

Project Report

A CHAT ABOUT HOUSING

Hot Topics Action Group Project

Joint Project

by

**Queensland Disability Housing Coalition
and**

Queenslanders with Disability Network

funded by

Funded by Residential Tenancies Authority (RTA)

**Prepared by Mary Kenny
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1. Introduction

I thought the information tonight was very interesting. The peace and goodwill thing I think was very interesting. I never knew about that. I remember at the time when you said the police sent you to the courthouse with these papers, they didn't know – I mean, even us are inundated. It's a shame that they have to make the system so confusing, that they can't simplify it, but at the same time I think that information is very important and I think that should be pushed because that could be a stepping stone because these people are a nightmare and poor Mary and Bill have put up with hell for so long. I feel so sorry for them. But that was great information, thank you.

Gold Coast Participant

This report concerns information on the Hot Topics groups project recently completed by the Queensland Disability Housing Coalition (QDHC). The project was funded by a Residential Tenancies Authority (RTA) Community Education grant to provide an avenue for community education around tenancy rights for people with intellectual disability, an often forgotten about group, and to see if the Hot Topics format for people with intellectual disability, used by Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) could be used elsewhere to provide information and to develop connections with the housing sector groups.

The purpose of this report is to:

- provide a description of the work of the project;
- highlight the outcomes for the participants;
- document the learnings of the project; and
- provide details about the Hot Topics model in the form of a resource called Hot Tips for Hot Topics.

Throughout this report snapshots provide information about the topics and discussion held during the various Hot Topics group discussions. All participants were asked if they agreed to have their situations mentioned in this paper. Names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

2. Background

Throughout 2005, QDN and Mary Kenny (project consultant) met with a group of people who have intellectual disability and who wanted to chat about things that were happening for them in their lives. The group was called Hot Topics Action Group, and met approximately every three weeks.

The format used a community learning model and enabled the participants in the group to chat about the things in a way that was friendly, helpful and encouraging. The model encouraged active participation in the group and addressed issues of isolation and discrimination and provided connections, information and education. Representatives from Tenant Advice & Advocacy Service, Queensland (TAASQ), Tenants Union of Queensland Incorporated (TU) Queensland Public Tenants Association (QPTA) and Department of Housing, came to the group individually and provided information and phone numbers. Most importantly, they established a personal connection with members of the Hot Topics group.

Additionally, the Hot Topics group hosted an evening where the guests who had visited the group came to be part of a panel to discuss housing issues. This was a successful

experience and opened up possibilities for developing the group idea further. It also provided a successful strategy for engaging members of the group and confirmed their connection with individual workers in the Housing sector.

3. The Project: Aims & Objectives

As a result of the success of the Hot Topics Action Group at QDN, QDHC applied for a Community Education grant from the Residential Tenancies Authority (RTA) to identify whether the Hot Topics format could be used elsewhere to help specifically with housing issues. Both QDN and QDHC are aware that many people with disability are adversely affected in their experiences as tenants by their lack of knowledge, confidence and understanding about tenancy law and how it affects them in their daily lives.

The project aimed to provide people with disability in the Toowoomba, Gympie and Gold Coast areas with access to the network of agencies and people who are more informed about tenancy rights and responsibilities. This will be done through a collaborative partnership between Queensland Disability Housing Coalition (QDHC) and Queenslanders with Disability Network Inc (QDN).

Additionally, this project aimed to enable participants to feel empowered and enlivened by using the community learning model process and to gain confidence about their rental and to increase their understanding of their tenancy rights and responsibilities. The project aimed to provide information and education about common tenancy issues such as:

- Repairs
- Breach of contract
- Keeping pets
- Disputes with neighbours
- Safety and security in public housing
- Issues around Residential Tenancy Act
- Issues around Boarding Houses

Mary Kenny was engaged as consultant to do the project. A work plan was developed to guide the work of the project

4. Collaborative Reference Group

With the support of the RTA, QDHC and QDN collaborated on a submission to fund the work of the project. In order to manage the project, QDHC and QDN developed a Memorandum of Understanding. QDHC auspiced/managed the project. A reference group met monthly throughout the project to discuss the progress and support the consultant. Members of the group were Karin Swift, Coordinator QDHC, Judith Hemmingway from QDHC and Greg Wagner, Coordinator QDN, Dominic Cullen and Amanda Tink from QDN, Valentina Dimoska from RTA and Mary Kenny, Consultant.

5. Methodology

The project was conducted in South East Queensland; we chose Toowoomba, Gympie and the Gold Coast communities because QDN had already established some contact with people with disability in those areas. These three communities were within easy car travelling distance from Brisbane. The consultant contacted the people with disability in Toowoomba, Gympie and the Gold Coast, using the established networks of QDN and QDHC. After making connections with a small number of people in each area, the consultant travelled to Toowoomba, Gympie and Gold Coast on a regular basis from March to August 2007. Initially, the visits were weekly to Toowoomba and Gympie and then fortnightly. The visits are now on a monthly basis.

6. Methodology of conversation

The following diagram illustrates the dynamic and the energy flows required to help a conversation take place. Using this method helps participants to feel included, to have a say, to feel listened to, to feel a sense of belonging in the group.

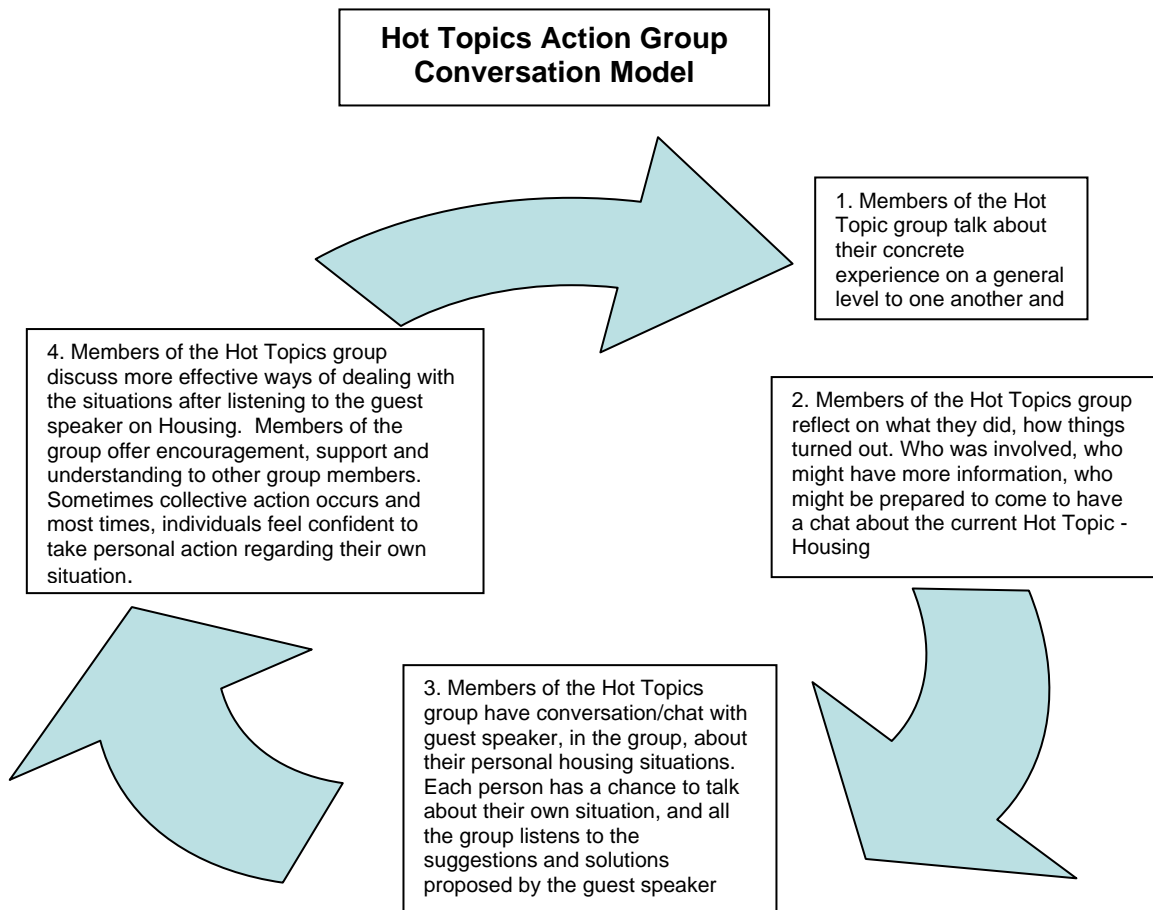


Diagram 1 - Hot Topics Conversation Model
Adapted from David Kolb Adult Learning Model

"I like this method because - because of my processing slowness, this slows things down and clarifies each point and I am also verbal - not verbal, visual, so I have got to be able to see it written down, so it hits me in there and it stays in there hopefully. And then we get to - and I can see the points so that while I am looking at the points, sometimes I can be following what's happening and a little bit of my brain is also processing. Sometimes that doesn't happen. I have to wait and in a quiet moment quickly grab a bit, process something that I want to say. Unless it's really listed and it's clarified, I have a lot of trouble"

Gold Coast Participant

7. Letting people know about the project

Emails were sent to all housing sector groups in the Toowoomba, Gympie and Gold Coast areas. The emails provided information about the project and invited organisations to contact QDHC or Mary Kenny for more information. Some enquiries expressing interest in project were received as a result of these emails.

Information about the project was included in the QDHC newsletter and QDN monthly e-Bulletin had regular updates about the Hot Topics groups

Karin Swift and Mary Kenny delivered a presentation about the project at the September 2006 TAAS (Q) state wide training event held by the Department of Housing. There was positive feedback from participants and there was general interest in developing the Hot Topics Action idea in their local areas.

QDHC placed an article in the newsletter that the TU develops and distributes to TAAS(Q) and other stakeholders in the housing sector.

Some people already involved in QDN's network were interested in participating.

The consultant spoke to parents, service providers, people with disability and local support networks to make contact with people with intellectual disability.

8. What we did/who met and when

The consultant provided an accessible public venue that was known to most participants in each of the areas.

In **Toowoomba**, four people attended the first meeting. Subsequent meetings were held on Wednesday afternoons. Numbers in the group fluctuated between eight and four people. During the consolidation phase of the project, four people attended the group regularly, and continue to meet monthly.

In **Gympie**, three people attended regularly, and the Consultant was visited by a number of housing sector groups and disability service providers whilst at the meeting venue. Meeting times were changed for the convenience of people attending.

On the **Gold Coast**, two groups have emerged. The first group is part of an existing QDN network and meets on the week ends. The consultant met with this group several times. No one in this group had an intellectual disability, and the consultant continued to network to find others who might also benefit from the Hot Topics model.

In June 2007, the first meeting of a Hot Topics Housing group was held at Southport, on a Saturday and ten people with intellectual disability attended. Ten people have formed a group which meets fortnightly, and now meets monthly on the first Friday of the month at 6.30 pm. All members of this group receive lifestyle and accommodation support. Members of this group have housing issues such as neighbours, pets, repairs, understanding the literature and have experienced difficulty in making connection with and communicating effectively with the housing sector.

Each venue provided a welcoming atmosphere, quality food and catering. Paying attention to this detail enabled participants to feel welcome and that their input is valued.

Quality food assisted with concentration during the meeting and included a good mix of protein and carbohydrates and minimal fats e.g. chocolate or pizza and sugar. Fruit juice, tea and coffee were offered in preference to soft drink.

Assistance with transport was provided, although many people walked to the venue or shared travel costs.

An information pack containing QDHC 'A Home of My Own', QDN membership and organisational policies were given to all participants and interested people who spoke with the consultant.

9 Hot Tips for Housing Sector and community workers

The Hot Topics model can benefit Housing Sector and Community Workers. Workers will gain a clearer idea of issues, make a clearer and accurate assessment of what is needed by individuals with an intellectual disability and prevents issues escalating and increases the likelihood of tenancies being successful and therefore avoiding crisis work and accommodation in the future

These tips can assist housing workers and other support agencies to effectively engage with the group as a way of consulting with them and listening to the issues that the services then need to address. For example some tips for housing workers wishing to assist someone with an intellectual disability or wanting to consult them about issues may be:

- be prepared to be flexible about a time and venue to meet with people
- be prepared to talk about a number of issues around the actual housing issue and wait for the information to emerge as people discuss various topics
- clarify that what you are saying is understood
- allow adequate time for questions and interpreters
- be prepared to have a number of breaks in the discussion, giving people time to process information etc.

10 Learnings and Challenges

10.1 Developmental aspect of the project

Forming a group, building on existing relationships and developing a positive supportive group culture takes time. When the participants come together and share their experiences in a way that is welcoming and supportive, actively listening, then the participants relax and have a sense of being heard. When people have been heard in the group, relationships in the group change, and there is a greater cohesion, more commitment to returning to the next session and more respectful listening to others.

This project has highlighted:

- a) the amount of time needed to complete various phases in developing and maintaining a group:
 - o **Lead up phase:** in contacting and networking with possible group members. Using traditional networks for contacts for the target group did not always locate the individuals who might have benefited from being part of Hot Topics

- **Beginning phase:** establishing a venue that is well known, accessible, readily available, inexpensive and welcoming to people with disability
 - **Consolidation phase:** this phase begins after the group has settled into a routine and when everyone is ready to hear information from the relevant stakeholder, in this instance, the housing sector. Introducing guest speakers too soon does not enable the group to gel as a group, and information from the guest speaker may not be taken on board
- b) the need to ensure that once a group was functioning to build in ongoing support for the group to continue after the life of this project.
 - c) that the use of connections and networks of existing groups and agencies was important to reach people with disability
 - d) the need to establish credibility and trustworthiness when an 'outsider' is working to set up the group

10.2 Different approaches needed for each region

The Hot Topics model provides a participatory and empowering model for people with intellectual disability. It also provides opportunities for housing sector providers to engage directly with people with intellectual disability and obtain information about issues as well establishing a relationship with the individual participants so that issues can be discussed and dealt with before crisis develop and threaten tenancies. Housing sector providers need to be prepared to be flexible about a time and venue to meet with people and be prepared to talk about a number of issues around the actual housing issue and wait for the information to emerge as people discuss various topics.

Different demographics in the Toowoomba, Gympie and Gold Coast regions provided challenges in finding people who would form the Housing Hot Topics groups. In the Toowoomba area, for example, many families have ageing parents who continue to support family members with disability at home. These parents were concerned about allowing their adult sons and daughters to attend the groups for fear that it would raise expectations and lead to disappointment when they were unable to access affordable housing and appropriate supports.

In this project, the Consultant was an "outsider" to the local community, and needed more time for the lead up and beginning phases of the project in all three regions.

There are several people in public housing in Gympie who would benefit from being part of Hot Topics; however, more networking and a facilitator from within the local community would enhance the chances of organising a group of people with disability to meet regularly. Five people expressed interest in forming a group, but they found it difficult to organise a time that would work for both the facilitator and fit with their work commitments.

The project received good support from the community sector.

The Queensland Housing office located in Toowoomba provided access to staff. Staff were very supportive, and able to provide contacts and assistance with knowledgeable and suitable local officers to attend the group. In Gympie, the main office for Queensland Housing is located at Maryborough and is not easily accessible from Gympie. Workers

from Home Assist, TAASQ and the local housing groups expressed interest in attending and supporting the group. In Toowoomba, members of a local Public Tenants Group attended the Hot Topics group on a regular basis. In Gympie, the local Disability Services Queensland coordinator circulated information about the project.

Local disability groups expressed interest in the project and promised to advise service users of the availability of a Hot Topics. In all three regions, venues were provided at little or no costs. The Toowoomba City Council provided meeting rooms free of charge. Later in the project, a local community group provided a seminar room at a very reasonable cost. The Gympie Community Centre was very supportive, offering an accessible and affordable venue that was well known in the community. These venues are available for any ongoing activities of the groups.

On the Gold Coast, a fledgling QDN group provided an opportunity to canvass for group participants. Further networking with an accommodation support agency produced a keen and enthusiastic group of ten people with disability who meet regularly at 6.30 pm on Friday evenings. Whilst this time suits the participants, it is difficult for housing sector workers to attend the meetings.

The Coordinator of QDHC visited the group in June and provided much needed information and support to the participants regarding neighbours and getting along with other tenants who live in housing complex.

Excellent support has been offered from the lifestyle and accommodation support agency that supports the participants in the Hot Topics group. For example:

- the agency reminded participants of the time of the meetings
- helped each participant to plan how they will get to the meetings
- contacted the Consultant to advise the names of other agencies that might have suitable group members
- provided individual support to one of the participants at the meeting

11. Snapshots of discussion

A variety of comments were made by the participants on the following issues:

Issues with neighbours

We have the neighbours from hell. They have been picking on us. We have tried to complain and nothing happens. Another thing they did, one of us accidentally forgot a light on outside. Instead of them coming in and saying, "Can you turn your light off, please?", they smashed it. So then the police came and - we rang the police up and told them. They came out and had a look and went to next-door and had a talk to them. They came back and told us what's going on. By the time the police come from their place, back to our place, the mother came back in with the light cover.

There's a rubbish tin, throw all the rubbish in our place. I have a whole heap of cigarette butts and when we say can I throw them in, please, they are not ours, they are hers.

I have got an electric lawn-mower. I took it out to cut the grass and what did they do, bucket of water over it while it was going. Today we come home. What do we find in the letter-box? Dog poo.
Gold Coast participant

I know we had one issue, a person in public housing, in duplex, and the neighbours were horrific. The neighbour also had a disability but it was probably the carers they had through the Centrelink system, the carers, and the carers from hell, absolutely horrific and the number of complaints and police called and complaints written to housing and nothing

happened. He actually had a heart attack and passed away.

Gympie Disability Support Worker

With people smashing windows, there's a thing called the RTA, Residential Tenancy Act, in there it talks about people having quiet enjoyment of their space. So that when that is happening, people getting loud and drunk and smashing windows, that's not quiet enjoyment of their space. If these people are also renting from the Department of Housing, You can ring your local Department of Housing and say, "I'm not able to enjoy my space. These people are doing all this stuff, making all this noise," and then they have to do something about it because it's infringing on your ability to enjoy your space

Gold Coast –Housing Sector worker

Issues with design and changing needs

The shower's over the bath. She had no hope in hell of hopping over the bathtub to get underneath the shower. So after we got onto them, they all had their meeting with Bill - apparently he was saying this bathroom was supposed to be done six months ago. Why wasn't it? And so they did the bathroom. They've put lino down in the kitchen and put all the skirting boards back on.

Toowoomba Participant

Issues with accessing affordable housing

I have so much trouble getting a place for my mum. She's 77 last year. Because they had no - you know, she's still on the waiting list and everything. Because my mum can still walk and cook, slightly. She's been on the housing list...two to three years. So we had to get my mother into another place that wasn't through the housing commission because they...up here, I have had my daughter and son-in-law living with me for an amount of time, in housing commission, because their place was sold under them and they had applied for housing commission as well. They couldn't get accommodation on their low income. They found it very hard. They went on council commission and there's nothing for them...they come in with me because she's my daughter but they have got their own house now.

Toowoomba Participant

Issues with personal space, boundaries and relationships

One of the things that we found, we talk to a lot of people and it gets really stressful because everyone is living on top of one another, in really small spaces and everyone is getting on everyone's nerves and everyone knows everyone's business. It becomes quite inappropriate, how people just barge into your space and you feel that you have - you know, you feel a bit invaded. One thing we always say, that it's really good idea to sort of set boundaries around, well, this is my space and this is your space and not actually go into each other's - you know, invading each other's privacy. One good tip we can think of, for example, if you are going to visit a friend it's always good to ring first and say, "Hi, I am here, can I pop in?" Sometimes that will make people feel more - like, welcoming people and it's not just like coming in and barging in on people's space. That's what some people we have talked to have said is a good idea.

Gold Coast participants

Issues with vulnerability and finding support

The key thing is that these people are too disempowered by what's happening to them to manage on their own. They actually need someone to stand alongside them. They need an advocate that's able to help them through all this stuff because at first I don't think they received my information very well. It's like, yeah, yeah, we tried all that. That's all happened before. And we were fobbed off.

Housing Sector worker

12. Next Steps and possible future work

Ongoing support for the groups

Toowoomba:

- Ongoing networking and connection with local parent groups will lead to increased understanding about the need for alternative options for adult family members.
- The local Hot Topics group will continue to meet and welcome participation from other people with disability.
- The local Hot Topics group will sponsor an information session planned for November to provide an avenue for local housing sector agencies and parents and people with disability to hear benefits of considering independent housing for family members.
- The Hot Topics group will be facilitated by a volunteer and will continue meeting monthly.
- Contact with this group can be made through QDN office at qdn@qdn.org.au

Gympie

- During the beginning phase, more flexibility is required to meet possible participants. A future project worker could hold information sessions in the various workplaces where people with disability receive employment support
- It is possible that Friday evening would suit people with disability in Gympie; however that would not be a suitable time for housing sector workers who might interact with the group during the consolidation phase.
- Contact with this group can be made through QDN office at qdn@qdn.org.au

Gold Coast

- In recognition of the need to continue to provide an opportunity to people with disability to meet and discuss important issues, QDN has expressed a commitment to ongoing support for facilitated Hot Topics meetings in the Gold Coast area. The Consultant has also contacted Gold Coast City Council for ongoing support for the group.
- The Hot Topics group is in consolidation phase and regular monthly facilitated meetings will enable:
 - Ongoing development of the relationships within the group
 - fruitful connections with the housing sector to be organised
 - Further understanding of the issues faced by people with disability in the Gold Coast region
 - Connections and visits with the Brisbane Hot Topics Action Group
 - Members of the Hot Topics group to engage with the emerging QDN group
 - Opportunities to involve other people with disability in the Hot Topics group
- The Hot Topics group has expressed interest in hosting an information session for other people with disability in the Gold Coast region in early 2008.
- Contact with this group can be made through QDN office at qdn@qdn.org.au

13. Conclusion

The Hot Topics project was successful in providing an avenue for community education

around tenancy rights for people with intellectual disability in the Gold Coast region. The Hot Topics format for people with intellectual disability, used by Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) can be used elsewhere to provide information and to develop connections with the housing sector groups.

The collaboration between QDHC and QDN and RTA worked well to enable increased contact between people with intellectual disability and the housing sector. There were learnings and challenges for all parties throughout this project.

Whilst people with intellectual disability have not joined the Hot Topics group in Toowoomba, the group is open and ready to support people with intellectual disability when they do come. The members of the current group have extensive experience of using public and community housing and provide support to a number of tenants in the Toowoomba area.

The different demographics between Toowoomba, Gympie and Gold Coast require individual, region specific approaches.

Additional time needs to be built into the project to allow the idea to grow and flourish within local communities. For many housing sector workers, this project was the first time they had considered a similar approach that was focused solely on people with intellectual disability.

Having commitment from a well established group such as QDN to continue the work in the Gold Coast region is essential to support the energy and enthusiasm and interest of the Hot Topics group in that region.

The housing sector welcomes initiatives that help workers engage with people with disability. Ongoing discussions with housing sector workers about how to manage the meeting times chosen by the Hot Topics participants for their group meetings are needed so that housing sector workers can meet with the group during working hours.