

## Putting the ME in hoME and the US in hoUSing



Group discussion report from Housing Rights' participation event  
October 2022



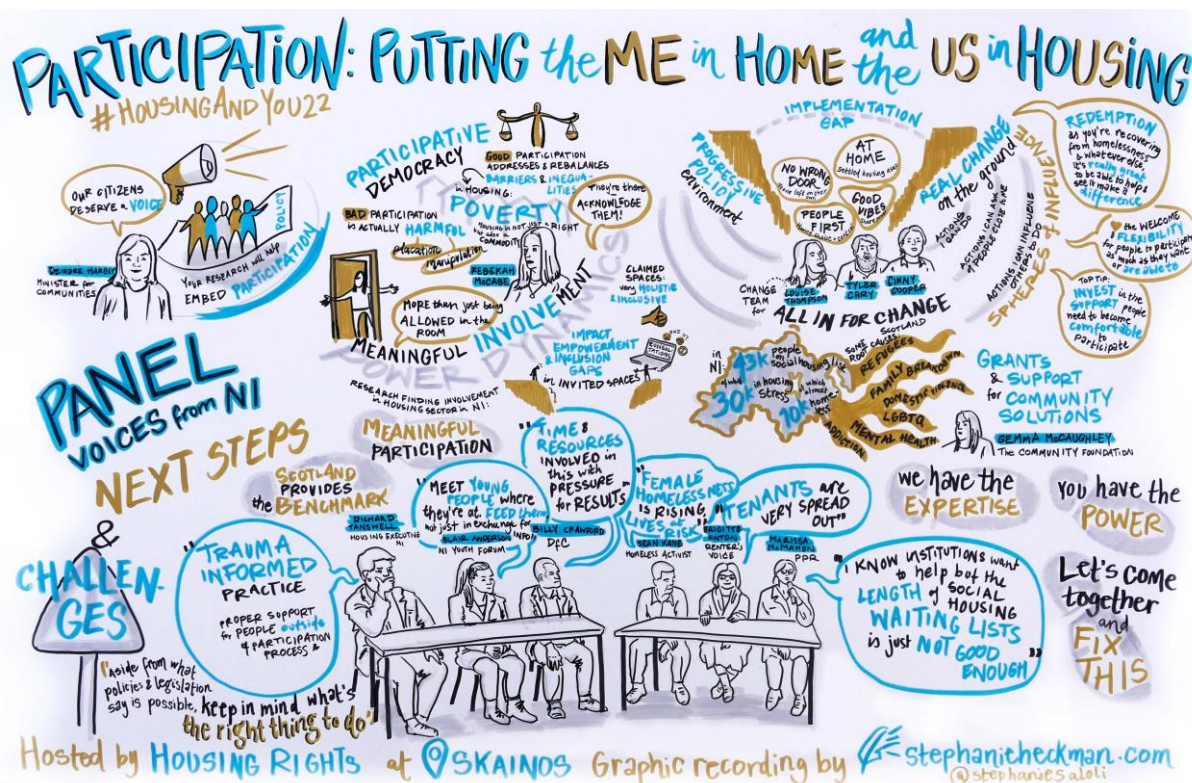
## INTRODUCTION

In October 2022, Housing Rights hosted an event entitled **Participation; putting the ME in hoME and the US in housing**. People affected by poor housing and homelessness have insights that many of the rest of us do not. They have expertise from their experience. At Housing Rights, we know the work to prevent homelessness is hard and that we must do it together. The decisions we make are better when we bring all our combined expertise to the table. That is why we hosted this landmark event to:

- profile the work that is already happening both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere; and,
- talk about the challenges and opportunities when it comes to getting participation right.

The event brought together experts by experience who have experienced housing problems or homelessness, with service providers, politicians, statutory bodies and other decision makers.

Important new research, which Housing Rights recently commissioned Involve to carry out, was launched at the event. We 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 we asked people to take part in four table discussions to gather views and ideas from everyone present. **This report outlines the key themes and insights which people brought to the discussions throughout the day.** The discussions were also captured in an art installation by Steph anie Heckman, pictured throughout the report, as well as in the live graphic recording pictured below:



## Why did people come?

*The first thing we asked people was why they came to the event. From the outset, the importance of participation was clear from discussions around the room.*



**Experts by experience came to let their voices be heard.** People came because they had experienced homelessness or housing problems. They came because of their unique experiences: as single mothers, as young people, as people with refugee status, as people seeking asylum, as people from ethnic minority groups, as people with disabilities.

**Decision makers, service providers and politicians came to hear and learn from experts by experience.** They came because of their responsibility to design legislation and services that work for people. They came because they want to put people at the heart of what they do.

People came because they are frustrated. People came because they had not been taken seriously in the past. People came to share knowledge and learn from one another. People came because of their values. **People came because they know what needs to change and they believe that change starts by people's voices being heard.**

*We went on to ask why it is important to involve people who have experienced homelessness and housing problems in the development of policy and services.*

People felt strongly that **it is key to involve experts by experience as they understand what it is like to experience homelessness and housing problems, which gives them a unique understanding of what needs to happen to fix things.** Others commented that the insights of experts by experience is key to sense checking whether policies will actually work, as well as measuring and evaluating their effectiveness. Others highlighted the importance of participation in order to ensure policies and services consider the individual needs and circumstances of each person, by listening to and understanding different people's journeys. In turn this helps to improve services by ensuring they are accessible and inclusive, through bringing more empathy into the design of services

***"People should be involved as it's their lives, they are living it day in, day out"***

## Challenges and barriers

*Next we asked people to discuss challenges and barriers when it comes to participation.*

**Experts by experience** spoke about the **stigma of homelessness** and how people can be prejudiced, assuming people who are homeless do not know the solutions, judging them because of their situation. People explained they felt talked down to and discriminated against. These negative experiences stopped people from feeling able to engage.

People also spoke about **lacking the confidence, skills and knowledge** to engage in participative processes. They explained there is a lack of information and knowledge of how to challenge the system which leads to missed opportunities. Many commented that people in power are inaccessible and that an additional barrier was having to go to the space of those in power to engage, which is often not a suitable environment where everybody feels comfortable.



**Life challenges** were also highlighted as a barrier to involvement such as financial stress, trauma or mental health challenges, which can make it difficult for people to be able to engage. Others explained they **did not have the time or finances** to engage in participative work.

**Language barriers** were also raised, both in terms of people's level of English, and in terms of jargon and words being used in consultation processes which made them inaccessible to those not working in the homelessness or housing sector. People also shared experiences of the use of language leading to marginalization.

**Fear of retribution as a result of power imbalances** was another common and deeply concerning theme throughout the discussions. For example, fear that speaking up about housing issues could impact people's immigration status. Others feared being judged as a result of their experiences of homelessness or housing problems.

**The transient nature of some groups**, such as people experiencing homelessness, made it difficult for them to engage. Others highlighted intervention from government as a barrier, such as people seeking asylum being moved to another area in the middle of a piece of engagement work. People noted that change takes time but securing long-term engagement can be challenging.



**One of the most common challenges identified was the feeling among many people that nothing will change and that it is therefore pointless to engage.** A lack of trust in decision makers, and the suspicion that they will not listen and act upon what they hear, was another barrier. This was fueled by experiences of engagement which have been box ticking and tokenistic, leading to disillusionment and consultation fatigue. People noted that those in power often put their own ideas and strategies first, and then seek input from experts by experience, which leads to lack of trust in the process.

**Decision makers and organisations talked about the lack of time and resources to involve people**, explaining that they are often working to tight timeframes without enough staff members to complete the work. Others spoke about being under-resourced and therefore caught up in ‘firefighting’ and addressing other priorities. The **lack of adequate funding** to do participative work was one of the key issues raised across the board.

Some organisations explained that they **lacked the skills** to do participation well and tended to get stuck in the same type of engagement. They said they needed more training as they are afraid of putting people in uncomfortable positions by asking them to speak about trauma. Others had a **fear of offending people or being called out for getting it wrong**.

**For certain organizations, the realisation that they may not be able to deliver the needed changes was a barrier.** Some spoke to the limits of short-term participation, the need for longer term planning, and the need for participation to be part of the culture of an organisation. Others spoke of the challenge of finding people who are open to taking part in participative projects and different expectations around the time it takes to see change.

*We went on to ask what government could do to make it easier for experts by experience to share their insights.*

**People said it was important that government is more open and builds trust with those they are trying to engage with** by adopting less of a top-down approach and instead taking a person-centered approach to participation, learning from what is happening on the ground.

One of the key things that people wanted to see government do was to **provide enough funding and resources for this work**. Many voiced their desire to see government stop talking and do something. They wanted to see opportunities provided for organisations to bring people together to share their lived experiences. People noted the need for a continually evolving model of good practice, based on what is happening on the ground.

Other specific recommendations for government included:

- Reviewing the consultation process to make sure it is accessible, as well as providing people with the support they need to engage in consultations

- Ensuring that language used is accessible
- Providing long-term funding for participation work
- Meeting experts by experience in their own environment to help address power imbalances
- Mapping what participation work is happening

***“Meet people where they are at, not where you think they are”***

## Opportunities

*We then asked people to reflect on where they had seen participation working well.*



People discussed a range of **good practice examples** they had seen of participative work including:

- Involvement in government strategies and legislation such as the Housing Supply Strategy, the review of the Caravans Act and the Private Tenancies Bill
- Groups meeting with Ministers and MLAs
- Organisations involving service users in consultation responses and posing the questions in an accessible way
- Involvement in services, such as peer to peer support, resident participation and young people writing funding applications in foyers
- Community and grassroots involvement such as community meetings in local areas
- Specific sectors, such as trade and student unions, and the learning disability sector, engaging in participatory work
- Statutory and public bodies involving people, such as the Housing Executive and Translink
- Examples from Scotland such as temporary accommodation groups and local authorities
- Participative research

People also discussed **methods of involvement** they had seen which had worked well such as:

- Use of incentives to get people involved such a help with food and money
- Collaboration between different organisations and building networks over time
- Use of hybrid meetings with support to tackle digital exclusion
- Giving people the opportunity to socialise as part of participative work, and having a range of different activities to get involved in
- Events being held locally to improve accessibility

**Specific examples** of good practice were also given such as:

- Anaka Women's Collective
- Regional Service User Network
- Participation & Practice of Rights (including their Take Back the City and The Kind Economy campaigns)
- Service User Forum
- Voices of Young People in Care
- Renters' Voice
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum
- Housing Rights' peer advocacy
- Thames Reach
- NIHE's Housing Community Network

People spoke about **the opportunities which open up when organisations have the resources** to pay staff to do participation work, as well as to provide thank-you payments to volunteers for their time and skills. **People felt able to participate when they felt valued and acknowledged**, as well as when people in power came to their level, for example by meeting them in their own environment where they felt safe and comfortable. Clear communication, organisation and planning were also named as key ways to enable engagement, as well as holding regular meetings at times that suit people's varying availability. Setting specific goals and targets also helped facilitate engagement.

**Personal connections and relationship building** were highlighted as other key aspects of what enabled people to get involved. The creation of a community of support, **giving people a sense of purpose and belonging** was also highlighted as something that enabled people to participate, as well as having support from a floating support services where needed.

*We also asked which areas of housing and homelessness policy need more insight from experts by experience.*

People felt that **all areas of housing and homelessness policy need to be informed by insights from experts by experience**. However, some specific areas were also highlighted:

- Plans for the private rented sector
- Young people
- Domestic violence and housing

- Mental health support and inclusion
- People with addictions
- Support for people who are migrants or who are stateless, including the interaction between immigration policy and housing policy
- Social housing points system
- Temporary accommodation policy, including rules placed on some groups living in hotels
- Policies regarding release from prison
- Building social housing

***“Involving people is essential but we need to make sure we are all doing it.”***

## **Next Steps**

*In the final table discussion, we asked people what they would take away from the event, what steps they would take in their own work, and how we could work together.*



People said they were **more aware of what needs to be done, and how to involve experts by experience**; taking their insights on board, rather than simply listening.

There was **an increased awareness of the time and commitment necessary to build relationships with people**.

Many highlighted the learning they would take away from the **All in For Change** project in Scotland, for example how they brought a range of people on board (experts by experience, front line workers and government officials) without differentiating between the different members, and speaking together with one voice.

The need to **collaborate and harness the good work already happening in NI** was another key theme. People said they would take away the new connections and contacts they had made working in the homelessness sector. Others reflected that they had learnt that power actually rests with people rather than simply the government.

People reflected on issues with current practices, for example the fact that the consultation processes are not as effective as they could be, with more time and space required to enable engagement. Organisations said they would take steps in their work to **keep things simple and not to use ‘policy talk’**. People noted the need for people



to have **more information and education on their rights** in order to be empowered and have their voices heard. They noted that many living in poor housing or experiencing homelessness do not know how valuable their expertise is.

Experts by experience said they would try and get involved in more participative projects. Decision makers said they would evaluate and reflect on their practices, recognizing the need to take proactive steps to change how they work in order to reflect people's lived reality. **Many said they would prioritise participation in their work moving forward, to ensure every aspect is informed by experts by experience.** Some people said that they would seek to ensure working groups involving people are focused and efficient, with a time limited outcome to focus their work. Others took away the need to use their imagination to find new creative ways of involving experts by experience.

Some people spoke about specific practical steps they would take, such as looking at new ways of building houses, or speaking out about the fact that the housing selection scheme does not reflect the particular situation that people who have sought asylum find themselves in. Others said they would take more steps to advocate on behalf of people who are in housing needed.

While some people feared that the event might just end up being another space for discussion without resulting in any change, many people said they were coming away with **hope for the future and a desire to work together to see change and the advancement of participation.**

*Finally, we asked people what changes they would like to see in the involvement of experts by experience in housing and homelessness policy or services, as well as asking what they would like to see government do.*

People commented on the need for **capacity building** to help people build the skills and confidence to involve people, and to get involved. Others said that the government could ask people working in the sector to support them to involve the people they are working with. Others highlighted the importance of not overpromising but taking a step to do something.

**Provision of adequate funding and resources** was one of the key things people across the groups wanted to see from government. People commented that most of the support around participation comes from the third sector rather than government and statutory bodies and that this needs to change. The need for government to invest in participation at an early stage in decision making processes was also highlighted.

People mentioned a desire to see **steps taken at a practical level**, for example service providers listening to people in order to meet their needs. Others commented that statutory bodies should involve people using their services when deciding what language to use in order to ensure it provides clarity and dignity. Another key theme was the importance of government bodies **meeting experts by experience wherever they are, to ensure they feel comfortable, safe and able to engage.**

There was a desire to see a **strategy for participation** put in place to ensure it is happening across the sector, taking into consideration the need for different approaches to meet the needs of different groups. Others commented on the need for legislation to allow experts by experience who voluntarily engage in participation projects to be paid for their valuable input.

There was also a call for government to review services they are carrying out to assess how much they have been influenced and informed by experts by experience. People wanted to see **more accountability from government, as well as less talk and more action**. Others commented on the importance of communication from the government, and the need for inter-departmental working to ensure engagement and participation in relation to other issues linked with housing, for example in health and criminal justice. Others commented that there was a need to see a culture shift inside government departments towards a more participative approach.

Overall people wanted to see **increased involvement of experts by experience in decisions made throughout housing and homelessness policy and services**.

*“We have the answers, you have the power, let’s come together and fix this.”*



For further information please contact our Participation and Policy Officer via email at [kerry@housingrights.org.uk](mailto:kerry@housingrights.org.uk)