

STRATEGIES TO SECURE LOCAL HOUSING

Finding housing is one of the most important steps towards preparing to welcome a newcomer household. It can also be one of the most daunting! This factsheet aims to help your Community Supporter Group source safe, clean and affordable housing by using resources that may already be available to you in your local community.

Rest assured - once you start spreading the word in your local community, people will get excited and come to your aid - this includes real estate agents and property owners!

Spread the word

The housing market can be tricky, but you can use your networks to find housing options in places you may not expect. Spread the word, both online and in conversation, that you are looking to find accommodation for a refugee household that you and your group are supporting to come to Australia. Explain that you are a part of a community sponsorship program that encourages the community to play an active role in welcoming refugees - this will likely assist you to find more support among your community. Real Estate agents, landlords and property owners are all members of your community, so speak with them to see how they could potentially support your work.

You can also use your networks and resourcefulness to [source household items](#), like key pieces of furniture and whitegoods. Places like Gumtree and Facebook Marketplace are a good place to begin.

Temporary Housing Options

Temporary housing may be necessary when the arrival date for the refugee household you are matched with is uncertain. Consider options such as:

Hotels (with accessible kitchens)

Serviced Apartments

Short term rentals

Consider platforms like Airbnb and Stayz: Reach out directly to owners who have properties on these platforms. People are often willing to help when they know they are supporting people in need.

Private home

Perhaps one of your group members has a couple of spare bedrooms that they wish to offer up. Consider whether their home has enough space to allow for privacy and autonomy (i.e. enough bedrooms, a separate living space, bathroom and entrance/exit). Check this [hosting good practice guidebook](#) for more tips and considerations if you are providing your home as temporary accommodation.

Permanent Housing

Housing brings security and stability, making it a particularly important part of the settlement experience. Suitable housing can have [positive impacts](#) on health and wellbeing, feelings of safety and belonging, and successful integration into a new community.

Refugees face a number of barriers when navigating the housing market that are often based on a lack of English. Your group can be helpful by simply attending inspections, discussing tenancy agreements and assessing the suitability of accommodation in advance. Get to know the property market in your area, and get to know a real estate agency who will have more in depth knowledge of the area.

You will need to be an advocate for the refugee household you are matched with to help agents and landlords understand the need and appeal to their social conscience. Remember that newcomers don't have a rental history in Australia, and will not have immediate income other than from Centrelink, so you will need to be their supporter and advocate.

Once you have found a potential landlord, it is a good idea to make sure that they are open and 'friendly' towards having newcomers as tenants. [Discuss the rental arrangements](#), including things like:

- Paying rent: Will the household receive rent assistance? Is your group intending to provide 'top up' payments?
- Communication: What is the English proficiency of the household? Will they communicate with the property manager or landlord? Does the agent/landlord speak any other languages? Will a translator be required? Will your group be in contact with the agent/landlord?
- Tenancy rights: Do all parties understand their rights and responsibilities?
- Duration: Can the tenancy agreement be terminated early? Is there the possibility for a short term or monthly agreement if need be?

Alternate housing options

In other countries, community sponsorship groups like yours have shown great creativity when navigating the housing market for refugees. For example, you could research and approach local churches in your area. They may have empty properties available that you can access at a more affordable rate, or as short-term / temporary accommodation.

Affordability

When researching accommodation, your group will need to consider whether the rent amount is appropriate long-term. Consider the amount that the household is likely to receive as income support and rent assistance, and discuss this hypothetical budget with your group.

Perhaps you are based in an area of high rent, but this does not mean that renting is not a possibility. You may be able to negotiate a rent reduction - remember that you can always ask, and that the landlord can say no if it isn't possible.

On the other hand, perhaps your group has access to rent-free accommodation that is group-owned or accessed through one of your contacts. It is recommended that you try to avoid the temptation of free housing, and instead set a rent amount similar to that of housing support. This will not only set more [realistic expectations](#), but also enable a sense of independence.

'Topping up' the rent

Consider 'topping up' rental payments for the refugee household you are matched with for a period of time using funds raised. Even though the household may be eligible for income or rental

assistance from the government, your group can top up the difference between this amount and the full rental amount.

There may be concerns about setting the expectation for what is affordable for the household, or what kind of financial assistance your group will be providing in the long term. It's important to have discussions with your group members, the newcomer household, and if relevant, the rental provider and ask questions such as :

- What is a reasonable amount of 'top up' to pay?
- Who will we pay the top up to? The household or directly to the rental provider?
- How and when will we explain 'topping up' to the household?

Topping up rent payments has been successful here in Australia! A group based in Sydney 'topped up' the rent payments of a household they were supporting for 12 months. In this time, the family were able to secure employment in the area and have since paid rent at the same location independently. If your group is considering topping up rent payments, it is a good idea to discuss a timeframe at the beginning to help set and manage expectations.

Additional security/Become a guarantor

The NSW government offers a [Bond Extra program](#) to incentivise rental providers to accept applications from people who may be experiencing difficulty entering the private rental market. The Bond Extra provides an amount of up to \$1,500 additional to the rental bond to act as added security in case of rental arrears or property damage. Check whether the refugee household is eligible for this program, or perhaps your group would consider providing a similar security, just like a refundable bond, in order to appease potential agents and landlords.

You may also consider becoming a guarantor on the tenancy agreement. This will help to address potential hesitancy that an agent or landlord may have about having tenants without a rental history in Australia. If co-signing a tenancy agreement, it is important to discuss these terms with both the newcomer household, and the rental provider, including:

- What level of risk do we take on as guarantor? What level of risk do we take on if co-signing?
- Is there an opportunity to co-sign the lease for a portion of the tenancy, to then be transferred in full to the household?
- What are the responsibilities of co-signing or becoming a guarantor in my state?

After arrival

It is important to empower newcomers to understand their responsibilities as renters and feel independence in future decisions.

Renting

Your group should be guided by the specific needs and level of understanding of the newcomer household when explaining the rights and responsibilities of renting in Australia. Perhaps they have experienced a similar system in their host country or country of origin, or perhaps this is their first time signing a formal rental agreement.

It is important to explain the tenancy agreement to the refugee household, using an interpreter if required. [Discuss key obligations](#) described in the agreement early on, and schedule a time to go through it in more detail when they are more settled. While too much information may be overwhelming, it is important that the newcomer household understands that they have ownership from the very beginning.

Discuss the cost of rent in proportion to income with the household. You will likely have these conversations alongside those about Centrelink and accessing financial assistance. Consider whether the rent amount is affordable in the long term, or whether this initial accommodation should be considered as a 'stepping stone' to longer term resettlement.

Your group is likely to set up the accommodation as welcoming and comfortable. This is a very kind gesture! It is also important to let the refugee household know that the space is theirs, and that [they may rearrange](#) or remove things as they please.

Additional resources:

Template letter for agents / landlords:

We have developed a letter that your group can send to rental providers to introduce the CRISP program and explain that you are looking for suitable, affordable housing for newly arrived refugees.

[Template Letter for Agents / Landlords](#)

Detailed furniture and basic household goods list:

Taken from the CRISP Settlement Guidebook, this list outlines the items that constitute a 'full household package' for newly arrived refugee households. We strongly encourage you to speak with the household you are matched with to ensure that key items meet their preferences and needs, and remind them that the interiors can be modified where necessary.

[Furniture and Basic Household Goods List](#)

Printable furniture and household goods checklist:

After discussing the specific requirements of the household with them (where possible) and with your group, use this checklist to keep track of what you've sourced.

[Furniture and Household Goods Checklist](#)