

# Housing Rights

when everyone has a **home**



## Involving Everyone

Including 'easy to ignore' groups in housing policy and strategy development in Northern Ireland

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# Introduction

At a time of great change for housing policy and practice in Northern Ireland, it is important that the widest possible range of current and potential service users are involved in discussion about the planning and delivery of housing services. It has long been recognised that some groups have been excluded, either through discrimination, lack of opportunity, or because the opportunities available are unsuitable. These groups have become known to often well-meaning service providers as 'hard to reach'. Recently it has become better understood that such groups are not actually 'hard to reach' if organisations make appropriate efforts to include them; therefore in this report we have chosen to use the alternative term 'easy to ignore'.

The aim of this research was to assess and make recommendations for the greater involvement of 'easy to ignore' groups in housing policy and strategy development in Northern Ireland, with particular emphasis on engagement with the Social Housing Reform Programme. The research objectives were:

1. To review the relevant academic literature, policy documents and good practice guidance, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere
2. To identify specific good practice case studies in Northern Ireland and elsewhere and to examine them in greater depth
3. To gather expert opinion from a selection of service users, practitioners and policy-makers from housing and other service areas
4. To assess the data and to make recommendations for change, to include addressing the research questions.

Organisations contacted included a government department, housing and homelessness umbrella organisations, and voluntary organisations involved in the areas of supported housing, homelessness, mental health, learning disability, education, ex-offenders, and minority ethnic groups. We included organisations from outside the housing field in order to get a wider idea of current good practice.

## The most common 'easy to ignore' groups were identified as:

- **'Equality' groups:** Black and minority ethnic groups including Roma and Travellers; young people; asylum seekers; refugees; children; people with mental ill-health; people with learning difficulties.
- **Where people live:** homeless people; private rented sector tenants. Many of these groups have other needs and belong to equality groups.
- **Communication issues:** poor literacy and numeracy; poor social and interpersonal skills; lack of internet access; English as a second language.
- **The nature of impairments and 'unwanted voices':** exclusion of emotionally vulnerable people and those with complex needs; ex-offenders.

Poverty was also a unifying factor in all these groups.

## The main barriers to involvement included:

- **Methodological barriers** – how participation is organised: lack of information provision, lack of definition of the scope of the involvement;
- **Physical barriers** – access issues: location of meetings for dispersed groups;
- **Attitudinal barriers** – the way organisers respond to service users' needs: regarded as the most serious obstacle, centred around power imbalances and lack of trust;
- **Financial and resource problems** – providing practical support: lack of provision of practical help such as travel costs and lunch, plus staff shortages;
- **Timing** – planning events around users' ability to attend: failing to acknowledge the chaotic lives lived by some service users
- **Consultation/ participation fatigue** – respect everyone's time and energy.

## Many good ideas were put forward about how to 'make it work', which we divided into 5 categories:

- **Values and rights:** establishing a philosophical basis for working together;
- **Co-production and capacity release:** a methodological framework for working together;
- **Creating an appropriate environment and use of involvement techniques:** a process for working together;
- **The role of advocacy groups:** working with allies; and
- **Making an impact:** achieving outcomes. The priorities for achieving impact were identified as continuity, visible benefits, good working relationships and responding to incentives.

## Specific suggestions to improve participation included:

- Above all – LISTEN (this was said by almost everyone);
- Honesty and transparency – don't give people the run around;
- Demonstrate the value of the process and provide feedback;
- Include participation in everyone's work, not an optional extra;
- Involve, consult and empower – people should be involved in both the design and delivery of services;
- Talk about barriers, be flexible, adapt and change when needed;
- Try to seek a positive outcome; be open to new participation techniques;
- Ask why do you want to do this? What will be the impact?
- 'Take the pain out of meetings';
- Include user involvement in regulation, or make it a statutory requirement.

Involvement in policy and strategy was acknowledged to be particularly difficult. Avoiding jargon was important, but connecting lived experience to policy change was considered to be the best way to make policy and strategy relevant to service users.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The research findings identified a promising environment for building on existing good practice and positive attitudes. However, we also ask why current structures seem unable to accommodate a wider variety of service users, whether to contribute to policy and strategy or to service delivery.

We suggest this could be because there is no systematic approach to improving practice. Therefore the research concludes by recommending an integrated model for service user involvement in housing, for all participants including 'easy to ignore' groups. The model is in three parts: Philosophy, Process and Resources:

### Philosophy:

The recommended philosophy of service user involvement is based on the rights of the service user and a co-production approach to the development of policy and strategy, which values lived experience alongside professional expertise. Together these factors are intended to instigate a culture of mutual respect and partnership.

### Process:

Good intentions are meaningless without a process that works. We propose three stages: finding the right structures; facilitating engagement; and promoting capacity release.

### Resources:

At a time of public sector cuts it is important to re-state that good quality service user involvement costs money, and involving easy to ignore groups can cost more. It is important to share and develop good practice, therefore the establishment of a small regional centre to promote excellence in user involvement in housing services is proposed.

We have uncovered a great commitment to service user involvement on the ground, including elements of good practice and a general wish to establish a culture that respects lived experience. A new approach to involvement will benefit everyone, whether or not they are currently considered to be 'easy to ignore'.

For further information

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