

How to find a supportive housemate



A step by step guide

What is this guide about?

This guide contains stories from people with disability, families, friends and allies who support individualised living so that all people with disability have the opportunity to live and thrive in their own home in our communities. In this guide, we look at some of the ways people with disability can share their home with housemates who provide companionship and support.

How to use this guide

This guide is intended for people with disability, and those assisting or acting on their behalf, such as family members, friends, or allies. Throughout this guide, we use the terms 'you' and 'yours' to refer to the person with disability.

Acknowledgements

These ideas and strategies were discussed in a webinar, <u>Individualised Living Discussion</u>
<u>Series</u> with Matthew (Math) Ellis, Aaron Tomkins, Jenn De Souza, Libby Ellis and Lisa Bridle.

Matthew has been living in and sharing his own home for 28 years. His housemates, Aaron and Jenn, share Matthew's interests in gardening, swimming, cooking, road trips, watching movies and listening to music.

Libby Ellis is Matthew's sister and has walked with Matthew on his journey.

Lisa Bridle is a parent to Sean Fisher. Sean is in his 30s and has been living in his own home for several years. Here is a video about <u>Sean's living arrangement</u>.

In this guide, we share Matthew's, Aaron's, Jenn's, Libby's, and Lisa's experiences.

We thank them for their contribution and generous sharing.

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Sharing with housemates

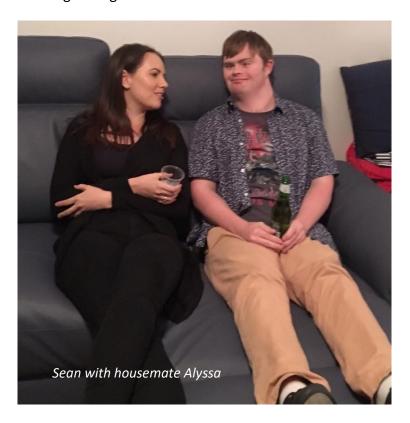
An individualised living arrangement is where a person lives in a home they can call their own - a home that provides a strong sense of belonging, freedom, contribution, safety and privacy. A place where you choose who you live with, if anyone. You are included in community and neighbourhood with valued roles and meaningful relationships with family, friends, neighbours and community members and you have the support you need to live a good life.

Individualised living is an alternative to group home living. It takes a person centred approach, exploring and designing a living arrangement with the person.

Some people want to live alone, but you might want to share your home with someone or people of your choosing. Sharing with housemates is one way to create an individualised living arrangement. This might be sharing your home with a housemate who does not have a disability or who does not have significant support needs.

Sharing lives, being connected to other people and a sense of belonging are important human needs.

This guide won't tell you exactly what to do, but we are sharing the experiences of other people with disability and their families who have created a housemate living arrangement. We aim to give you ideas on the opportunities and considerations when creating a house-share individualised living arrangement.



Why share with housemates?

Sharing with housemates has a number of advantages:

- **Sharing of costs:** Housemates can share the cost of rent, utilities, groceries, and other household expenses.
- **Companionship:** Sharing with housemates is a great social way to live and share lives with each other. Housemates can share their friendship networks and open up new social opportunities for each other.



Libby: "Math, we knew you to be actually quite a social person, and we had spotted in the group home, Math, that you wanted to have relationships with the people who supported you as opposed to the people who lived with you in that home, who also had their own difficulties with communication and forging relationships. So you made a beeline to people who could initiate relationships and were more able to develop that themselves."

Practical support: Housemates are mutually supportive of each other. A housemate
could also provide you with practical support. This support might be a range of
practical assistance at home such as coaching and mentoring, prompting and
reminding, safety and security overnight, gardening, assisting with shopping, cooking
and sharing meals. The practical support offered will vary person to person,
household to household and will depend on what you need and is negotiated with
the housemate.



Lisa: "It is worth saying, that was one of my fears about Sean moving out—that maybe he would be lonely. In fact, Sean's life is so busy and full of relationships that he's pretty happy if he does have uninterrupted home time. You know, just some chilled out time with his flatmate."

The importance of planning to find the right housemate

It is important to get the right match in a housemate and ensure there is clear understanding about the role of a supportive housemate, expectations, responsibilities, rights and clear lines of communication. For this reason, it is useful to take a stepped approach. While you may be eager to find a new housemate, it is important that you find a good match that will create a harmonious living arrangement.

It takes time...

It takes time to find the right and suitable housemate for an individualised living arrangement. You might need to consider a backup plan such as NDIS funding for extra support while you are looking for a housemate or if a housemate decides to leave at short notice.

It can take several weeks to several months to find the right housemates and take the necessary steps before the housemate moves in.



Lisa: "One of the big challenges is overthinking things. None of Sean's flatmates have been exactly who I dreamed up, if you know what I mean, but they have all brought amazing things into Sean's life."

How to find housemates

Step 1: Having a vision and believing it is possible

You and the people around you will need to have a vision and believe that you can share your home and life with a housemate. Sounds very obvious, but if you don't believe it can happen, it probably won't.

This can be a challenge for you and your family. You might need to open your thinking to new possibilities and believe you can share your home with people other than family and paid supporters.

It is useful to talk with others who have house sharing living arrangements, the trail blazers who already have individualised living arrangements set up. You can check out resources such as My Home My Way, ILO toolkit and Resourcing Inclusive Communities where lots of stories can be found about people with disability sharing their home with housemates.



Libby: "I call it a leap of faith. We are putting ourselves continually in the presence of people who had gone before us and kind of working it out. We are figuring out how they've done it and working up ideas for Matthew."



Step 2: Who is the housemate and what is their role?



It's useful to think about who the housemate might be; what are their personal characteristics; things you would like to do together, and the practical support they can provide. The role of housemate is also important to consider and will include the expectations and responsibilities.

Libby outlined the four core aspects of housemates for her brother Matthew, but here is a list of considerations.

A. Companionship:

This means there is an expectation that housemates will share lives. Matthew's housemates Aaron and Jenn think of companionship as the time they are enjoying spending with Matthew.

So an expectation of a housemate is that they would enjoy social times with you, finding enjoyable things to do together at home.

B. Homemaking:

This is creating a pleasant and comfortable home and/or garden, and deciding together how it will look, and ensuring that the home and possessions are well maintained and cared for. Homemaking may include cooking and sharing meals or shopping together for groceries, gardening and/or home maintenance.

C. Personal support:

This will vary depending on your support needs but could include, mentoring, coaching, reminding of appointments, prompting, providing transport, or emotional support.

D. Safety and security overnight

You may want a housemate who will be home most nights to provide safety and security overnight. You may need a housemate who doesn't mind being at home overnight. That doesn't mean that a housemate can't make plans to be away from home, but an expectation would be that time away is planned in advance.

These considerations help shape a housemate's role. There may be additional roles, like chef or driver. There might also be an expectation that a housemate attends team meetings or is part of a communication channel with support workers and family.

Two more things to think about with the housemate role:

- 1. A housemate is not a replacement parent or carer
- 2. A housemate is not a paid support worker

The expectations for a housemate differ from those for parents or paid support workers. Housemates are there to share a home and create a supportive environment. The approach and responsibilities are unique to each arrangement. However, tasks such as assisting you with personal care will usually be carried out by a paid worker.

When we are working out the supportive role of a housemate we will also think about the benefit or stipend they might receive. This will depend on the support the housemate provides and could include benefits such as reduced rent or a small regular payment. Housemates typically aren't paid hourly, and their role is quite different from that of a formal support worker, although they may receive some benefit in exchange for their supportive role.



Lisa had hoped Sean's housemate would have a drivers licence and be able to assist him with transport occasionally. Instead they found a great housemate who does not have a licence but can assist Sean with ordering an Uber.

Defining the role of a housemate

It can be helpful to write down what you are looking for in a housemate, including the qualities you value and the activities you might want to do together. Clearly documenting the housemate's role and your expectations can set the foundation for a good arrangement. Remember, flexibility is key—you may need to negotiate and adjust your expectations as you go.



Lisa: "As you craft the role, you can think, 'What might be the financial value of this?' Housemates might want to seek some advice about that, too. They could bring their own ideas, so it could all be very negotiated and open for possibilities. Then you kind of have to bring those things together before thinking about, well, what could the NDIS fund?"

Joscelyn's Housemate ideas – Housemate profile

- Lady 25-45 years
- Non smoker
- No drugs. Alcohol in moderation
- Can be religious but not talk about it
- Can have a cat/s or small dog
- Reliable, tidy, polite
- No swearing/fighting
- Likes cooking
- Be OK with helpers coming and going
- No bringing randoms home from the pub



Step 3. Putting the word out for a housemate



Once the role for the housemate has been documented, it's time to think about how to find the right person. The ideal housemate might already be in your social network, or you may need to expand your search. This could involve advertising for a housemate.

Consider how most people typically find housemates—using social networks, social media, or platforms like <u>Flatmates.com</u>, <u>Flatmate Finders</u>, or local Facebook pages dedicated to finding housemates. If you have a specific interest or hobby, you could place an ad on a community notice board or in groups that share that interest, such as a community garden or tennis club. When creating your ad, aim to set the right tone and spark interest.



Libby: "The purpose of the ad is to first grab somebody's interest or curiosity... Peaking people's interest and curiosity. They will want to learn more, they want to find out more."

Please see pages 18-20 for examples of housemate ads.

Step 4: Responding to interest – initial contact by email or phone



You will need to decide how you want potential housemates to make contact: by email or phone. At this stage, you will provide more information about the housemate roles and learn more about the applicants.

This part may generate a lot of responses, but not all of them will be suitable. Remember to be patient and stick with the process. It's important to find the right match, so don't be afraid to say no if you feel it's not the right fit.

Please refer to page 21 for a questionnaire that one family uses to learn more about potential housemates.



Libby: "People get more and more information, which enables them to say 'yes, I'm still in' or 'no, now that I've got that information, I don't think this is for me'."

Step 5: Initial meeting at a café or other neutral place



If the person is interested in being a housemate and seems like a good match, the next step is to meet in person. It's a good idea to meet at a neutral space like a café, popular beach or park. A neutral location helps everyone feel at ease, as it's a safe and public space with other people around. This also ensures you can interact in a relaxed environment where

you can assess whether the person is a good fit.

At this meeting, you'll have the opportunity to get to know the person better, see how you communicate with each other, and explore your shared interests. You can ask more questions and share more details about the housemate arrangement. It might also be helpful to share a draft of the housemate agreement, which outlines the role and expectation of the support the housemate will provide.

Having a family member, friend, a support person or a member of your circle of support with you at this meeting can help you assess the situation and ensure everyone's comfortable.

Step 6: Background checks



If the person is interested and seems like a good match, the next step is to conduct background checks. It's important to do these checks, and it can be beneficial to start them before inviting the person to view the house. Conducting checks helps ensure safety and can protect everyone involved in the living arrangement.

It might feel a bit awkward asking a potential housemate for these checks but this is a very important safeguard.

A. Informal check on social media and friend networks

An informal check of a potential housemate's social media accounts can provide insight into their interests, character, and lifestyle. If you share mutual friends or connections, it's a good idea to reach out to them and ask about the person. This can give you a better sense of whether they're a good fit. It's also fair to let the person know you are checking them out online and ask if they're comfortable with it.

B. Formal checks

It is important to conduct proper vetting of a potential housemate. This step serves as a critical safeguard, particularly for the person with disability. Ensuring that the individual is trustworthy and has a good character is essential for creating a safe and harmonious living environment. These checks are crucial safeguards for both you and the potential housemate. Here's what you'll need to ask for:

- Police clearance: Request a police clearance to ensure there are no serious criminal records.
- Working with vulnerable people check
- NDIS Worker Screening: If you are using a service provider or are self managing you can access the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission worker screening database. You can also search the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission banned worker list.
- References: It's important to check references, and you should reach out to someone who has known the person for a long time. You should ask for:
 - Work references
 - o Rental references
 - Character references

Most prospective housemates expect and appreciate probity checks, as they demonstrate a commitment to safety and trust. These checks ensure the housemate's suitability and provide peace of mind. Your prospective housemate might want to check your references too. That is OK. Think about who you might ask to give you a reference.

Please refer to page 22 for a list of sample questions to ask past landlords, employers and friends.

Step 7: Viewing and exploring the home



Following the checks, if the person appears to be of good character and looks like a good match, the next step is to meet at the house and show them around. This is an opportunity for the potential housemate to meet you at your home, see the available bedroom and shared spaces in the house. This is also an opportunity for more conversation and to ask

questions about the housemate's role and expectations, as well as any benefits such as reduced rent or stipend the housemate might receive.

The person might like to look at the bedroom, bathroom, and shared spaces. They could also find out more about parking, transport in the area, and the gardening and housecleaning required.

Step 8: Living with a housemate trial



Before officially moving in, it is a good idea to have a trial. This might involve you and the prospective housemate spending more time together, having overnight stays to gain a better understanding of how it could work. Jenn and Aaron had a trial weekend before they moved in, which can be a great way to try it out before housemates commit to moving in.



Libby: "It's like the housemate can say, 'I can picture myself doing this and living in this way."

Step 9: Formalise agreement and get started



Though you may negotiate the role and expectations a little, it is important to have a formal document signed by all parties. The agreement should clearly outline the support the housemate will provide, expectations of household contributions, and behaviour. It can also include steps for addressing any

issues if things are not working out.

See page 23 for a list of things to consider when drafting a housemate agreement.

You should also consider the tenancy arrangement for the housemate, especially if you are renting privately. It's important to ensure that you have security of tenure over your home. For more information about share housing, <u>visit the Tenant' Union NSW's website</u>.

Step 10: Keep communication channels open



With a new housemate moving in, it is important to keep communication channels open. Be clear about how you will communicate with housemates, family, support team members, etc.

Sean, his support team, family and his housemate are in a WhatsApp group together. His housemate joins the team for regular meetings.



Aaron: "It really comes back down to that transparency in that communication piece about, you know, being honest and genuine and open about what I can do, what I can't do, and finding a common ground."

Consider who will help you monitor the arrangement. Is there a service provider, family member, circle of support, or microboard involved to assist you? Who can you or the housemate turn to if issues arise?

What if a housemate moves in and they are unsuitable?

While a thorough background check and a signed agreement are important, it's still possible that things might not work out—and that's okay.

Having safeguards in place is crucial, as we know people keep people safe.

Family and friends visiting, maintaining good relationships with neighbours, and having strong community connections can help spot when things aren't going well. It is important people who know you well listen to you and what you are saying with words or actions — about how the housemate arrangement is going.

Some people include a clause in their housemate agreement about what happens if the arrangement doesn't work out. This ensures the housemate has thought about where they could stay if asked to leave.

You might want to ask your family, friends or support circle to help with tricky conversations with your housemate.

Here are some short tips for having that tricky conversation with your housemate/s:

- Be honest: Share your concerns clearly and respectfully without avoiding difficult issues
- Try to understand the other side of the story: By acknowledging both perspectives and keeping emotions in check, you can resolve the tricky conversation more effectively and prevent escalation.
- Offer solutions and set boundaries: Work together to find solutions and be open to compromise, while clearly communicating what is or isn't working for you to ensure mutual understanding of expectations.
- Use clear communication and ask questions: Express yourself clearly and respectfully, and encourage the same from your housemate. Ask clarifying questions and reflect back what you've understood. This can help avoid misunderstandings and lead to a more constructive conversation so both sides understand each other.

Success stories



Do you want to hear more about people with disability sharing their home with housemates? Here are several video clips showcasing success stories:

<u>Meet Sean</u> - Sean is in his 30s and shares his apartment with his housemate. In this five-minute video hear from Sean and his mum about moving out of home and the steps they took to make it happen.

<u>Homeshare - Doing life with Jess</u> - Jess is an artist and shares with two housemates. This five minute video will inspire you to think creatively about sharing with housemates and the supportive role they can play.

<u>Enabling home</u> - In this ten minute video you will hear from Warren and the people close to him about his journey to move from a group home to a home of his own. His housemate shares how the living arrangement has opened up more social opportunities and friendships and expanded Warren's world.

<u>Dee's place</u> - Dee knew from when she was a young adult that she wanted to move out like her brothers and live in a typical home sharing with a housemate. Dee's home is truly her own and she has a wonderful presence in her local community - five minutes.

<u>Paul's video story</u> - In this three-minute video hear from Paul who shares his home with a housemate and is a great host.

<u>Ned and housemates</u> –Ned shares his home with two housemates. In this four-minute video, hear from Ned, his housemates and family about how they created this great living arrangement.

The step-by-step recap

- 1. **Having a vision and believing it is possible** Believe you or your family member can live and thrive in a shared house.
- 2. **Have a clear housemate profile** Write down the type of person you would like to share your house with and practical ways a housemate can provide support.
- 3. **Create an ad to spark interest** Think about sharing your ad with your friends, networks, social media, local interest places, or advertising on reputable websites.
- 4. **Responding to interest** Work out how you will respond to people interested in being your housemate. Will initial contact be by phone or email? Give interested people more information to help them decide is this right for them?
- 5. **Meet at a café or other neutral place** Meet the potential housemate in a public place to see if they are a good match. This is a good opportunity to get to know more about the person and explain how a housemate arrangement works.
- 6. **Background checks** Ask for Police Check, NDIS worker screening. Check references from previous landlords, professional references, and character references.
- 7. **Viewing and exploring the home** If the person looks like a good match for a housemate, arrange a meeting at the home. Show them their room, common areas, and discuss more about the arrangements.
- 8. **Living with a housemate trial** If the person looks like a good match to be a housemate, spend more time together and get to know each other better. Try out sharing the house for the weekend or week.
- 9. **Formalise agreement and get started** Ensure there is a formal agreement. This can include an occupancy or subletting agreement and list the amount of rent to be paid and expectations about support provided.
- 10. **Keep communication channels open** Arrangements work best when we have open communication this might include regular checking in with you and your housemate.

Useful resources

Resource 1: Examples of housemate ads

Example 1: traditional advertisement

Fun loving & outgoing 27-year-old male in need of a housemate

Rent \$xx pw, Wi-Fi included (Other expenses shared)

This apartment comes with the opportunity for rent reduction in exchange for household assistance. An interview will be mandatory and arrangements are negotiable.

The current housemate has 2 part-time jobs (during the weekdays) and is a volunteer for a local youth group and a food co-op. He has a wide range of interests including swimming, gym/boxing, social Frisbee, camping, music, socialising and travelling.

The new housemate should be active, a non-smoker, community minded, like socialising/meeting new people and have a good sense of humour.

Example 2: Social media advertisement (text and graphic tile)

Housemate and live-in supporter

- Make a positive difference in the world
- Live in a great house and great location
- Make new friends
- Be a part of a dynamic and supportive community that values inclusion, interdependence, and social connection
- Gain valuable skills and experience.

We are looking for an excellent human to share a house, good times and provide some practical support to a man with disability.

This is an example of individualised living. The idea is living together in a home with a cool cooperative vibe, where you can share your interests, socialise together and provide support at agreed times.

You do not need to have disability support experience. You do need to be a truly excellent human being, compassionate, reliable with an upbeat personality.

You will share a fabulous house in [insert suburb] with cheap rent and provide scheduled support at agreed times. We will work with you to get the balance just right.

Sound interesting? If so, send an email to [insert email] and tell us about yourself.

Graphic tile to be added to post:



Example 3: Advertisement for flatmate website

About the property (upload photos of property)



Hello, thank you for checking out my ad. Please be sure to read through its entirety before reaching out. Live in a sunny house in a wonderful location, close to transport, and everything you need.

House is dynamic with a cool cooperative vibe. Has an outdoor entertaining area, 3 bedrooms, large kitchen and mega TV. Pretty and herby gardens for the green thumbs and doggo called Angie. Angie is in her golden years and is not cool with other dogs.

About the flatmates

Hi, I am Jacob, I'm a friendly, social and chilled out 31 year old. I love spending time with friends & family. I am an educator and sought after speaker at conferences and events.

I'm seeking a housemate who is wanting to build a friendly house sharing relationship. House sharing works best when there is a cool cooperative vibe.

The house is dynamic and fun with people I work with coming and going. But don't let that put you off, everyone is cool.

I am a man with disability who is supported by a small, trusty team of support workers who support me day to day.

We are looking for an excellent human to share our house, and provide some practical support.

This is an example of individualised living - sharing a house, fun times, and providing support at agreed times. All this is negotiable but in exchange you will get a reduction in the rent or live rent free, depending on our agreed arrangement. You do not need disability experience but do need to be an excellent human - compassionate, reliable, with an upbeat personality.

Resource 2: Example of housemate support checklist

Send your email to

Resource 3: Reference checks: sample questions to ask past landlords, employers and friend/ mentor/ coach/ teacher

You need to get three types of reference:

- Rental references
- Work references
- Character references

Rental reference - sample questions

- 1. How long did the applicant rent the property?
- 2. Did they pay rent on time?
- 3. Did they take good care of the property?
- 4. Were there any complaints or issues during their tenancy?
- 5. Would you rent to them again in the future?
- 6. Can you provide additional comments or insights about their character and reliability as a tenant?

Work references - sample questions

- 1. Can you confirm that the applicant is currently or was employed at your company?
- 2. What is their position at your company?
- 3. What date did they start working for you?
- 4. Are they punctual?
- 5. What are their regular hours of work each week?
- 6. What are their current terms of employment? Are they currently employed casually, part-time, full-time, on trial or a contract?
- 7. What are the applicant's prospects or aspirations for employment in the future?
- 8. Do you work well with the applicant? Do other employees enjoy working with them? Why/why not?
- 9. Has the applicant ever been in trouble at work before?

Character references – sample questions

- 1. How do you know the applicant?
- 2. How long have you known them, and how well would you say you know them?
- 3. How would you describe their personality/character?
- 4. What are their hobbies? What do they do in their leisure or spare time?
- 5. Do they get along well with others?
- 6. Can you describe a time when you saw the applicant face a challenging or stressful situation? How did they handle it?
- 7. Have they ever been involved in a fight or dispute?
- 8. Do they smoke?
- 9. Do they drink? If yes, do they drink to excess?
- 10. Do they take drugs?
- 11. Do they own firearms?
- 12. Do they have pets?
- 13. Do you think they would be a suitable supportive housemate for a person with disability?

Resource 4: What to consider for a housemate agreement

Who is the agreement with?

- Person with disability and/or family member
- Housemate

Purpose of the agreement

- Principles of a supportive housemate agreement
- Details, roles and responsibilities
- Voluntary living arrangement for mutual benefit and sharing lives

How long is the housemate agreement?

- Do you want a trial agreement for three months or a longer term?
- How frequently do you want to review the agreement?

Address of home

Other people also living at the home (ie other housemates)

Housemates' responsibilities

You will need to provide a lot of detail here, such as:

What is their supportive role? List practical support, tasks, actions and expectations. You might also want to insert the time each week the housemate is expected to devote to these tasks. Think about communication channels with family and paid supporters, if they are required to join planning meetings, any nights the housemate would be expected to be at home, expectations of certain number of dinners shared in the home together, etc.

- Keep home clean and tidy
- Notify of any damage or home maintenance required

Housemate should seek advice from relevant professionals about any implications of Supportive Housemate arrangement.

Your responsibilities

- A private room furnished/ unfurnished
- Car parking
- Shared furnished living and common areas
- Use of all common areas of the home and amenities
- You should seek advice from relevant professionals about any implications of Supportive Housemate arrangement.

Tenancy agreement:

Think about the legal status of your housemate; are they a

- a co-tenant
- a head-tenant
- a sub-tenant, or
- a boarder or lodger.

To find out more about the legal status of people in share housing visit the <u>Tenant's Union of NSW</u> - you may want to seek professional advice.

Mutual responsibilities

Think about privacy, communication, mindful of each other's right to be comfortable and feel safe living in their own home.

- A smoke free environment within the home
- Keeping the home clean and tidy and appliances in good working order
- Addressing maintenance issues
- Neighbours and neighbourliness
- Having friends over
- Parties
- House rules
- What to do if problems arise.

Household costs and contributions

- Non shared costs: These are the things you and your housemate will pay for separately and are specifically for each person's own use. Eg personal care and grooming products, clothing, food, medications, entertainment
- Shared costs: Shared utilities (gas, electricity, water usage), shared food, other shared household consumables (eg cleaning products, toilet paper)
- Rent: if the housemate is receiving a rent subsidy or stipend as a benefit for providing some support to you, how much rent do you want them to pay?

Other matters to consider

Eg Contents insurance, time away from home, privacy.

There will be many more things to consider relevant to your situation. You may wish to seek professional advice for any implications of the supportive housemate arrangement.

Useful links

My Home My Way website: myhomemyway.com.au

ILO Toolkit: <u>ilotoolkit.com.au</u>

Homeshare Australia and New Zealand Association (HANZA) website: hanza.org.au



If you picked up a hard copy of this guide, scan the QR code above to download the interactive online version with hyperlinks. You can also find the guide at https://bit.ly/HowToFindASupportiveHousemate

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Office: (02) 9869 7753 or 1800 774 764 (Toll free for people outside of Sydney)

Email: info@ric.org.au | Website: www.ric.org.au