on the Act (NSW Department of Fair Trading 2011b; NSW Department of Fair Trading 2011a; NSW Department of Fair Trading 2012)

Because of the role of housing managers and landlords in regulating what changes can be made to the physical asset of rental housing, it is quite common to find resources that focus on everyday practices and habits and explicitly state they do not require permission from landlords (for example McCann 2010; Environment Victoria 2012; NCC 2011). However the laws affecting tenancies are a significant focus of sustainability information that is made available to tenants.

Tenant guides have particular sections that address the landlord/housing manager and tenant relationship, usually by indicating which everyday practices can be undertaken without or with landlord/housing manager

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approval. In particular, the *NSW Sustainable Renting Guide* breaks up each potential way tenants can green their home into distinct headings within each section: 'what to look for', 'once you've moved in' and 'ask your landlord' (NCC NSW 2012). For example under 'water efficiency', this guide suggests: "ask your landlord for permission to install low-flow fixtures..." (NCC NSW 2012: 16).

Other guides have specific icons that indicate practices reliant on landlord/housing manager involvement (LJ Hooker 2012b; ATA 2009). Here tenants are positioned as having the ability to ask for changes to improve their physical dwelling.

### 5. Websites

Websites are an important source of information for renters. Information for renters appears in web sites such as the Liveability website of LJ Hooker (one of Australia's largest real estate agents). This site "is an initiative that supports people to make the sustainability choices that are right for them" (LJ Hooker 2012a; ATA 2009). The website contains information for both home owners and renters on how to improve energy and water efficiency. Recently, the company has produced a "Rent Smart" guide in conjunction with the Alternative Technology Association, Kildonan Uniting Care and the SustainAbility Advice team (LJ Hooker 2012a). According to this guide:

*You don't have to own your own property to reduce your environmental impact, save money and increase your comfort at home. Renters too can find many simple, inexpensive ways to*

*reduce a rental home's energy and water use (LJ Hooker 2012b).*

Here renters are positioned as being able to make significant changes to their everyday practices, a theme echoed in other resources including particular organisations directly targeting renters.

Green Renters is a recently-founded organisation in Victoria. It is

*... a not-for-profit organisation providing sustainability advice specifically for those living in rental accommodation. Renters are a growing part of the community and we believe their involvement is vital and possible (Green Renters 2012)*

Interestingly, this organisation uses green games such as "Rentopoly" where players make their homes more sustainable to reduce their 'rent' (Green Renters 2012). Green Renters runs workshops specifically on sustainable living, eco-crafting, preserving, green cleaning etc (Green Renters 2012).

An organisation that addresses the combined concerns of climate change adaptation and rental housing is Just Change:

*... a not for profit organisation founded by six friends in Victoria who saw a gap in the current approach to energy efficiency and climate change action in Australia. We seek to fill that gap through an innovative program that gives renters, property managers and landlords the tools they need to access the many energy efficiency schemes available in Victoria (Just Change 2012).*

This organisation is unique in its specific focus on climate change and the effects

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on rental households. Interestingly both of these organisations are based in Victoria; however, Green Renters has begun running workshops across the country.

### 6. Local government and other general information

In NSW, local councils play a role in disseminating information on sustainable living. Some councils provide information specifically for renters, but this is not yet the case in the context of our study. Newcastle City Council offers more general information on topics such as composting, grey water re-use worm farming and provides general links to other sites (NCC 2012). Lake Macquarie City Council provides a number of brochures and factsheets on sustainable living such as information about green cleaning, sustainable backyards, a recycling guide, saving water, saving energy, reducing waste and sustainable transportation (LMCC 2012). This council also runs a number of workshops on worm farming, green cleaning, and habitat gardening, among others. These types of resources may be utilised by renters and assist in their ability to make changes that enhance their adaptive capacity. Another resource that has been widely studied is the carbon or ecological footprint calculator.

### 7. Carbon or ecological footprint calculators

Another way that organisations and governments provide information on sustainability and climate change is through the carbon or ecological footprint calculator. These are most often targeted at mitigation measures. Carbon footprint or ecological footprint

calculators are interactive tools that assist individuals calculate their personal and household environmental impacts. Carbon calculators are often produced by non-government organisations in conjunction with governments or business. Bottrill (2007: 2) explains:

*Carbon calculators have been developed primarily to increase awareness of the connection between fossil fuel use and carbon emissions and/or to enable people to invest in carbon saving projects to offset their emissions.*

The accuracy and helpfulness of these calculators is contested; however, they provide a different learning experience from other sources of information (Bottrill 2007; Franz and Papyrakis 2011).

Carbon calculators ask questions about specific consumption choices (e.g. consumption of electricity, choice of local food, transport options) and living arrangements (the number people living in the dwelling, the energy saving devices they have, whether they buy green power etc) and make suggestions about how to reduce emissions through changes in lifestyle. However, they have been critiqued by Franz and Papyrakis (2011: 392) for not providing a way to “...fully offset one’s environmental impacts...” or change lifestyles to such an extent as to prevent environmental destruction (Franz and Papyrakis 2011). This may continue feelings of powerlessness rather than promoting action (Franz and Papyrakis 2011).

Two examples of carbon calculators include ‘one degree’, which is a carbon calculator developed by News Limited,

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Australia, and an ecological footprint calculator provided on the Lake Macquarie City Council website (LMCC 2010). This calculator has been compiled by the World Wildlife Fund, the EPA Victoria and the Global Footprint Network and features an animation to complement a series of questions that calculate the number of 'Planet Earths' needed to sustain a person's current lifestyle, the amount of land needed to support them and suggestions for reducing their ecological footprint (LMCC 2010). Users are then able to make changes to their calculations and pledge to change particular lifestyles in order to reduce their impacts.

Carbon calculators encourage a wide range of habits and practices and provide information on sustainability through analysing real-world situations and lifestyle choices that are not tailored specifically to the situation of tenants. In the next section we outline the types of changes that can be made in rental housing that are reliant upon the involvement of landlords.

### 8. Changes reliant on landlords

The changes that are reliant on the actions of landlords are significant and important in enhancing the adaptive capacity of the rental sector. Table One below outlines these types of changes, which would dramatically reduce the amount of money spent by tenants on water and electricity as they involve the installation of water or energy technologies such as solar panels or water tanks. These changes would make the physical housing more sustainable and the tenants better able to adapt to the ill-effects of climate

change such as rising energy and water costs.

**Table One: Landlord changes**

Install solar panels
Install water tanks
Install water-saving shower head
Install aerators/flow restrictors on taps <sup>1</sup>
Install curtains and pelmets on all windows
Install energy efficient LED light bulbs
Insulate roof and walls
Double glaze windows
Install solar hot water
Fix water leaks
Allow tenants to use/modify/install garden beds

(Sources: Environment Victoria 2012; Environment Victoria and Tenants Union of Victoria Ltd 2010; McCann 2010; NCC NSW 2012; ATA 2009).

Because the resources provided focus mainly on sustainability rather than climate change adaptation there are some practices that landlords could undertake that are not included above. For example one important change that is not listed in any of the materials is provision by landlords of flyscreens on all windows to prevent mosquitoes from

<sup>1</sup> Legislation was recently introduced in NSW and QLD (and a review in TAS made a similar recommendation), to make the installation of water-saving shower heads and aerators/flow restrictors on taps mandatory for all rental properties where the tenant is charged for water. The majority of other changes listed in Table Two are not mandatory at present but are listed as potential contributors to making rental properties more comfortable to dwell in and making it easier for renters to adapt to climate change.

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coming into homes. With the potential increase in mosquito-borne illnesses as a result of climate change (NSW Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency 2012), providing fly screens and repairing any holes in floors and walls of rental properties may be vital actions that landlords need to undertake to ensure tenants are able to adapt to climate change. Poor ground drainage around homes is another potential breeding ground for mosquitoes. In these examples, minimum requirements or standards that define what a habitable rental property is and ensure all rental properties meet these standards may be essential in preventing the negative impacts of climate change.

### 9. Everyday practices of tenants

The majority of the practices listed in guides on sustainable living require changes in everyday practices, habits and routines more than monetary capital, ownership of property or additional knowledge and specific skills. It is argued that by adopting the suggested new practices or altering existing practices, tenants will reduce the environmental impact of their lifestyles.

These practices can be adopted without consulting or obtaining permission from landlords and arguably owner-occupiers could also engage in these practices in order to reduce their environmental impact. However these resources have been produced specifically for tenants and the targeting of that audience is perhaps important to counter prevailing understandings of the passivity of tenants (Mee 2009). As the Nature

Conservation Council (NCC) of NSW chief Executive officer explains

*[W]hile renting can have some impact- after all you do not have complete control over the physical structure of your home and finances may be limited- it does not have to be a barrier to living sustainably (NCC NSW 2012: 13)*

A tenant's understanding of themselves as unable to make changes in their housing could potentially be a barrier to climate change adaptation. We are particularly interested in how this information is presented.

### 10. Checklists

Some of the ways in which these suggestions for change are communicated to tenants involve checklists. Checklists aim to help make remembering sustainable practices easier and to facilitate decision-making practices. Because some of the sustainability measures suggested are dependent upon where tenants live, for example their access to public transport, some checklists have been developed to help tenants make decisions about which property to rent (see NCC NSW 2012). Other checklists have been designed to help tenants assess the physical assets of a rental property, for example whether or not it has vegetable gardens, solar panels, solar hot water, or curtains etc (see NCC NSW 2012).

### 11. Tips and suggestions

Table Two is a compilation of the information provided in resources that specifically target tenants, although most of these practices could equally be adopted by owner-occupiers. Practices

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include energy saving, water saving, food/consumption practices and gardening practices. The types of practices contained in these information guides can be structured around particular rooms or spaces of the home, such as living rooms and outdoor areas, or by topics such as heating and cooling, appliances or lighting (NCC NSW 2012; Environment Victoria and Tenants Union of Victoria Ltd 2010).

**Table Two: Sustainable practices**

<b>Energy saving practices</b>
Grow deciduous plants outside sunny windows to keep rooms warm in winter and cool in summer
Use bubble or cling wrap to insulate windows if they are not already double glazed
Turn off lights when you leave the room
Use energy efficient appliances
Install a hot water heater insulating wrap
Wrap hot water pipes in old towels to insulate
Dry your clothes on clothes line rather than the clothes dryer
Turn your fridge temperature up in winter and down in summer.
Make sure your fridge is positioned 5cm from the wall and away from the oven.
Only run one fridge
Use lamps instead of halogen lights
Seal draughts in windows with weather stripping and use draught snakes for your doors
Use a blanket or hot water bottle instead of a heater
Hang blankets or curtain between rooms where there are no doors. If there are doors, close them when heating a specific room
Turn off lights and all unused electrical

equipment at the switch
Use a fan rather than an air conditioner
Block up unused fire places with an old blanket to stop draughts
Turn off hot water heater when you go away for more than 2 days
Wash clothes etc in cold water
Set hot water heater to the minimum temperature available
Make sure your fridge seal closes properly.
Defrost fridge and freezer regularly if you have an older model that does not automatically defrost
Do not overload your fridge or freezer
Use lids on pots and pans to reduce heat loss when cooking
Reduce the time ovens are preheating and avoid opening the door when cooking
<b>Water saving practices</b>
Take showers instead of baths
Re-use grey water
Save shower water in buckets and reuse it on the garden
Undertake other measures to create a dual-flush toilet if you do not have one e.g. placing water bottle or brick in cistern
Use a water-saving shower head and flow restrictors on taps
Reduce time and frequency of showers
Turn off taps when they are not in use
Ask landlords to fix water leaks
Keep dishwashers clean and use economy settings if possible
Wash clothes when you have a full load
Use front loader washing machines as they use less water than top loaders
<b>Food/consumption practices</b>
Compost food waste to reduce organic matter in landfill
Recycle

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Upcycle materials and find new uses for them e.g. plastic containers, tins, plastic bags
Reuse materials e.g. jars, green bags, appliances
Eat less meat and buy only sustainably fished seafood
Buy recycled or second-hand materials
Buy seasonal, local, organic food
Ride a bike
Catch public transport
Decrease your use of a car for transport
Grow your own food to reduce food miles
Reduce food waste by only buying the amount of fresh food that is needed
Buy 100% green power
Think before you buy anything. Do I actually need this?
<b>Gardening practices</b>
Mulch garden to reduce water loss
Compost and reuse nutrients rather than throwing them away.
Grow your own food
Start a worm farm or bokashi bucket for food scraps
Growing native indigenous plants that are suited to soil conditions and drought tolerant
Water your garden in the early morning or late afternoon to reduce evaporation
Grow food organically by only using chemical-free organic pest and disease control methods

(Sources: Environment Victoria 2012; Environment Victoria and Tenants Union of Victoria Ltd 2010; McCann 2010; NCC NSW 2012; ATA 2009)

As can be seen from Table Two, there are a number of tips and suggestions made by the organisations above that aim to help renters reduce their

environmental impact and reduce the amount of money spent on energy, water and consumables. They are practices that assist in reducing the environmental impacts of tenants' lifestyles and therefore are a form of mitigation. At the same time they also reduce resource consumption in ways that could be seen as cost-saving, which assists in tenant adaptation.

In June 2012, the NSW government body responsible for the provision and management of public housing, Housing NSW, produced an informative booklet for public housing tenants about how to save energy and water. The first of its kind in Australia, this booklet contains a range of information for public housing tenants structured around how to reduce energy use, how to reduce consumption, how to reduce water use, how to reduce waste and on buying seasonally (NSW Department of Family and Community Services 2012). Other State housing authorities offer information on sustainability (for example the Office of Housing Victoria produces the *You and Your Home* guide which includes sustainability information), but the Housing NSW booklet is the first targeted guide.

Whilst much of the information mirrors that already discussed, some of the tips for tenants provided in this guide do not appear in other resource guides or in the guides collated in Table 2. For example, in the 'Family and Kitchen' (NSW Department of Family and Community Services 2012) section tenants are told that it is better to "thaw frozen foods on the bottom shelf of the fridge before cooking" (NSW Department of Family and Community Services 2012: 7). In the sub-section on

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'Children and Family' suggestions are made about how to save money at the same time as being environmentally sustainable, such as using cloth nappies, buying pre-loved clothes and making use of toy libraries instead of purchasing new toys (NSW Department of Family and Community Services 2012: 6).

This guide is comprehensive and has clearly been targeted to a group of low-income tenants, particularly public housing tenants, including implicit references to public housing tenure in enabling adaptation. For example the guide discusses gardens, which are easier for public housing tenants with long term tenure to cultivate than for tenants in the private sector. The document also encourages renters to report leaky taps to maintenance, alerting them to the role of the landlord in maintaining their property in a sustainable way. The guide provides a link to the 'NILS' (No Income Loan Schemes), available in some areas to assist low income households purchase essential household items (that could include energy efficient appliances).

This information can be viewed as endeavouring to tailor information appropriate for a specific group rather than producing a generic resource. In this way, it goes some way towards overcoming one of the common critiques of information as a strategy to encourage change, that is, that it fails to recognise diverse audiences (Strengers and Maller 2011; Waitt et al. 2012; Whitmarsh et al. 2011). Such a failure may affect the ability of NGOs and government to communicate adaptation strategies.

The majority of the practices recommended in the resources reviewed here require a change in everyday habit and routine more than monetary capital, ownership of property or additional knowledge and specific skills. They are not dependent on the tenant being a tenant per se. The resources will assist tenants to mitigate and potentially adapt to climate change.

But what other adaptation practices will tenants need to adopt in a climate changing world that are specific to their position as tenant? How might regulations and legislation assist them to adapt in ways beyond adopting more sustainable living practices? Briefing Papers 5-8 in this series address these questions.

## 12. Conclusions

This briefing paper has provided an overview of the types of resources that are available to tenants on how they can make their homes and their practices more sustainable. We have endeavoured to provide a summary of the sources of information available to tenants along with a list of practices that are reliant upon the actions of landlords, and those changes that can be undertaken by tenants alone.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the practices of tenants which are reliant on the approval of landlords are only a small percentage of the overall changes that tenants can make to improve their adaptive capacity. However, the landlord actions listed above would contribute significantly to the well-being of tenants. Is the shift to sustainability and enhancing adaptive capacity lagging because of landlords' refusal to modify the physical housing

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stock? Or are there other barriers affecting tenants' ability to adapt to climate change and make their energy, water, food/consumption and gardening practices more sustainable such as fear of eviction? (See Briefing Papers 5-8).

We hope this briefing paper will help contextualise the information that we receive through interviews and focus groups during our research project, to help address some of these questions. We do not however make assumptions about the types of practices that tenants are currently engaged in. The information is rather something that we might add to through our qualitative research 'in the field' on everyday adaptive practices.

As noted in earlier briefing papers there is a messiness and overlap in the fields of adaptation, mitigation and sustainability, particularly when it comes to providing resources for tenants on sustainability. However, it is evident from the resources listed above, that most resources for tenants do not specifically address climate change adaptation and that this is a gap that needs to be filled. The kinds of changes that need to be made to ensure tenants are able to adapt to climate change may differ from those that make their homes more sustainable. This may not require a huge amount of additional work, but the language we use to communicate changes and practices for tenants may need to expand from altruistic discourses around *being green* to include discourses that focus on the necessity of these shifts for enhanced well-being. They will in any case need to clearly reposition tenants as active in making such changes.

With the production of best practice guides and community implementation guides as part of our research project, we hope to add to the resources discussed above and thereby enhance the future adaptive capacity of the rental sector.

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