

Housing Rights



PUTTING THE 'US' IN HOUSING

**THE MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT OF AFFECTED
GROUPS IN DECISIONS MADE ABOUT HOUSING
AND HOMELESSNESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: OCTOBER 2022

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This important scoping report comes at a significant time for housing in Northern Ireland. Rising interest rates, the cost-of-living crisis and increasing levels of homelessness and housing stress all mean that policy development which makes a difference in people's lives, has never been more needed.

At Housing Rights we are deeply committed to ensuring that people with lived experience of housing problems and homelessness are meaningfully involved in the decisions government makes.

This report was commissioned by Housing Rights 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 purpose of this research is to contribute to current thinking about the participation of groups made vulnerable by their housing situation in decisions about housing and homelessness in Northern Ireland. These are important and increasingly urgent issues that demand fresh and bold approaches to policy and service design, shaped by the expertise and needs of people who have experience of poor housing and homelessness.

The aims of this research were to:

- Identify groups whose experience of poor housing and homelessness are not being heard in policy development, and service design and delivery in Northern Ireland.
- Identify and assess mechanisms and models through which the meaningful involvement of affected groups is secured, by looking at approaches taken to participation in related policy (and service design/development) decisions.
- Make recommendations for the practical application of engagement models, including frameworks for planning, implementation and evaluation.

This report approaches these questions through a lens of participatory democracy - a set of ideas and practices based on the belief that democratic decision making at all levels of governance should be made with and by the people who are affected by those decisions. Participation happens along a spectrum, and involvement is best understood in that context. Good participation, at any level on the spectrum, is often about opening up entrenched power structures so that public policy and services can be more responsive to the needs of everyone in society. To do this, however, requires understanding the language of participation and the impact it can have on how processes are planned, implemented and evaluated. Participation is never neutral - it always takes place in a context of unequal power relations, and understanding the nature of that power is essential in order to rebalance rather than reproduce it. One way that power operates in participation is through barriers to participation, and groups who are 'easy to ignore' when programmes and processes fail to meet the needs of many of the people who are affected by them.



There is an obvious and significant overlap between people who experience poor housing and homelessness and those who face barriers to participation, because the factors that contribute to inequalities also often constitute the barriers that prevent people from taking part, such as poverty, education, confidence, work and caring responsibilities, language and literacy barriers, and disabilities. The ways in which the experience of poor housing and homelessness interacts and intersects with identity characteristics is complex because inequalities are structural and systemic. People's identities are multifaceted and intersecting, and demographics alone don't determine housing outcomes. Poor housing is both the result and the cause of inequity, and poverty is a unifying factor across all demographics who experience poor housing and homelessness. However, for those made most vulnerable by their housing situation, including those on low incomes in the private rented sector and those who experience homelessness, there are few formal avenues through which they can influence the decisions that affect them.

Participation is relatively well defined and with established practice in the Social Rented Sector. However, there is inconsistency across the sector, and an absence of data on the diversity, inclusion, or representativeness of current participatory activities. There are also gaps in the evaluation of tenant involvement, making it difficult to know what works and what doesn't, or how accessible current opportunities are to groups who are systematically excluded.

Consultation is widely used as a way to broaden engagement with strategic policy decisions, both by the Housing Executive and by the Department for Communities, and a key way that decision makers obtain feedback from stakeholders. It is currently the primary method for the public to feed into policy development. However, consultation is just one method, and, beyond statutory obligations to consult, it will often not be the correct approach, especially when the input of 'easy to ignore' groups is required.

There is much more diversity of participatory practice in the claimed spaces occupied by civil society groups, activists, campaigners, and the community and voluntary and advice sectors. The research looked at current practice among a small number of projects and organisations that work at the intersection of housing and 'easy to ignore' groups, and found that they are often effective at involving and collaborating with groups who are affected by poor housing and homelessness, but that they sometimes struggle to see the impact of their work on decisions made about policy and services.

The report summarises these gaps as:

1. The inclusion gap, especially in invited spaces.
2. The empowerment gap, and the absence of meaningful redistribution of power in decision making about housing and homelessness to those who are most affected.
3. The impact gap, and the institutional limits of being open to the input of participation.

Based on these gaps, we present a range of case studies from across the UK, NI, and Europe that demonstrate approaches that address some or all of those gaps. Many of the case studies demonstrate how decision makers, stakeholders, and affected groups can work together more effectively throughout the decision making process.

In learning from existing practice in Northern Ireland, and from the case studies, the report concludes with a set of six recommendations for the meaningful involvement of affected groups in decisions made about housing and homelessness in Northern Ireland. Each recommendation is a principle accompanied by a set of actions that decision makers can take to support improved involvement of affected groups in decision making.

Recommendations

1. Involvement makes a difference

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 who have 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.