

# Climate change and the rental sector: Theorising the Housing Manager

Briefing  
Paper  
ELEVEN



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Acknowledgements:



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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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The correct citation for this publication is:

Vaughan, N., Williams, M., Instone, L., Mee, K. and Palmer, J. (2012) 'Climate change and the rental sector: Theorising the Housing Manager', Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Newcastle, Sustaining Rental Life Briefing Paper 11.

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Cover photo by L. Instone, 2012.

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## 1. Summary

Our research project explores the barriers, assets, and capacities that tenants, housing managers, and landlords bring to climate change adaptation in the rental sector. In particular, it explores these actors as active agents in the adaptation process. Understanding the roles of tenants, property managers and landlords requires engagement with theorisations of their capacities, interests, and experiences. In this briefing paper, we explore how housing managers have been theorised in a way which allows us to identify what capacities and areas of influence they bring to the rental sector. We argue that there has been only limited engagement with private property managers in housing studies, a major gap considering the important functions carried out by housing managers. Nonetheless, by drawing on literature that explores social housing management, landlord-tenant relationships, and strata management, the paper identifies three broad areas of housing manager theorisation that are helpful for exploring adaptation: influences on the housing manager, the housing manager's influence on people and relationships, and on the material qualities of buildings. We conclude by arguing that deeper theorisation of private housing managers is needed for a more nuanced understanding of the private rental sector and its capacity to adapt to climate change.

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### 2. Introduction

This briefing paper is part of a series of briefing papers on our research project that 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, NGOs and real estate agents work together to strengthen the adaptive capacity of the rental sector 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 approach recognises the important role of housing managers in

working with tenants to strengthen the adaptive capacity of the rental sector.

This briefing paper brings into focus the ways in which the role of the housing manager has been understood and explores how the housing manager has been theorised. Housing managers are key actors in our study, and theorising their role will facilitate our analysis of interview material, and allow us to situate our work in housing research more generally. Doing so identifies potential contributions our project will make in this body of work.

### 3. Scope and limits of the available literature

In order to theorise the role of the housing manager, this paper draws on different bodies of literature that attend to the role of the housing manager in a variety of ways: work on social housing management; literature that explores relationships between landlords, property managers and tenants; and strata management.

Reviewed literature on social housing managers derives from a wide range of case studies, including Australian (Marston 2004) and UK research (Saugeres 2000; Saugeres 1999; Saugeres and Clapham 1999). As the paper argues, there is a significant amount of literature that theorises the *social* housing manager in contrast to the amount of work on housing managers in the private sector.

The second body of literature is used to scope out relationships between property managers, landlords, and tenants. With the exception of very limited literature (for instance, Short et al, 2003; 2006), there is an absence of

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research exploring this relationship. There are, however, useful insights on the landlord-tenant relationship, primarily from the US and UK (for instance Lister 2004; Lister 2005; Grineski and Hernández 2010), and from the commercial sector (for example Rasila 2010). This literature allows us to conceptualize some of the tensions underlying relationships between different actors in the rental sector, and possibilities for more constructive relationships.

However, there are major limitations to these two bodies of literature in that they largely neglect the complex role of the property manager in 'juggling' tenants and landlords. The work directly focused on housing management almost exclusively addresses social housing managers, while the experiences of property managers in the private sector have been overlooked. This is a topic in which our study is well-poised to make an important contribution.

Drawing on work that, while not focused on the rental sector, nonetheless involves processes of housing management, is also a valuable way of teasing out these themes in our research. For this reason, we use recent work on the strata management sector to explore more nuanced accounts of managing relationships between different actors (Easthope and Randolph 2009; Easthope et al. 2012).

The literature reviewed below, therefore, offers important synergies with our research: it helps us in this paper to further theorise the role of the housing manager and in Briefing Paper 12 to explore the potential connections

between this role and improving sustainability in the rental sector.

In order to explore this literature in a way that is meaningful to our project aims, the briefing paper explores themes through a structure attentive to:

1. Influences on housing managers
2. The capacity for housing managers to influence the rental sector.

Through this approach, the briefing paper acknowledges that we can conceive of themes emergent in these literatures as able to enhance our understandings of the assets, capacities, and barriers confronted by housing managers.

### 4. Influences on Housing Managers

Housing managers negotiate a diverse array of influences in their everyday practices, including policy directives, organisational cultures and personal beliefs. Housing managers are not passive conduits through which policy, legislation, or directives are passed along to dwellings/ residents/ landlords, but are actively involved in translating, and sometimes, resisting institutional aims and programs, and negotiating contradictory and complex organisations and environments. This section draws mostly on work which focuses on social housing managers, and explores the multiple influences on housing managers, and how these are actively negotiated.

#### Policy and legislation

Research into the role of housing management in social housing has had a particularly strong focus on how policy

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changes influence the tasks of the housing manager. For instance, much research into neoliberal influences on housing management identify a (re)construction of the role of the social housing manager as a consequence of ideological and political shifts (for example Manzi and Smith Bowers 2004). In this way, broader policy changes potentially (re)shape the role of the housing manager. Our research also shows that policy and program changes at the federal, state, and organisational levels can influence the day to day activities of property managers. It is worth highlighting, therefore, that some literature argues that neoliberalism has attempted to (re)construct the role of the housing manager, by showing that broader policy frameworks influence what the property manager is expected to do.

However housing managers can translate and enact policy and programs in diverse ways and cannot be thought of as passive receptors of policy. Saugeres (1999), in her work on social housing managers' perceptions of tenants, emphasises the agency of managers, noting that:

*... even though frontline staff have to operate within policies, procedures and definitions that limit their discretionary powers, they still interact with tenants and interpret their situations according to their own subjectivities... it is argued that staff are not passive recipients of organizational rules and socialization, but both reproduce and resist dominant ideologies through everyday discourse and practice (Saugeres 1999: 1403).*

Policy changes can therefore influence the broad scope of the role of the housing manager, as well as affecting the day-to-day tasks the housing manager is responsible for. Housing managers bring their own subjectivities to such policies, suggesting managers actively negotiate the policy context that they work in.

### Organisational culture

Multiple aims, cultures, and practices co-exist within the one organisation, and must also be actively negotiated by housing managers. Priemus (2005, 15) observes that housing associations, which may have both construction and management activities, can have contradictory goals and aims. Further, he points to contradictions within government policies that can encourage sustainable housing even as they simultaneously undermine it in other ways. Priemus cites the Dutch government's co-existing aims of enhancing the sustainability of housing while at the same time pushing up housing consumption through market-led developments. He cites examples such as financial support for homeowners and tenants that can stimulate housing consumption while "considerably reduc(ing) the sustainability of housing" (Priemus 2005: 12). That is, financial support to increase the development and consumption of housing can have the unintended consequence of environmental damage through increased construction activities. While these contradictions may not directly be experienced by housing managers, they certainly inform the environment they operate in. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the financial 'bottom line'

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is a major constraint to adaptation in the rental sector, and in broad strokes, at least, we can see similarities here with the focus on a market economy and increased consumption competing against sustainability; Priemus sees this as a key policy contradiction surrounding sustainability and housing.

### 5. Influencing people and relationships: Property Managers, Tenants, and Landlords

Another area of literature that helps us to theorise the housing manager is literature that focuses on the landlord-tenant relationship. This literature contributes to our theorisation of the housing manager in several, interconnected ways. First, some literature seems to treat the 'landlord' and 'property manager' interchangeably, without distinguishing between the specific role of landlords and property managers. Other literature focuses directly on the landlord-tenant relationship, to the exclusion of the property manager. This is obviously appropriate where a landlord-tenant relationship exists without being mediated via a professional property manager. This literature may nevertheless contribute to our understanding of the relationship between tenants and property managers because it contains elements of the relationship between tenants and self-managed landlords when the private landlord is carrying out property management tasks.

However, we would also suggest that the absence of explicit attention to different ways that private owner/landlords and professional property managers experience the

relationships and processes involved in housing management is a major gap in this literature. In particular, a very brief review of this literature suggests a need to move away from the tendency to conflate landlords with professional property managers, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of housing managers.

Much of this literature uses the entry point of the tenant's perspective (see for example Lister 2004; Lister 2005; Grineski and Hernández 2010). While this is essential, incorporating the perspectives of both tenants and landlords may enrich the literature that explores the rental experience.

Our review commences by outlining the ways in which social housing managers have been understood as influencing their tenants, before drawing on literature about landlord-tenant relations more generally, and, where possible, more specifically the property manager-tenant relationship. We then review literature from the commercial sector, where analysis about these relationships is somewhat more hopeful. Finally, we briefly review work on strata management because it offers insights into ideas about 'juggling' relationships, helpful for addressing precisely this gap in other literature on housing management.

### Social housing managers

Housing managers, particularly in social housing, are understood as managing *tenants*. Indeed, literature on social housing management is one of the most prominent areas of housing research that explicitly explores the influence of the housing manager, both direct and implicit, on tenants (see for example,

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Clapham et al. 2000; Franklin 2000; Priemus et al. 1999; Saugeres 2000; Saugeres 1999; Saugeres and Clapham 1999). For this reason, this literature is one of the most useful sources for looking at how the housing manager has been conceived as an active agent in the housing sector. While this literature is therefore most directly relevant to understanding the role of social housing managers rather than private sector housing managers in our research, many of the themes may also be relevant to private property managers, especially given the current absence of theorising in this area.

This literature on the role of the social housing manager observes a consistent focus on guiding and shaping the tenant. For instance, the Octavia Hill method of social housing management in early 20th century Britain had a strong emphasis on managing tenants to instil residents with middle class values and behaviours. Similarly, neoliberal housing management strategies have sought to make tenants 'participative', 'work force ready' and appropriate 'neoliberal citizens' (Ravetz 2001; Grayson 1997; Flint 2004). Efforts to explore the capacity of housing managers to work with tenants to improve the sustainability of the rental sector will need to take care to avoid using similar assumptions about housing managers as somehow 'improving' tenants.

### Private property managers

There is remarkably little research on the role of the property manager in the private rental sector, especially in terms of mediating and managing the relationship between landlords and tenants. It is particularly notable that

most research on relationships in the private rental sector focuses directly on the landlord and tenant, or conflates landlords and property managers (see, for instance Lister 2004; Lister 2005; Pierre et al. 2010; Grineski and Hernández 2010).

Nonetheless, this literature offers insights into how tenants may experience relationships with property managers and landlords who manage their housing. Furthermore, what is most striking about this work is the power the landlord is perceived to wield over tenants; Lister's work explores the challenges faced by young people when first entering the rental sector, and their experiences of being 'monitored' by landlords as landlords seek to control both tenants and the property (Lister, 2005), while Grineski and Hernández (2010) explore environmental injustices of the private rental sector in Arizona. In their study, the poor quality of housing stock, and the failure of landlords to improve it, contributed to the ongoing health problems of tenants', tenants were placed in an unequal relationship with their landlords, and were ignored when they sought improvements to their dwellings. Such examples suggest the constraints on tenants and the potential for dire consequences as a result of landlord and property manager inaction.

The limited work that does focus specifically on the role of property managers also considers that low income tenants in particular can be disempowered in their relationship with the housing managers. For instance, Short et al (2003, 2006) explore property managers' practices in managing tenants deemed to be 'risky', in part through the use of, and threat of,

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listing tenants on tenancy databases available to property managers and landlords. These databases effectively 'blacklist' tenants judged to be risky. Short et al describe the processes through which property managers can use both formal and informal threats to induce tenants to comply with their tenancy agreement (Short et al. 2006: 935). The authors note that warnings are often used outside of formal processes "in part, to circumvent what is perceived by property managers as a too lengthy process of legal redress" (Short et al. 2006: 935). Informal practices can clearly be used by property managers to overcome perceived barriers. Of note, though, is our emerging analysis that indicates that informal practices are also used to enable tenants, property managers, and landlords to achieve common ground in overcoming challenges unique to adaptation, such as the 'split incentive' (see Briefing Paper 6).

Nonetheless, both this and other research studies note the potential for improvements and interventions in these relationships. In particular there is an acknowledgement of the scope for personal relationships and connections to be fundamental in reshaping formal relationships, and that landlords and property managers can more positively interact with tenants. For instance:

*Lister (2007) argued that acknowledgement of this personal relationship and the associated informal rules and understandings associated may hold the key to better outcomes for landlords and tenants. (Bierre et al. 2010: 23).*

There is therefore scope for a greater recognition of emotional and informal relationships and connections to be drawn upon in improving the adaptive capacity of the rental sector.

The role of private property managers in 'governing' tenants has been considered in research on the professional practices and use of tenancy databases to manage potential tenants deemed high-risk (Short et al. 2003; Short et al. 2006). This work is valuable in revealing that low income tenants may be disempowered in the rental sector through the use of tenancy databases. Meaningfully for our work, is the acknowledgement that "rental tenancy is accomplished through dynamic, strategic relationships between tenant(s) and property managers/owners" (Short et al. 2006), and that property managers are the "meat in the sandwich" in this relationship (Short et al. 2003: 27). Furthermore, the importance of communication between property manager and landlord, and property manager and tenant is acknowledged as critical to property management practice, carried out through both formal and informal strategies (Short et al. 2003; Short et al. 2006). This work clarifies the importance of understanding the unique role played by property managers, as well as the specific practices that they employ in managing a particular issue (in this case, 'risk management', in our research, climate change adaptation).

### Commercial sector relationships

Another area of literature that may help to theorise the role of the housing manager is work on landlords and tenants in the commercial sector. Rasila

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(2010) for example observes the importance of trust and commitment in positive landlord-tenant relations in the commercial sector. Like some of the literature considered above, some of this work conflates the role of the landlord with the property manager. However, where it offers helpful insights is in the way it conceives of the landlord and (business) tenant relationship: it suggests a relationship more (equally) negotiated between actors, unlike social housing where the focus is on shaping tenants through management practice, and private housing where tenants are disempowered through the housing manager. However the commercial relationship in this research involves two, rather than three actors, and the literature does not grapple with the complexities of a relationship mediated via the property manager. For deeper understandings of literature in this area we can return to Short et al's (2003, 2006) work, as well as research into strata management.

### Strata management

We can also theorise the role of housing managers in 'juggling' relationships, through emergent work on strata management that explores the complexities of governing strata title, including the multifaceted relationships between strata managers, owner's corporations, developers and residents (Easthope and Randolph 2009; Blandy et al. 2006). For instance, Blandy et al. (2006) consider the power relationships between residents, developers, and managing agents in multi-owner residential complexes in New Zealand and England. They analyse the case study through a 'bundle of rights' approach and conclude that there is

notable "frustration of residents [owners] in finding themselves constrained by legal frameworks" (2006: 2381) and that current legislative and contractual frameworks favour developers and managing agents as developers, are able to maintain control and influence through the appointment of managing agents and retaining and interest in the body corporate until certain conditions are met (e.g. until all units are sold). They suggest that this, and relationships between developers and managing agents, may disempower property owners and residents. The authors also point to examples in their research in which residents/owners felt that real estate agents and managing agents were communicating poorly with them and failing to provide adequate information about their rights and limitations as property owners, and the specific role of the body corporate and owners' corporation in governing the multi-owner complexes. Their interviewees were frustrated with constraints imposed on them by legal frameworks, and with poor communications between themselves and other actors. Work on strata management and the relationships between different actors can be helpful for conceptualising the tensions and complexities surrounding the multiple relationships between different actors in the rental sector, at least as they demonstrate that owners/ occupants/ agents/ developers may have competing priorities and experience certain legislative frameworks as an influence on their relationship with other actors. Implicit in some of the recommendations by Blandy et al. (2006) is the need for greater clarification of the roles and

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responsibilities of the different actors involved in strata management.

Elsewhere, in their work on the role and effectiveness of strata management in Sydney, NSW, Easthope et al. (2012) identify the importance of ‘managing people’ as one of their key insights: “strata management is about managing people as well as managing buildings” (2012: 4). They point to disputes, primarily around noise, car parking, and a failure to adhere to by-laws. Disputes were commonly resolved through informal processes, particularly negotiation between owners. Formal dispute mediation was also used by executive committees and owners. These have obvious differences from the relationships that housing managers ‘juggle’ between tenants and landlords, but Easthope et al.’s analysis nonetheless identifies ways in which relationships are ‘juggled’ and negotiated. Furthermore, respondents acknowledged how successful management reflected the particular qualities of individuals on the executive committee, something that also seems critical for how tenants in the rental sector assess their rental experience.

Recognising the ways that the executive committees of strata buildings have to manage the sometimes conflicting interests of different residents helps us make claims about the importance of exploring the multifaceted relationships and actors managed by property managers more specifically.

Another area where Easthope et al.’s research into strata management provides contributions helpful in theorising the housing manager is in their discussion of information exchange

and provision between owners, managing agents, executive committees, and builders. Some problems were noted where owners were not provided with sufficient information or clarification from the managing agent, or conflicting advice was received, for instance on rights and responsibilities of different actors (Easthope et al. 2012: 6). Critical to the smooth functioning of housing management, then, is up-to-date and clearly communicated information between the actors, a lesson that is pertinent to the role of the property manager in managing the landlord-tenant relationship.

### 6. Influencing Buildings

Short et al (2003; 2006) note that property managers are primarily employed to manage a building belonging to the landlord. The capacities of property managers to influence the material, technical, and maintenance processes of buildings, is clearly not distinct from their relationships with landlords and residents. Nevertheless, exploring the spheres through which housing managers can influence the building structure allows us to identify potential adaptive capacities beyond influencing the everyday practices of landlords and tenants.

Reflecting the dearth of research into the distinct role of the property manager in the private rental sector, there is limited work on how, and to what extent, property managers have, for instance, sought to influence landlords through recommending particular actions, such as upgrades or specific contractors. We know, however, that part of what

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property managers do is to carry out maintenance work on behalf of landlords or to make recommendations to landlords about such maintenance or upgrade work. There is therefore the potential for enhanced adaptive capacity in the rental sector through changes to everyday practices in maintenance that could work to improve the sustainability of rental properties. Indeed, there is research which explores the ways that building managers have enhanced the sustainability of multi-occupant buildings through changes they have administered to the building. These cases, and the role of building management in enhancing sustainability in the rental sector are considered in Briefing Paper 12.

## 7. Conclusions

Housing managers have been under-theorised in relation to their capacities to influence the rental sector, especially private property managers. This paper makes clear that greater research is needed into the experiences of private property managers, especially in order to make more visible their role in mediating the relationship between tenants and landlords. Nonetheless, drawing on a broad scope of literature, including social housing management, work on landlord-tenant relationships, and strata management, this paper has outlined the complex and individual ways that housing managers can enact policy and programs, and influence and manage relationships and buildings. In Briefing Paper 12, we explore these spheres of influence in relation to particular empirical examples of sustainability and housing.

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