

Response to a Consultation on the Housing Executive's Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020

Introduction

Housing Rights welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Housing Executive's consultation on *Proposals for a Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020*. Housing Rights believes a Strategy is essential; particularly against the backdrop of a changing society in Northern Ireland. Housing Rights supports the aims and objectives of the Housing Executive in their endeavours to create a more integrated society.

Housing Rights has over 50 years experience of helping people in housing need. It is unfortunate that, despite great efforts being made towards developing a peaceful society, Housing Rights' advisers still deal with clients who are victims of intimidation and harassment or who are faced with a lack of shared social housing options. Addressing these housing matters is crucial to the development of greater community cohesion.

Housing Rights believes:

- That the Government needs to continue to recognize this work as a priority and invest the necessary financial resources to make shared living a reality for those who want it.
- There is an important role for the Housing Executive to encourage local communities to be more involved in developing community cohesion. Communities have a valuable role to play in promoting good relations and challenging negative behavior.
- A number of practical steps could be implemented to improve the response from the Housing Executive in helping those who are victims of intimidation and/or harassment.
- The Housing Executive should review the availability of temporary accommodation to help those members of minority ethnic communities who have particular social, cultural and religious needs.
- The Traveller community should be included in any final strategy on community cohesion. Unfortunately, their needs have not been referred to in the consultation document.

Provision of shared housing

Whilst appreciating that Northern Ireland is still in many cases a segregated society, Housing Rights welcomes the recognition of the Housing Executive that many people aspire to live in a mixed area. Housing Rights shares the vision of the Housing Executive in creating a shared future for people to be able to live side by side, regardless of their background. Housing Rights has had many examples over the years of clients wishing to move to an area of mixed housing, but finding that they could not as there is an overall lack of mixed social housing. In many cases, such people have no alternative but to rent privately instead, where there is much more choice on offer for shared housing. Housing Rights believes that regardless of the

tenure type, all households should have the real opportunity of living in mixed housing, if they so wish.

However, we, of course, appreciate that there are difficulties in providing greater opportunities for shared living. Given the importance of shared housing to furthering the creation of a peaceful future for all citizens of Northern Ireland, Housing Rights hopes that the Government will afford priority to this issue and provide the necessary financial resources to carry this through to a successful conclusion.

Role of community involvement

Following on from the Department for Social Development's recent consultation on a *Strategy for Tenant Participation*, Housing Rights believes that the Housing Executive should consider improving the involvement of local communities in developing greater community cohesion. Local communities can play a pivotal role in promoting inclusiveness and challenging negative behaviours of the minority who do not wish to see a shared future for all. However, we acknowledge that there can be tensions within communities between those who are 'settled' residents and those from incoming minority groups. Housing Rights believes that there is an important role for the Housing Executive to facilitate community leaders/activists to encourage other members within their local communities to be welcoming and inclusive.

It is important that the Housing Executive makes appropriate efforts to ensure that everyone in the local community is involved. Specific attention should be given to involving those local residents who are 'easy to ignore'. Recent research carried out by Dr Jenny Muir and Mary McMahon which addressed the issue of *Involving Everyone* including those, for example, with poor communication skills, people with a disability and people with mental health issues¹, may be helpful in this regard. (See Appendix 1 for the Executive Summary.)

Further issues to be considered

Generally speaking, Housing Rights agrees with the aims and objectives set out in the consultation document. The following table highlights those areas which Housing Rights feels should be addressed when considering community cohesion. The comments are based on the experiences of our clients and we hope they will be useful when considering the way forward:

Race relations	The Housing Executive acknowledges that hate crime is a growing issue in Northern Ireland. This has also been reflected in the number of enquiries made to Housing
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¹ 'Involving Everyone', Dr Jenny Muir and Mary McMahon, June 2015, http://housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/Easy%20to%20Ignore%20Full%20Report%20-%20June%202015_0.pdf

Rights from people who believe they have been intimidated or harassed at their home.

Housing Rights believes that dealing with intimidation and harassment is key to improving community cohesion and reducing the incidents of intimidation and harassment. Effective systems need to be put in place to tackle this problem. From the experience of Housing Rights in dealing with victims of hate crime, we would suggest some practical actions which we believe could improve the response to the needs of victims of intimidation and harassment:

- The Housing Executive should consider establishing a specific point of contact within the organisation for victims for hate crime.
- The Housing Executive should look at what measures can be put in place to speed up its processes for responding to the needs of people living in danger.
- The Housing Executive needs to draw up better protocols between themselves and PSNI to speed up the process of helping to get someone rehoused out of a dangerous situation.
- The Housing Executive and PSNI *Information Sharing Protocol Information Request Pro-Forma* needs to be strengthened to include deadlines for the receipt of information to more quickly process a person's claim for intimidation points under the Common Selection Scheme. There needs to be better communication channels between housing staff and PSNI.
- Although established now for a number of years, the Hate Incident Practical Action Scheme needs to be more widely promoted.
- There needs to be greater clarity as to who a victim of hate crime should contact in an emergency i.e. Housing Executive or PSNI, and this should be widely advertised.

Housing Rights is aware that a fundamental review of the social housing allocation policy is currently underway and that it may contain proposals to remove Intimidation Points. Whilst we acknowledge the need for improvements to the housing allocation policy, we believe that the potential impact of such a change on minority ethnic groups needs to be carefully considered.

	<p>Housing Rights also believes there is a need for the Housing Executive to consider additional measures to help sustain tenancies through mediation as this has the potential to play an important role in maintaining or improving community cohesion.</p>
<p>Temporary accommodation</p>	<p>The consultation document refers to the Housing Executive's aim to ensure that "...<i>all black and minority people in NI can get full and fair access to housing services...</i>" Housing Rights would like the Housing Executive to address the issue of not only access to permanent housing, but also to the availability of suitable temporary accommodation.</p> <p>One of the key areas of work for Housing Rights is helping people who face homelessness, including accessing suitable temporary accommodation. The experience of our clients and advisers shows that there are very real problems with accessing appropriate temporary accommodation; particularly for some people from minority ethnic backgrounds.</p> <p>In terms of this consultation, temporary accommodation is especially relevant in cases of intimidation, harassment and also in the settling of people who acquire refugee status.</p> <p>In its experience of working with other organisations, such as HAPANI (Horn of Africa People's Aid NI), Housing Rights is of the opinion that there are some groups of refugees who find accessing suitable temporary accommodation particularly difficult. In some of these cases, the offer of temporary accommodation was not considered suitable as it conflicted with their cultural, religious or lifestyle needs.</p> <p>We have found that this is generally the case for single females of Muslim origin who find it impossible to share accommodation with others in an environment which can include the consumption of alcohol and/or drugs. The current supply of temporary accommodation means that there is very little to suit their needs. This then puts them in the precarious situation of having to stay with 'friends of friends' who are essentially strangers.</p> <p>In order to assist with the integration of refugees into Northern Irish society, Housing Rights believes there is a</p>

	<p>need to review the provision of appropriate temporary accommodation which is currently available.</p> <p>As the primary funder of temporary accommodation services, Housing Rights believes that the Housing Executive has a role to ensure that the providers of temporary accommodation have adequate policies and procedures in place to create a safe environment and that they are actively implemented. The Housing Executive and providers can play a key part in proactively challenging any negative behavior towards minority groups which occurs in temporary accommodation.</p>
Traveller community	<p>Housing Rights is disappointed that the consultation document makes no reference to including the Traveller community within the plans for greater community cohesion. Housing Rights recognises that the Housing Executive operates a separate strategy on the accommodation needs of Travellers. But, as a prominent minority ethnic group, their needs should, we believe, also be referenced in the overall community cohesion strategy.</p>

Conclusion

Housing Rights welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Community Cohesion strategy and would be happy to discuss any of the issues which we have raised in this response further if this would be helpful.

For further information on this response please contact Sharon Geary, Policy Officer, Housing Rights, Middleton Buildings, 10-12 High Street, Belfast, BT1 2BA, (t): 028 9024 5640, (e): sharon@housingrights.org.uk



Involving Everyone

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

**Dr Jenny Muir and Mary McMahon
June 2015**

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

Housing Rights
Middleton Building
10-12 High Street
Belfast
BT1 2BA

T. 028 9024 5640

W. www.housingrights.org.uk
twitter.com/HousingRightsNI