

**Housing
Rights**

www.housingrights.org.uk

@HousingRightsNI

Policy briefing

**Policy briefing to accompany:
Putting the US in hoUSing
research by Involve**

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Housing Rights is Northern Ireland's leading independent provider of specialist housing advice. For over 50 years we have been helping people to find and keep a home. We believe that prevention is better than the cure, and work to prevent homelessness wherever possible.

At Housing Rights, we believe it is key that 'experts by experience' (people with experience of poor housing and homelessness) are meaningfully involved in decisions made about preventing and ending homelessness.

1.1 Putting the ME in HoME Research

Housing Rights commissioned Involve¹ to carry out research to better understand the breadth of work already happening in Northern Ireland and further afield to support people to be involved in decisions made about housing and homelessness. It was also intended to shine a light on those groups whose voices are not being heard and to provide insights about how collectively we in the housing and homelessness sector and in government, can improve our practice in the area. The research was supported by an Advisory Group with representation from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Communities.

2.0 POLICY CONTEXT

There is a growing recognition among elected representatives, government departments and statutory bodies of the importance of involving experts by experience in decisions made about housing and homelessness policy and services.

In Northern Ireland this has been furthest developed in terms of engagement with social housing tenants, with the [Tenant Participation Strategy introduced in 2015](#),² and a new Strategy currently being developed. Government structures which promote and facilitate engagement are less developed for those living outside the social rented sector such as people experiencing homelessness, private renters, and homeowners. However recent government policy has identified an appetite for engagement in decision making, with the principle of co-design receiving prominence.

The [New Decade New Approach](#) deal for example included a high-level agreement that:

*Engagement with civic society and the principles of co-design and co-production must underpin the development of the Programme for Government, budget and strategies.*³

In a similar vein, the then Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey, in introducing the [Draft Housing Supply Strategy](#) noted that transforming housing supply must:

¹ Involve are the UK's leading public participation charity <https://involve.org.uk/>

² https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dsd/tenant-participation-strategy-2015-2020_1.pdf

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

...major on engaging with those people who are most in housing need. This approach is built on the principle that those who are most affected by poor housing are best placed to help design or redesign it.⁴

This draft Strategy is intended to be the overarching policy document for the NI Executive's approach to housing, and is accompanied by an [Equality Impact Assessment \(EQIA\)](#) which identifies groups and communities most impacted by inequality in housing. The EQIA states that:

The commitment to transform supply will, by necessity, require not just collaboration across government departments, but effective partnerships across local government and with the third sector and private sectors, informed throughout (as noted in the HSS) by the lived experiences of those 'in the system' to help shape solutions.⁵

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), also identifies a strong commitment to participation in their [2022-27 Homelessness Strategy](#):

...this strategy will aim to reflect the voice of those who have lived experiences of homelessness in all aspects of its design and delivery.⁶

As well as committing:

...to ultimately have those with the lived experience involved in the coproduction and co-design of strategy actions.⁷

It is in the context of this growing recognition of the importance of involving experts by experience in the development and delivery of housing and homelessness policy and services that this research has been carried out and these policy recommendations considered.

3.0 KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research⁸ identified groups whose experiences of poor housing and homelessness are not being heard in policy development and service design and delivery in Northern Ireland. The research also identified and assessed mechanisms and models through which meaningful involvement of affected groups is secured, drawing upon existing good practice in Northern Ireland, as well as good practice case studies from elsewhere in the UK and Europe. Based on this analysis the research gave the following six recommendations for the meaningful involvement of affected groups in decisions made about housing and homelessness in Northern Ireland;

1. Involvement makes a difference

⁴ https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/communities/dfc-housing-supply-strategy-report_0.pdf

⁵ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/communities/dfc-draft-egia.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/73313718-aa0e-4aae-b122-6573dcab88c7/Ending-Homelessness-Together-Homelessness-Strategy-2022-27.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/policy-research/involve-research.pdf>

Involvement should make a difference - to participants, to decisions, to policies and to services. The difference involvement can make should be planned into the participation process at the earliest possible stage and should be communicated clearly at the end of the process.

2. The statutory environment supports participation by default

Participation is institutionalised when it happens to a high quality by default: as a normal and unquestioned component of the decision-making process, rather than something that happens on an ad-hoc or occasional basis. This happens when it is written into the rules of how decisions get made. Embedded practice is where the decision of whether and how to engage is routine and built-in to the process, rather than being at the discretion of the decision maker. Putting participation on a legal or statutory footing could act as an important precursor to changing the culture, behaviour, and practice of institutions.

3. There is capacity for participation within decision making structures

High quality public participation requires skills, knowledge and experience to be able to respond to different policy contexts and to develop opportunities for people to participate that are inclusive and accessible. This is especially true in policy areas such as housing, where there is significant overlap between the experience of poor housing and homelessness and the experience of barriers to participation, which we elaborated on above.

4. Involvement happens throughout the decision making process

Involvement can take place at any stage in the policy process, as long as there is room for change as a result. However, the stage in the policy process is a key element of the context for involvement, and will impact on the types of methods that are appropriate. Involving people early in the process can help identify issues, generate a shared vision, and shape the agenda so that it is close to the needs of people most impacted by the decision. Likewise, involving people after the decision has been made and during its implementation can provide oversight and scrutiny on how services are delivered and ensure that they meet the aims of the policy and address the needs of service users.

There will be opportunities throughout the policy cycle to invite and encourage participation. However, the approach and the methodologies used should take account of the stage the decision-making process is at to ensure participation can add value and to avoid manipulative or tokenistic engagement.

5. Decision makers have strong connections with others who are already involving affected groups

There is significant participation expertise and practice in civil society and the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. Organisations are claiming

spaces to involve and collaborate with people with experience of poor housing and homelessness for whom other spaces of participation present barriers. In some cases, those groups may already work closely with decision makers, in others, their relationship may be more adversarial. However, the onus is on decision makers to build those connections and support civil society groups to continue to do their vital work.

6. Understand what works

Evaluation is important for ensuring that engagement meets its objectives, and for ongoing learning and improvements to how engagement happens. Good evaluation can provide a deep insight into the strengths and weaknesses of planning, implementation, inclusiveness, participant experience, impacts on decisions, policies and processes, and can capture learning of what works and what does not, so that improvements can be made.

4.0 PARTICIPATION EVENT; FURTHER LEARNING

In October 2022, Housing Rights hosted an event entitled *Participation; putting the ME in hoME and the US in housing* to profile the work that is already happening both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, as well as to talk about the challenges and opportunities when it comes to getting participation right.

The event brought together experts by experience, service providers, politicians, statutory bodies, and other decision makers. Involve's Putting the ME in HoME research was launched at the event. Attendees also heard from experts by experience and a range of speakers supporting work in this area both in the community and in government. In addition to presentations and panel discussions, throughout the day participants took part in four table discussions to gather views and ideas from everyone present. [Following the event a report was produced which outlined the key themes and insights which people brought to the discussions](#) throughout the day which included:⁹

- We must involve experts by experience in decisions because they have insights other people do not. Their experience gives them a unique view on what needs to happen to fix things. As one participant said, 'it's a no brainer!'
- Experts by experience face challenges and barriers to being heard. They face stigmas, are scared of what may happen if they speak up and are tired of being the 'token' expert. They're asked to share, but then no one listens and nothing changes.
- There is motivation and energy to change things. When experts by experience are properly involved, we make better decisions. It builds relationships, skills and a sense of belonging from working together to create change. As one expert by experience said, 'We have the answers, you have the power, let's come together and fix this.'

⁹ https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/Housing_Rights_Participation_event_report_October22.pdf

5.0 HOUSING RIGHTS' KEY POLICY RECCOMENDATIONS

5.1 Recommendations for Northern Ireland Executive

5.1.1 Placing participation on a statutory footing

Housing Rights recommends that participation is placed on a statutory footing at an Executive level with cross-cutting legislation to support, resource and facilitate the effective and meaningful involvement of people affected by policy decisions in the design and implementation of policy solutions. In doing so the principles agreed in the New Decade New Approach Deal, (and echoed in multiple government policy since then), that co-design and co-production should underpin the development of the Programme for Government, budget and strategies, would be given legal effect.¹⁰ Furthermore, by placing involvement on a statutory footing, due priority and resource would be given to involvement processes. Consideration should be given to learning from, and building upon, the approaches taken in other jurisdictions such as those highlighted in the research. For example, provisions in the Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament, Scotland's Community Empowerment Act (2015), Scotland's Open Government Action Plan 2018-2020 and the Public Participation Frameworks which have been developed in local authorities in the Republic of Ireland.¹¹

5.1.2 Training and capacity building

In order to ensure that this statutory responsibility translates into good participation practice, Housing Rights further recommends that the Executive Office ensures **training and capacity building are provided across government departments to those who are responsible for policy design and implementation**. This should include training in participation practice including in the planning, design and implementation of participation.

Furthermore, the NI Executive approach to policy development and delivery, as illustrated in documents such as the NI Executive Practical Guide to Policy Making and Policy Toolkit¹², published in 2016, should be reviewed to ensure involvement meets best practice principles.

¹⁰ [2020-01-08 a new decade a new approach.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

¹¹ Putting the US in hoUSing research report

<https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/policy-research/involve-research.pdf>

¹² A Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland sets out key principles for good policy-making developed internationally and gives practical advice on applying them in Northern Ireland. The Policy Toolkit is intended to provide a practical overview of the key steps and key phases in the policy development process. It is divided into individual workbooks, which are structured around the key stages of the policy process to enable policy-makers to

5.2 **Recommendations for the Department for Communities**

5.2.1 **Participation Strategies**

As noted in the research, the Tenant Participation Strategy is the only participation strategy which exists with regards to housing and homelessness in NI, and is solely limited to social tenants. **Housing Rights recommends that a cross-tenure approach is taken to government led participation in the housing and homelessness sectors. Consideration should be given to expanding the remit of the Tenant Participation Strategy to include other tenures (private renters, people experiencing homelessness and homeowners) and/or developing separate strategies** to address the private, owner occupied and homeless sectors. People affected by poor housing and homelessness should be key stakeholders in this process.

Housing Rights further recommends that the development of the revised Tenant Participation Strategy, currently under development, reflect the best practice principles for involvement identified in the Involve research, particularly with regards to data collection and evaluation.

5.2.2 **Evaluation**

As is highlighted in the research; *Evaluation is important for ensuring that engagement meets its objectives, and for ongoing learning and improvements to how engagement happens.* Indeed the research identified a concerning evaluation gap, even in the social rented sector where involvement is most embedded. **Housing Rights therefore recommends that the Department commits to improving the processes through which people affected by poor housing and homelessness are involved in decisions. This should include evaluation of the engagement processes in line with the best standard practices outlined in the research. This is particularly important with regard to how people are involved, at what stage, how they are supported and what difference has been made as a result.** Information to inform evaluation should be gathered from an early stage in the process and any evaluation should capture information about who took part in order to understand if groups whose situation makes them vulnerable to housing problems or homelessness have been involved, and if not what barriers may have existed.

5.2.3 **Homelessness Strategy Steering Group**

The Homelessness Strategy Steering Group is the inter-departmental group overseeing the implementation of the NIHE Homelessness Strategy. **Housing**

dip into the guidance as appropriate Both are available at the following link; <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/policy-making>

Rights recommends that the Department works with experts by experience, the NIHE and other stakeholders (particularly those with expertise in involvement) to consider the most appropriate way to involve people who have experienced homelessness in the work of the **Homelessness Strategy Steering Group**. Housing Rights notes that the Terms of Reference for the group is currently under review and that this may provide an opportunity to consider how best to involve people in this group.

5.2.4 Housing Supply Strategy

The draft Housing Supply Strategy includes a welcome commitment to the principle that; *those who are most affected by poor housing are best placed to help design or redesign it*, as well as commitment *to major on engaging with those people who are most in housing need*. However there is no detail in the Strategy as to how this will be done. Given that this is a 15-year overarching strategy for housing which has not yet been signed off by the Executive, **Housing Rights recommends that the Department uses this unique opportunity to develop a long-term, sustainable programme for involving people with experience of poor housing and homelessness in the development and delivery of the Housing Supply Strategy**. Particular consideration should be given as to the best way to involve the groups identified in the Equality Impact Assessment which accompanies the Strategy, as those most likely to be affected by it.

As a first step to developing this programme, **Housing Rights recommends that the Department commissions a piece of work, bringing together experts by experience and other key stakeholders to identify how best they could involve people impacted by housing problems and homelessness in the development and implementation of the Strategy**. It is important to note that in order to make real the strategic commitment to involving people in most housing need, a homogenous approach will not suffice and instead a range of different tools and mechanisms will be required throughout the life cycle of the strategy in order to meaningfully engage with the different groups who are affected.

5.2.5 Private Rented Sector reforms

Housing Rights strongly welcomes the fact that the Department has involved private renters in the development to date of the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, for example by inviting Renters' Voice to take part in their Working Group on the Tenancy Information Regulations. **Housing Rights recommends that the Department continues to involve private renters in the development and implementation of the Private Tenancies Act and considers ways in which the current approach could be improved to include private renters whose voices are currently not being heard, for**

example by building in resources to pay experts by experience for their time in recognition of the expertise they bring. In addition, support should be provided to independent organisations working to support tenant voice in Northern Ireland.¹³

Furthermore, Housing Rights recommends that private renters are involved at an early stage in the policy development regarding the stage 2 private rented sector reforms committed to by the Minister for Communities during the last mandate,¹⁴ including:

- Letting Agent Regulation
- Grounds for Eviction
- Fitness Standards

Given the time and resource necessary for meaningful engagement on such wide topic, Housing Rights recommends that the Department takes steps now to begin to involve private renters in policy development regarding these stage 2 reforms, and indeed other areas in need of reform in the private rented sector. **Housing Rights recommends that consideration is given to following the example of the Glasgow City Council by establishing a Tenant Led Commission for the private rented sector.** Indeed, such a commission could help the Department to gather insights and expertise from private renters to inform both the development of secondary legislation under the Private Tenancies Act (NI) 2022, as well as the 'Stage 2' reforms of the private rented sector. Good practice examples, such as Glasgow City Council's Tenant-led Commission,¹⁵ should be considered.

5.2.6 ***Cost of Living Crisis***

With the impact of the cost-of-living crisis continuing to be felt by people across all tenures; social and private renters, people experiencing homelessness and home-owners, **Housing Rights recommends that consideration should be given to how best to involve people affected by the cost of living crisis (on a cross tenure basis) who are struggling to meet their housing costs, in both the identification of issues and the design of policy solutions in response to the crisis.** For example, consideration should be given as to how to involve people with experience of mortgage debt in decisions about how best to take action to prevent another repossession crisis in the wake of rising interest rates and the cost-of-living crisis.

¹³ <https://nationwidefoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Tenant-Voice-Programme-Report-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁴ [Minister Hargey outlines plan to improve protections in private rented sector | Northern Ireland Executive](#)

¹⁵ [Glasgow Tenant-Led Housing Commission \(PRS\) addresses a number of fundamental challenges to improve quality of housing - Tenants Information Service \(tis.org.uk\)](#)

5.3 Recommendations for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive

5.3.1 Homelessness Strategy Lived experience programme

Housing Rights strongly welcomes the commitment from the Housing Executive to developing a 'Lived experience programme' through their Homelessness Strategy. **We recommend that this programme continues to be developed with experts by experience to ensure it is accessible and meets the needs and interests of people who have experienced homelessness.** Housing Rights welcomes the fact that the NIHE have recently commissioned Housing Rights and Homeless Connect to begin to gather insights and expertise from this group. Following this piece of work **Housing Rights recommends that NIHE establish a stakeholder group including experts by experience** and those independent organisations working to support them to inform the development of the Lived Experience Programme. Housing Rights notes with concern that the implementation of this aspect of the Strategy did not begin until the final quarter of 2022 – 2023. While we recognise the current funding restraints, **we recommend the Lived Experience Programme is designed and delivered in a manner which reflects the best practice principles for involvement identified in the Involve research, including being funded on a longer-term basis to ensure meaningful and sustainable engagement.**

5.3.2 Fundamental Review of Allocations

Housing Rights welcomes the involvement to date of social tenants in the development of the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations, and the independent support for this engagement provided by Supporting Communities. **Housing Rights recommends that consideration should be given to how best to continue to involve groups affected by the Fundamental Review of Allocations in its ongoing development and implementation. Particular consideration should be given to involving people impacted who have not been able to access social housing (in addition to the continued involvement of those who have already been allocated a social tenancy).**

5.4 Further General Recommendations

5.4.1 Paying experts by experience for their time

In order to ensure the participation is accessible, and the expertise of people impacted by housing problems and homelessness is recognised, Housing Rights recommends that **when the input of experts by experience is sought whether by The Executive Office, Department for Communities or NIHE, where possible people are paid for their time.** Payment should be made in a manner which best meet's the individual's situation, for example through the use of vouchers if cash payments would interfere with their social security entitlements.

5.4.2 Partnering with organisations working with experts by experience.

As outlined in the research, *there is significant expertise and practice in civil society, with organisations involving and collaborating with people who have experience of poor housing and homelessness.* **Housing Rights recommends that when developing and implementing the above mentioned programmes that the Department and the Housing Executive work closely with organisations who are already working with experts by experience in order to maximise impact.**

6.0 Summary of Key Policy Recommendations

Responsible authority	Recommendation
NI Executive	Participation should be placed on a statutory footing with cross-cutting legislation to support, resource and facilitate the effective and meaningful involvement of people affected by policy decisions in the design and implementation of policy solutions.
	Training and capacity building for officials should be provided across government departments to those who are responsible for policy design and implementation.
Department for Communities	<p><u>Overarching</u> Ensure that a cross-tenure approach is taken to government led participation in the housing and homelessness sectors. Consideration should be given to expanding the remit of the Tenant Participation Strategy to include other tenures (private renters, people experiencing homelessness and homeowners) and/or developing separate strategies to address the private, owner occupied and homeless sectors. People affected by poor housing and homelessness should be key stakeholders in this process.</p>
	Ensure that the development of the revised Tenant Participation Strategy, currently under development, reflects the best practice principles identified in the research, ¹⁶ particularly with regards to data collection and evaluation.

¹⁶ Putting the US in hoUSing research report - <https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/policy-research/involve-research.pdf>

	<p>Commit to improving the processes through which people affected by poor housing and homelessness are involved in decisions. This should include evaluation of the engagement processes in line with the best standard practices outlined in the research.¹⁷ This is particularly important with regard to how people are involved, at what stage, how they are supported and what difference has been made as a result.</p>
	<p><u>Homelessness</u> Consider the most appropriate way to involve people with experience of poor housing and homelessness in the work of the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group.</p>
	<p><u>Housing Supply Strategy</u> Design and develop a long-term, sustainable programme for involving people with experience of poor housing and homelessness in the development and delivery of the Housing Supply Strategy.</p>
	<p><i>(As a first step towards developing the above programme)</i> Commission a piece of work, bringing together experts by experience and other key stakeholders to identify how best people impacted by poor housing and homelessness could be involved in the development and implementation of the Housing Supply Strategy.</p>
	<p><u>Private Rented Sector</u> Continue to involve private renters in the development and implementation of the Private Tenancies Act and considers ways in which the current approach could be improved to include private renters whose voices are currently not being heard. Support should be provided (both financial and otherwise) as appropriate to tenants and independent organisations working to advance tenant voice in Northern Ireland.</p>
	<p>Consider following the example of the Scottish government by establishing a Tenant Led Commission for the private rented sector to gather the insights and expertise of private renters. This approach could be used to inform both the development of secondary legislation under the Private Tenancies Act (NI) 2022, as well as ‘Stage 2’ reforms of the private rented sector.</p>

¹⁷ Putting the US in hoUSing research report - <https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/policy-research/involve-research.pdf>

	<p><u>Cost of Living Crisis</u></p> <p>Consider how best to involve people affected by the cost-of-living crisis (on a cross tenure basis) who are struggling to meet their housing costs, in both the identification of issues and the design of policy solutions in response to the crisis.</p>
NIHE	<p><u>Homelessness Strategy Lived Experience Programme</u></p> <p>Continue to involve experts by experience in the development of the Homelessness Strategy’s ‘Lived Experience Programme.’</p>
	<p>Establish a stakeholder group including experts by experience and those independent organisations working to support them, to inform the development of the Lived Experience Programme.</p>
	<p>Ensure the Lived Experience Programme is designed and delivered in a manner which reflects the best practice principles for involvement identified research¹⁸ and is funded on a long-term basis to ensure meaningful and sustainable engagement.</p>
	<p><u>Fundamental Review of Allocations</u></p> <p>Consider how best to involve groups affected, especially those who have not been able to access social housing, in the ongoing development and implementation of the Fundamental Review of Allocations (in addition to the continued involvement of those who have already been allocated a social tenancy).</p>
NI Executive Department for Communities	<p>When the input of experts by experience is sought, pay people for their time wherever possible, in whatever manner best meets their needs.</p>
	NIHE

For further information please contact our Participation and Policy Coordinator: kerry@housingrights.org.uk.

¹⁸ Putting the US in hoUSing research report – <https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/policy-research/involve-research.pdf>

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