

Paper 2 - The NIHE Disability Forum: A model of good practice in user involvement with people with disabilities – How to conduct inclusive meetings

1. 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 second in a series of two. The first paper explains why the Disability Forum was set up and this paper will look at the good practice involved in running the Forum.

2. Why was the Disability Forum set up?

The establishment of a Disability Forum was 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 second in 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.

3. Purpose

The NIHE Disability Forum wish to highlight good practice in regard to people with disabilities and how they can meaningfully engage in various government and non departmental public bodies committees, advisory groups, ad hoc task groups etc in relation to housing issues. This paper details the method to ensure people with disabilities can play a full and active representative role in any given committee, fora etc be that for strategic or service influence, information sharing or issue based consultations.

The ultimate aim is that disabled people can meaningfully contribute to making a real difference to the lives of people with and people without disabilities living in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that people with disabilities have other aspects to their lives and it should not be assumed that they are only interested in health or disability issues.

The paper is divided into 3 sections:

1. Pre meeting planning and preparation
2. Meeting protocol
3. Post meeting action

Please note each section should not be viewed in isolation but as a continuous cycle.

The NIHE Disability Forum is a 100% user led group. A group comprising both disabled and non disabled representation may have other issues to address.

This paper is based on the NIHE organisational structure so it is advised that other public authorities, if using this model, should modify this document to suit their individual organisational structure and function.

Good practice would dictate that this original document be treated as a baseline which can be updated continually as experience is gained and relevant information is collected.

The information below is not an exhaustive list and relates specifically to how the NIHE Disability Forum conducts its meetings.

4. Overarching Issues

There are 3 overarching themes which run across all 3 sections:

- 1 Information, Communication and Physical accessibility.
- 2 Disability Equality Training which must be measured effectively and demonstrate that it delivers real attitudinal change with staff.
- 3 Attitudinal barriers are the biggest obstacle that disabled people have in accessing their rights, broaden their choices in life and obtain a level of independence.

5. Embedding Good Practice

To ensure meaningful engagement from the start all staff should have a clear knowledge of their organisations' values and ethos and a shared understanding of their organisations function and consistency of approach in regard to equality issues.

Pre-meeting planning and preparation

- Identify and provide reasonable adjustments
- Appropriate time of day for meeting decided
- Identify the preferred method of contact eg email, letter, telephone/mobile call
- Ensure that all meeting materials are provided in alternative formats not just the agenda, minutes, claim forms eg documents, handouts etc
- Attachment documents should be in Word as well as PDF for easy download
- Recognition of the possibility of a 'power imbalance' between staff and user group members
- Assumptions should not be made on levels of knowledge among participants ie underestimating the skills and abilities of people because they have a disability.
- Training Need Analysis for all stakeholders
- Organisational structure and function/service training for participants
- Clear group expectations – ie function of the group eg whether advisory, policy development, decision making, policy consultations
- Disability Equality Training for all Committee members including facilitator
- Inclusive Terms of Reference drafted by all members ensuring a statement on equal partnership
- Communication oral eg plain language, spoken clearly
- Communication written - plain language, no jargon, easyread
- Communication supports eg BSL/ISL interpreters, notetakers, support workers
- Advance information - ensure all meeting materials are sent out in well in advance of meeting date (2 weeks)
- Effective PowerPoint presentations eg caution re use of photos, cartoons etc for people who are blind and/or photo sensitive eg people with epilepsy
- Check font colour eg black with white print is appropriate
- Group contract developed
- Agreed number, time and length of meetings
- 1:1 contact with members before meetings to discuss issues and as a reminder of meeting date etc
- Fee and travel expenses paid
- Map to venue
- Available accessible public transport to and from venue
- Accessible venues, facilities and carparking
- Complete an event checklist and visit proposed venues before meetings
- Catering accessibility eg buffet style can produce barriers for people with physical disabilities
- Ensure financial resources are allocated for all access costs

6. Meeting Protocol

- Group facilitator must be trained in Disability Equality
- Facilitator and Chair will set the tone for the meeting so they require specific training
- Chair, presenters and speakers informed about all access considerations and reasonable adjustments and briefed on language
- Speakers informed about reasonable adjustments required eg accessible powerpoint presentations
- Inclusive clear language used – no jargon
- Ensure everyone has equal input
- Inclusive Space – an attitude that ensures every person regardless of ability or background can participate fully
- Teleconferencing can present significant difficulties for people with disabilities in particular sensory disabilities
- Presentations DVD with text or interpreters
- Accessible room layout identified eg tables, chairs with and without arms and chairs with and without wheels especially with carpet
- Fully accessible meeting room with sufficient space, good lighting, electric outlets for electronic aids and acoustics
- Clear housekeeping instructions including location of accessible toilets
- Determine number of comfort breaks by asking members
- Last minute meeting materials provided in required alternative formats
- Update group contract regularly
- Information Exchange standing item on agenda
- Continuous evaluation at the end of each meeting (ensure standing agenda item). This provides an opportunity for members to state additional reasonable adjustments and/or other personal issues

7. Post meeting action

- Members evaluation sheets analysed and follow up actions identified and prioritise for further development
- Contact members individually to identify and solve issues regarding personal issues eg additional information, agenda topics or decisions made, and please note
- Minutes and actions followed through and forwarded by deadline
- Quality Assessment of all published materials including provision of alternative formats
- Ensure reasonable adjustments are updated
- Ensure that travel and out of pocket expenses are paid within a set timeframe

8. Feedback Mechanisms and Organisational Benefits

The Disability Forum was established by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to ensure that disability is represented at all levels within the organisation. The Forum, as a user led group, increases the number of people with disabilities involved in the Housing Community Network. It also represented on the Central Housing Forum which meets with the NIHE Board.

The Disability Forum enhances, complements and contributes to NIHE structures by providing a two-tier platform in which disability issues can be addressed formally whilst allowing members to feed into their respective Scrutiny and Interagency Working Groups.

Currently the Disability Forum has 12 members. Members include people with different disabilities from across Northern Ireland (urban/rural) who have an interest in housing issues and can represent the views of people with disabilities within their community.

One member from the Disability Forum sits on the Central Housing Forum which provides a bottom up top down communication mechanism.

An annual action plan is drawn up and the outputs reported on. All updated policies have an addendum Customer Impact Statement on which the Disability Forum are consulted on through their representative on the Central Housing Forum. The NIHE carry out Disability Awareness Training with all staff.

9. Organisational Benefits

Involving disabled people should not be done out of duty or tokenism and the public authority should ensure that it is an inclusive process where people with different disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate and where the long term benefits of engagement are recognised and valued. This principle must be built into the culture of the organisation so that it is an inherent aspect of policy development. The following are identified potential benefits.

- Culture Change – an inclusive organisation that can welcome all service users
- Good business sense – economic benefits of listening to user experience which can deliver cost effective services
- Social Responsibility obligations achieved
- Legislative obligations fulfilled – Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Section 75 Northern Ireland Act 1998
- Top level commitment including a top down bottom up communication mechanism will ensure staff support. In return staff will buy in and produce an improved service delivery
- Meaningful engagement – an outcome focus that demonstrates disabled peoples' views and knowledge is taken into account. It should not be about outputs

- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation – performance indicators that demonstrate disabled people have been listened to and valued; feedback on what has changed as a result of participation; informing future planning and training
- Information sharing between departments and units supporting business efficiency

10. NIHE Disability Forum Outcomes to date

- Developed a Workplan 2014-2015
- An audit of all District Offices accessibility is carried out every two years
- Designed and published a Tenants Manual (A manual to provide information for people with disabilities when looking to become a NIHE tenant)
- Emergency Planning - Winter 2012/13, 2013/14
- Useful Tips Guide for NIHE Staff in regard to people with disabilities

Focus Group Participation

- Disability Housing Design Panel
- Accessible Housing Register and questionnaire
- NIHE Website pilot test
- Automatic Doors Survey,
- Environmental Controls focus group,
- Department for Social Development Engagement Policy for Social Housing Providers

Consultations

The Forum has and will continue to respond to DSD/NIHE and any other relevant public authority consultations. To date the Forum has responded to:-

- NIHE Interdepartmental Review of Housing Allocation Services
- NIHE Proposed Changes to Key Aspects of the Housing Selection Schemes in Light of Welfare Reform
- NIHE Community Development Strategy
- DSD Consultation of Facing the Future Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland
- DSD Social Housing Reform Programme
- NIHE Equality Scheme Audit of Inequalities and Action
- NIHE Disability Action Plan

Conferences

- Local Government Staff Commission – presentation on NIHE Disability Forum as a modal of good practice
- Disability Action’s DDO 2006 Event for 11 New Councils – presentation on user involvement

Further information

Disability Action facilitates the NIHE Disability Forum further information can be obtained by contacting:

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