



Submission

Electoral Office
Consultation on
Revised Equality Action
Plan for 2022-2027

December 2022

homelessconnect.org

Homeless Connect Consultation Response to Electoral Office Consultation on Revised Equality Action Plan for 2022-2027

Introduction

1. Homeless Connect (previously known as Council for the Homeless NI) has been working to prevent and alleviate homelessness in Northern Ireland since 1983. As a membership body, we represent organisations working with people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless and provide direct support to service users through our projects.¹

2. We welcome the opportunity to make a submission on the draft Equality Action Plan for 2022-2027. The focus of this short submission is on the needs of people experiencing homelessness in terms of the electoral process.

Access to the Political Process for PEH

3. At the outset, it is important to be clear on the definition of homelessness in Northern Ireland. People experiencing homelessness are not only those who are sleeping rough. According to the Housing (NI) Order 1988, the group deemed to be homeless or threatened with homelessness extends to individuals who do not have accommodation available for occupation; have accommodation but it is not reasonable for them to continue to occupy it; and people who are likely to become homeless within twenty-eight days. This leads to a much wider group of people having homelessness status.

4. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) is the body which is statutorily required to respond to homelessness here. If an individual or family is found to be eligible; to be without accommodation which it is reasonable for them to occupy; in priority need; and found not to have made themselves intentionally homeless, the NIHE “shall secure accommodation” for their occupation.²

5. In 2021/2, 15,758 households presented to the Housing Executive as homeless while 10,135 were accepted as such.³ In May 2022, 8497 individuals were living in temporary accommodation funded by NIHE. This equates to around 0.45% of the population of NI.⁴ These statistics of course do not include individuals who may be without a home but who have not presented to NIHE such as those living in informal arrangements (for example ‘sofa surfing’). Consequently, it is highly likely that the numbers experiencing homelessness in practice will be higher than what these figures suggest.

6. Sadly, people experiencing homelessness are often marginalised and stigmatised by wider society. In terms of the political process, people in this situation can often face barriers to their participation. Some of these barriers can include not having an address; changing addresses on multiple occasions in a short space of time (e.g.,

whilst living in temporary accommodation); and viewing voting as a low priority in comparison to other challenges they are facing. This could involve for example finding suitable accommodation or managing healthcare appointments. Being able to participate in the political process through voting is a fundamental right of every citizen here and it is important that efforts are made to reduce and remove these barriers.

7. Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted into political engagement on the part of people experiencing homelessness around the world. To our knowledge, none have been conducted in Northern Ireland. However, lessons can be learned from some of the academic evidence from other jurisdictions.

8. We would draw the attention of the Electoral Office to a recently published article in the European Journal of Homelessness entitled “Does my Vote Matter? The Electoral Behaviour and Attitudes of People Experiencing Homelessness.”⁵ This recently published Australian study, funded by the Australian Electoral Commission, provides a range of valuable insights in to the engagement of people experiencing homelessness with the electoral process.

9. The study highlights the importance of ensuring people experiencing homelessness have access to voting. As the authors put it:

“Ensuring that all eligible voters, and particularly those experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation, can exercise their right to vote is vital for democratic legitimacy, political equality, and effective representation, as well as for empowering individuals and enhancing their sense of inclusion. Just as supportive housing contributes to meaningful material outcomes, so encouraging and enhancing the voting rights of electors experiencing homelessness should be viewed as an “optimistic mechanism to directly improve disadvantaged people’s lives.”⁶

10. The study identifies twelve factors which act as obstacles to people experiencing homelessness voting in elections:

“1. Not having much knowledge of or interest in elections/politics. 2. Believing voting was pointless or that there was no one worth voting for. 3. Seeing politicians as untrustworthy and self-interested. 4. Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place. 5. Believing that politicians don’t listen or care. 6. Not wanting their name on the electoral roll. 7. Finding voting too complicated or burdensome... 8. Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place. 9. Not having much knowledge of or interest in elections/politics. 10. Being unaware an election was taking place. 11. Forgetting to vote. 12. Isolation/feeling disconnected from society.”⁷

11. While this study was conducted in Australia, it seems highly likely to us that many of these factors would also be applicable to people experiencing homelessness here in NI. It is not our contention that the Electoral Office has responsibility for responding to all these factors. Indeed, in some cases it would be inappropriate for it to do so. However, we would submit that the electoral authorities in NI, including the Electoral Office, have a role to play regarding points 4, 6, 7 and 8. It would be our hope that the Action plan could play a constructive role in addressing some of the barriers people experiencing homelessness encounter regarding the electoral process.

Our recommendations

12. In light of the above, we would recommend the following regarding the draft Equality Action Plan for 2022-27:

- a. “Carry out research to identify sectors of the population with lower levels of registration and from that prioritise outreach programmes.” We would recommend that people experiencing homelessness are considered in this research as a particular group who are highly likely to have lower levels of registration. Indeed, ideally, a similar study to that conducted in Australia should be conducted in NI.
- b. “Develop a programme of work with the education and care sectors.” We would recommend that the homelessness sector be added to this action and the consequent performance measure be amended to include people experiencing homelessness.
- c. “Develop the website platform with a focus on security and accessibility.” We would recommend that the Electoral Office engages with the homelessness sector and people with lived experience of homelessness on how to make the website more accessible to people experiencing homelessness. At the time of writing, it is not straightforward to find relevant information on how to register to vote as a person experiencing homelessness. On the relevant page, Special Category Registration, the section for this group is entitled “register as a homeless person.” We would recommend that this language is amended to “Register as a person experiencing homelessness”- homelessness is something which a person experiences rather than being definitive of a person’s identity. We would further recommend that the title of the form be amended to reflect the point about the use of the term “homeless person” and to make it more accessible.

¹ ‘Homeless Connect’ is a registered charity in Northern Ireland (charity number 103325)

² The [Housing \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1988](#), Article 10 and 11, accessed 11 October 2022.

³ Department for Communities, [NI Housing Bulletin](#), 9 June 2022, table 2.4.

⁴ The 2021 Census results show that 1,903,175 individuals lived in Northern Ireland on the date the census was taken. See NISRA, “2021 Census”, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census>.

⁵ Veronica Coram, Jonathan Louth and Lisa Hill, “Does My Vote Matter? The Electoral Behaviour and Attitudes of People Experiencing Homelessness”, *European Journal of Homelessness*, Vol 16:2 2022, 47-71.

⁶ Coram et al, “Does my Vote Matter?” 54

⁷ Coram et al, “Does my Vote Matter?” 60.



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