

Paper 1 NIHE Disability Forum: A model of good practice in user involvement with people with disabilities

What is the Disability Forum?

The Disability Forum was set up by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and Disability Action in June 2011. The Forum provides pan-disability user representation covering visual, hearing, physical, learning, hidden, mental health and multiple disabilities and focuses specifically on the housing issues which affect people with disabilities. The Disability Forum is a model of good practice in terms of formally embedding user involvement in matters of housing policy and practice within the NIHE.

This paper is the first in a series of two. This paper will explain why the Disability Forum was set up and the second will look at the good practice involved in running the Forum.

Why was the Disability Forum set up?

The Disability Forum came out of a recommendation of research carried out by Disability Action. The aim of the research was to find out the level of participation by people with disabilities in the Housing Community Network (HCN). (The Housing Community Network (HCN) is the model of community participation and user involvement that the Housing Executive uses).

This Paper is the first of a series of two:

- Paper 1 Why and how the NIHE Disability Forum was set up.
- Paper 2 Good Practice involved in facilitating the NIHE Disability Forum meetings.

When did the research happen?

The research took place from June to September 2008 and involved interviews with key people involved in the HCN (Central Managers, Supporting Communities Northern Ireland (SCNI), Area Managers, District Managers, and people with disabilities). In total 38 interviews were carried out.

What was identified in the research?

The research identified that people with disabilities were represented at all levels of the HCN, however that representation was limited. It also showed that disability issues were generally not addressed in a formal fashion by the HCN.

The research also showed a strong commitment by the NIHE to increase participation by disabled people as this group was identified as a hard to reach group. The NIHE's Community Involvement Transitional Strategy set out the need for a separate Disability Forum. By carrying out the research Disability Action was able to provide the NIHE with strong research evidence for the establishment of the Disability Forum. The recommendation to set up the Disability Forum was therefore accepted and Disability Action was asked to work out how it should be established. This was done in partnership with the NIHE and the HCN's.

How was the Disability Forum set up?

The initial stages involved meeting with the NIHE to agree on a strategy and to develop proposals. An implementation group was established and involved a representative from Disability Action, a representative from the Central HCN (person with a disability) and an Assistant Director from the NIHE. Disability Action developed a set of proposals and these were brought to the Central and Area HCN's for feedback.

These proposals included the following - developing terms of reference for the group, ensuring equal representation from the five NIHE Areas, covering the five categories of disability and holding meetings in accessible locations.

HCN Participation

Presentations were carried out with all of the five HCN areas. The aim of the presentations was to provide background information about the need for the Forum, to recruit members and finally to obtain feedback on the proposals.

On the whole the Disability Forum idea was received positively by the representatives who attended the meetings. Any feedback provided was used to help shape the setting up of the Disability Forum e.g. ensuring that people with different disabilities were represented. As one consultee recommended "The Terms of Reference need to be right".

Recruitment & Selection

Recruitment and Selection materials were developed this included an A4 Flyer and an Expression of Interest Form. The recruitment materials were available in a range of accessible formats (large print, audio tape, CD, Braille, easyread etc) and were available to complete online, face to face or by email. The recruitment materials were sent out to a wide range of community organisations covering the five NIHE areas in Northern Ireland.



Further information

Recruitment lasted for four weeks and 18 expressions of interest came in from across Northern Ireland and from people with different disabilities. 12 people (across the range of disability and Northern Ireland) were selected and the remainder were put on a reserve list. Following selection each candidate was sent a letter and invited to attend the inaugural meeting in June 2011.

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

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January 2015

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