



Community room activation

A practical guide for community housing providers

Informed by sector consultation across Australian Community Housing Providers (CHPs).

**No single model fits all sites. Use this tool as a starting point then adapt it to your community.*

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May 2026

Introduction

This tool has been developed to assist CHPs in making informed decisions about how to activate community rooms across their portfolios. It draws on consultation with multiple CHPs as part of the Community Development Australia Forum.

The tool is structured around practical "If X, then Y" decision points covering room setup, programming, and access control. It has a particular focus on the feasibility of activating community rooms as cooling hubs in extreme heat.

It also includes a theory of change to help CHPs articulate the social value of their community rooms within broader community development frameworks.

This tool is a starting point. Recommendations throughout are presented as considerations, not directives. Every site is different and CHPs must always consider:

- Local context
- Tenant cohort
- Available amenities
- Staff capacity

Section 1 — Quick Reference Summary

Use the table below as a quick reference when assessing a site for the first time, or when reviewing an existing room activation approach.

Factor	Low Risk / Simple	Medium Risk	High Risk / Complex
Access Control	Tenant champion + diary / calendar booking	Lockbox with code + calendar system managed by staff	CHP staff-led only initially; graduated release of access
Programming	Tenant-led, informal; open-door approach	Mix of structured CHP-delivered + tenant-led activities	Staff-supervised, structured sessions only in early stages
Documentation	Simple written room use agreement	Simple written room use agreement	Signed community room agreement with clear consequences
After-Hours Access	Key sign-out on trust; informal return protocol	Lockbox with code; informal return protocol	Restricted; CCTV recommended; no independent access initially
Cooling Hub	Open drop-in with advance tenant notification	Open drop-in with health partner or staff present	Staff-supervised activation only; clear escalation protocol

Section 2 — Theory of Change

The theory of change below sets out the logic underpinning community room activation: what problem it addresses, what is invested, what happens as a result, and what difference it ultimately makes to tenants and communities.

PROBLEM / NEED	INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES	IMPACT
Tenants in community housing face social isolation, limited access to services, and reduced wellbeing. Community rooms are underutilised assets with the potential to address these needs.	• CHP staff time • Physical space & amenities • External service partnerships • Tenant knowledge & skills • Policies & resources	• Structured & tenant-led programming • Access control & booking systems • Community relationship-building • External service partnerships • Cooling hub activation in extreme heat	• Activities delivered per month • Tenant participants • External service sessions hosted • Booking system operational • Cooling hub activations per season	• Increased tenant participation • Tenants feel safe & welcome • Access to services on-site • Reduced social isolation • Trust between tenants & CHP	• Tenants lead own activities • Peer support networks • Improved tenant wellbeing & resilience • Reduced antisocial behaviour • Tenants care for shared spaces	• Tenants in community housing live with greater dignity, connection and wellbeing. • Communities are more cohesive and self-sustaining. • CHPs demonstrate social value beyond housing provision.

Section 3 — Decision-Making Tool

Work through each decision point in sequence. Start with Part 1 (room setup), then move to Part 2 (programming), Part 3 (access control), and Part 4 (cooling hub). Each table presents a condition and a consideration. Not all rows will apply to your site.

Part 1 — Room Setup & Activation Readiness

1.1 Is the room on-site or off-site?

Condition	Considerations
If ON-SITE (within or adjacent to the residential building)	Consider co-locating with staff offices to allow passive supervision. Build in clear sightlines (e.g., glass windows facing common areas) to encourage natural foot traffic. Establish whether the room can be used without direct staff oversight (depends heavily on tenant cohort and trust levels).
If OFF-SITE (separate community hub)	Consider whether tenants can realistically access it (distance, transport availability). Build a formal booking or application process open to both tenants and external services. Partner with local services to drive traffic and justify ongoing investment. Develop access passes or lockbox systems for after-hours service providers.

1.2 How many tenants will the room serve?

Condition	Considerations
If serving a SMALL COHORT (under ~30 units)	Consider lighter-touch, informal activation (e.g., open-door policy, self-managed access). Formal booking systems may be unnecessary overhead. Prioritise relationship-building over structured programming in early stages.
If serving a MEDIUM–LARGE COHORT (30–120+ units)	Consider a structured booking calendar (e.g., Outlook calendar, shared diary). Identify a tenant champion or community representative to assist coordination. Introduce a simple room use agreement rather than a complex formal contract.

1.3 What amenities does the room have?

Condition	Consideration
If the room has a KITCHEN	Consider food-centred activation such as communal lunches, BBQs, morning teas, and cooking workshops (these consistently

	drive the highest attendance across all CHPs consulted). Food is the single most reliable engagement tool.
If the room has AIR-CONDITIONING	Consider activating the room as a cooling hub during extreme heat events (see Part 4). Air-conditioning is the single most important infrastructure requirement for this use.
If the room has WI-FI	Consider offering digital literacy workshops, job-seeking support, or online services navigation. Manage potential for over-reliance by establishing clear use guidelines and considering whether Wi-Fi should be available during all sessions.
If the room has OUTDOOR SPACE (BBQ area, garden)	Consider seasonal gardening groups, BBQ events, and community growing activities. These have worked well at multiple sites and attract diverse tenant cohorts including families and seniors.
If the room has LIMITED AMENITIES	Consider starting with low-cost, high-impact activities: bingo, games afternoons, book clubs, or simple morning teas. Do not let limited infrastructure prevent activation. Start small and build.

Part 2 — Activation Activities

2.1 What is the primary tenant cohort?

Condition	Consideration
If SENIORS-ONLY cohort	Consider: bingo, men's / women's lunches (where tenants cook), exercise and chair yoga, book clubs, guest speakers, art groups, and English classes. Food-centred events and consistent scheduling drive strong attendance. Identify tenant-led initiatives early as seniors often have strong skills and social motivation to lead.
If FAMILIES / SINGLE-PARENT households	Consider: school holiday activities, children's play sessions, employment and skills workshops, culturally specific groups, and morning teas. Family engagement is generally harder to sustain than seniors; focus on school holiday periods as peak activation windows.
If MIXED COHORT (seniors + families)	Consider separate programming streams for each group rather than combined activities, which can create tension. Offer one-off themed events (e.g., Harmony Day, Christmas) as cohort-

	wide touchpoints as these consistently attract broad participation.
If HIGH-NEEDS / HIGH-RISK cohort (e.g., rough sleepers, complex support needs)	Consider structured, staff-supervised activities only in early stages. Prioritise relationship-building through low-key events (e.g., coffee mornings) before moving to open or tenant-led use. External health or support services integrated into programming (mental health, employment, outreach) can add significant value and draw attendance.
If CALD tenants are present (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse)	Consider culturally specific groups, multilingual materials, and interpreter-supported events. Promote activities through trusted community leaders rather than flyers alone. Announce interpreter availability at events as this has been shown to improve uptake.

2.2 What type of programming works best?

Condition	Consideration
If you want CONSISTENT, RELIABLE ATTENDANCE	Prioritise weekly or fortnightly scheduled activities over monthly ones. Infrequent programs are harder for tenants to remember and track. Consistency builds habit and belonging.
If you want a QUICK ENGAGEMENT WIN	Consider a one-off themed event with food (e.g., Easter, welcome BBQ). These reliably drive high attendance across all cohorts and are a good way to introduce tenants to the space for the first time.
If you want to BUILD LONG-TERM COMMUNITY	Identify tenant strengths and skills through regular conversations, then support tenants to lead their own activities (art, cooking, exercise, language). This is more sustainable than CHP-delivered programming alone and reduces staff burden over time.
If you want to CONNECT TENANTS WITH EXTERNAL SERVICES	Invite services to deliver sessions on-site (Centrelink, health services, employment programs, mental health workshops). Vet these against tenant needs or survey feedback. Consider formalising service partnerships with MOUs/agreements.
If ENGAGEMENT IS LOW and not improving	Consider whether the programming is genuinely tenant-driven. Review if the same few tenants always attend. Try personal invitations over broadcast communications. Individual outreach consistently outperforms flyers and notice boards.

Part 3 — Access Control

3.1 What is the risk profile of the tenant cohort?

Condition	Consideration
If LOW-RISK cohort (e.g., seniors-only)	Consider a flexible booking system with a tenant champion who holds access. Minimal formal controls are needed. Allow informal key sign-out for private events. An Outlook calendar or shared diary is sufficient for coordination.
If MEDIUM-RISK cohort (e.g., mixed families / seniors)	Consider a lockbox with access code, issued to approved users only. Implement a simple room use agreement (not a complex form). Use a calendar booking system managed by staff. Allow weekend use via key sign-out with a clear return protocol.
If HIGH-RISK cohort (e.g., complex needs, history of ASB, misuse, or squatting)	Consider staff-led activities only during business hours initially. Restrict after-hours access until trust is established. Install CCTV and use a lockbox only for vetted individuals. Develop a written community room agreement with clear expectations and consequences for misuse.
If the room has a HISTORY OF MISUSE or antisocial behaviour	Consider resetting the room with a formal re-launch event to re-establish community norms. Introduce a signed agreement before any independent use is granted. Consider whether nominating a single tenant key holder creates more risk than benefit (a lockbox system may be preferable).

3.2 Should access be CHP-controlled, tenant-led, or shared?

Condition	Consideration
If TRUST IS LOW or the cohort is new to the space	Consider CHP-controlled access (staff-managed booking and opening). However, avoid over-restriction in early stages. Locking the room for extended periods without explanation creates confusion about whether tenants are welcome, and can permanently deter future use.
If TRUST IS ESTABLISHED	Consider identifying a tenant champion with access rights. This works best where the champion has genuine community standing and is not perceived as playing favourites. A rotating or co-champion model can reduce tension.

If EXTERNAL SERVICES need after-hours access	Consider digital access passes (rather than physical keys) with area-specific access restrictions. This allows flexible service delivery without compromising the security of adjacent offices or sensitive areas.
If the BOOKING PROCESS IS A BARRIER	Consider simplifying the process. Complex booking forms are a known barrier for tenants with low literacy or from CALD backgrounds. A phone or verbal booking confirmed by staff on a shared calendar is often sufficient for on-site rooms.

3.3 What rules and documentation are needed?

Condition	Consideration
If the site has a HISTORY OF DAMAGE or misuse	Consider a written community room agreement (signed by the user), outlining expectations, cleaning responsibilities, and consequences for damage.
If the site has a GENERALLY STABLE COMMUNITY	Consider informal rules communicated verbally during a room orientation or tour (cleaning, timing, kitchen use). A trust-based system with cleaners or staff doing periodic checks can be sufficient and helps preserve positive staff-tenant relationships.
If EXTERNAL GROUPS OR SERVICES use the room	Consider a formal booking application process reviewed by community engagement staff and an operations lead, to maintain oversight and ensure any external programming genuinely benefits tenants.

Part 4 — Cooling Hub Activation

Community rooms with air-conditioning can serve as cooling hubs during extreme heat events. This is especially relevant for CHPs whose tenants include older people, people with chronic illness, people with no alternative cooling at home, or those in poorly ventilated dwellings. Heatwaves kill more Australians than any other natural disaster, and community housing tenants are among the most vulnerable.

Step	Actions and considerations
Step 1: Assess suitability	If the room has air-conditioning, adequate capacity, and accessible toilets, consider it a candidate for cooling hub activation. If on-site: consider it a primary hub for residents of that building. If off-site: consider it a broader neighbourhood hub open to the surrounding community.

Step 2: Establish a heat trigger protocol	Consider adopting a temperature threshold as the trigger for activation (e.g., forecast of 35°C or above, as used by St Vincent's Homeless Health / City of Sydney). Consider monitoring the Bureau of Meteorology (bom.gov.au) or the University of Sydney's HeatWatch app for heat health risk alerts.
Step 3: Prepare the physical space	Ensure air-conditioning is serviced and functional before each summer season. Stock the room with: water bottles, cooling fans or spray mists, adequate seating, and basic first aid supplies. Consider a small supply of sunscreen and hats for tenants who may need to travel to reach the space.
Step 4: Develop a communication and notification plan	Develop a plain-English heat alert notice for tenants (include multilingual versions if CALD tenants are present). Identify how you will notify tenants quickly when the hub is activated, for example, SMS, letterbox drop, notice board, or through a tenant champion. Consider partnering with a community transport provider if the room is off-site or some tenants have mobility limitations.
Step 5: Partner with health or support services	Consider reaching out to local health services (community health nurses, GP practices, or outreach health teams) to provide health checks during extreme heat activations. Even without formal health partners, having a staff member or tenant champion present during activation adds an important layer of safety oversight.
Step 6: Manage access	Consider opening the hub on an extended-hours or drop-in basis during heat events, rather than requiring bookings. If the room is normally locked: identify who holds the activation key or code and ensure they are contactable at short notice. Consider allowing pets. Cooling hub models have found that permitting pets increases uptake, particularly among older tenants and those living alone.
Step 7: Evaluate and document	After each heat activation, record: number of attendees, any health incidents, tenant feedback, and any issues with the space or access. Use this data to improve your protocol over time and, where relevant, to make the case for investment in cooling infrastructure (additional fans, improved air-conditioning, shade structures).