



FEANTSA

What is FEANTSA?

It is an international network of homeless services from across Europe. At the moment it has about a hundred members in 30 countries. You can find out more on www.feantsa.org



Participation Toolkit

Redistributing the Power!



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Introduction

This document is a toolkit for organisations providing services for people who are homeless, and for the people that use those services. We hope that it can offer advice and ideas that could be useful in homeless services, in order for people experiencing homelessness to really get involved in decisions affecting services and how they operate. The idea is to look at what participation is and how you can make it work.

Participation is part of an evolution in ways of working: from doing things “to” people to doing things with people. In many countries it has become a politically sanctioned approach, although participation initially emerged as a reaction from people who were not happy with the old and accepted way of working. It still has this reactive element, even though now it is politically supported and in some cases even a funding necessity.

Homeless organisations across the EU have learned a lot from listening to their service users, and a lot of fresh ideas and experiences have come from new forms of service user involvement and organisation. This toolkit is an attempt to bring

together some of that experience as a resource for people who are just starting to get involved with participation.

We hope this document will be useful in homeless organisations right across Europe, so we will stick to general principles and approaches. The practical details and the legal framework will be different in different countries, so each organisation, and the people using it, need to find what works best for them.

We’ll try to answer four basic but important questions:

- **What is participation?**
- **Why do it?**
- **How do you go about it?**
- **How do you make it work?**

The people who have drawn up this toolkit are from different European countries and they have brought their experience together in a working group in FEANTSA. If you would like to get in touch with them, you will find contact details in the “More Advice” section at the end of the document.

What is participation?

Participation is a word and an idea that is used a lot in relation to all kinds of decision-making. It refers to how decisions are made and who is involved in making them – whether it is a high-level political decision or a smaller local decision, affecting only a small group of people.

Participation is becoming a big theme in the homeless sector, but people in the disability and mental health sectors and also social and youth sectors have also been talking about it for a long time. For example, in the mental health and disability sector, there has been a realisation that the opinions of people who are disabled or who have mental health problems have often been ignored. They were ignored because people felt they weren’t worth listening to, or because they weren’t able to make themselves heard. Decisions were taken about their lives and the care they should be given, over which they had no power and in which they had no say. This was an unfair and unacceptable situation, which people with disabilities and mental health problems have fought to change, often with the support of

their families and of people who work with them. Slowly a new way of working is emerging.

This new way of working is based around participation – participation of people in decisions that affect their daily lives and the services that they use. There are two main ideas behind it. The first idea is that people with mental health problems or disability have a right to have a say in how the services they use and the care they receive are set up. In fact, their say is really the most important one, as they are the ones who will actually be using the services. They also know better than anyone else what they really need from services. They should have the right to be a part of any discussion about them and their lives.

The second idea is that their situation makes it hard for people with a disability or with mental health problems to get involved, influence decisions and have a say in how things are run. They are faced with difficulties and barriers that other people don’t have to cope with.

4 What this means is, if you want to have real participation, you have to have change. You have to adapt the circumstances to suit the people you want to involve and the challenges that they have. The changes have to come within organisations and the way that they are run. Things have to open up so that people can get involved. You have to take away the barriers that are blocking them and you have to value their contribution. That's participation and it is also a more democratic way of working. When you decide to share out the possibilities of making decisions and you change the structures so that everyone can have a say, you are in fact sharing out the power. You are empowering people to have a say and change things – people that used to be powerless.

These are ideas that you can apply in relation to people who are experiencing homelessness, who can often feel powerless to affect things going on around them as well. We can use the experience of the mental health and disability sectors to see that homeless people can also be excluded from decision-making affecting their situation and the services that they use. This is undemocratic and to change this situ-

Why do it?

Getting participation off the ground can be difficult, even in an organization that is committed to the idea and principle. This is often not due to a lack of skills or ability among those involved but rather because there is a lack of clarity and shared understanding about what participation should achieve. For this reason, it is useful to examine the reasons why it is worth pursuing participation. These can be grouped under the following headings:

- > Democratic
- > Consumerist
- > Empowerment and personal development
- > Because you have to!

Democratic:

As was discussed in the previous section, participation is about recognising the right of people to be involved in decision-making that affects them. It is about operating in an open and democratic way. Respecting people's human rights is the principle that underpins participation. In homeless services, it can be about working to include and

“Not everybody who is using a homeless service will *want* to participate, or indeed believe that it is worth their while participating in the organisation. Before you can have participation, you need change.”

Brian Brady*

ation, you have to recognise that people who are homeless have the right to have a voice and have a say. Then you have to create the structures to make that voice heard. And finally you have to act on what is being said, because otherwise the whole thing is pointless.

Participation is a way of approaching things that you can apply and extend to society as a whole. Everyone should have the right to have a say in how things are run and all citizens should be included equally in society.

empower people who have found themselves marginalized and powerless. This is reason enough to do it, but there are practical benefits as well.

Consumerist:

The “consumerist” approach to provision of services is driven by the goal of improving the product – you could say this means taking a more business-like approach to the business of helping people. To improve the satisfaction of the customer, you have to take their views and needs into account. You change the product to make sure it corresponds to what users want and in this way ensure a better take-up. This is the business-like way of thinking about participation. Service provider organisa-

“Any service that does not keep in touch with the reactions and input on the client's part, will eventually become redundant.”

Danny Lescrauwaet*



tions report that where services are designed and provided in consultation with people who are homeless, they work better and people who are homeless are more likely to use them and get what they want from them.

Empowerment and personal development:

Those involved can get a lot from participation. It can be a good way to develop skills and self-confidence. It is good for people to be involved. They enjoy it and it can develop their skills and self-belief. It can be a source of new experiences and opportunities.

Because you have to!:

In some countries, promoting participation has been written into the law on how homeless and other social and healthcare services should operate. This is the case in coun-

tries like France and the Netherlands for example, where the structures for participation are actually laid down in the law. In other countries, public and private funders are increasingly making participation part of the criteria for funding of services. This may include involving service users in the conception and proofing of the funding application. So increasingly, services in the homeless sector find that participation is something that they have to do and they want to find the right way to make it a success.

So all in all, participation is way of ensuring that services in the homeless sector operate in an open way, that values the experience of the people that use them. By taking account of this experience, the quality and effectiveness of the services and the help that they offer people can be improved and so services can do their job more effectively.

How do you go about it?

Think Positive!

The task of changing how homeless services work, and creating new systems for including service users, can be a daunting one. People hardly know where to start. But an important part of starting off on the right foot is being in the right frame of mind. You need to think hard about the aims and motives of what you are doing. It is important to start off by recognising a clear bottom line: that people who are homeless and using services for homeless people have a valid and important role in decision-making affecting the services that they use. You need to remember that the aim of participation is to facilitate this contribution. This baseline will help participation to develop in the right way. Participation can be a slow process and it is important not to get carried away by the concept. It has to start from the issues that people are interested in changing and want to discuss. Participation often starts around immediate needs and gradually becomes more political. It's important to start with where the interest is.

In some countries in Europe, governments are pushing for good participation to develop in all sectors, including the homeless sector. This can be a very positive incentive for organisations to make progress in this area and participation has a real chance of succeeding where the obligation to engage with it, and resources to do so, have been made

a part of the framework that organisations work in. So, governmental support can be a help in moving things forward, but there are traps to be avoided as well. The problem can be when the government or responsible authority also tells you how to organise the participation and imposes the form. The danger is, that the pressure from the top and the formula to be observed can push organisations into going through the motions, without really engaging with participation or giving it enough thought. This "tick-box" approach is disappointing for service users because it feels like a token gesture and maybe even a waste of their time. So you have to bear in mind that all participation is not necessarily good.

Participation can have a lot of meanings and take different forms. Different ladders and tables have been created to illustrate the fact

“The way the institution operates – decision making channels, budgets etc. - needs to be made understandable and users have to be empowered, in order to have an actual impact”

Natalie Latour*

6 that user involvement can go from a situation where service users have very little influence, to one where they have real powers and responsibility. Diagrams showing different levels of involvement often try to highlight the danger of negative forms of participation, which could be manipulative or simply tokenistic. To avoid empty and token gestures, participation should be “user-led”. This means that the interests and concerns of the users of homeless services should be at the heart of the whole process.

Think practical!

You have to bear in mind that there is no one model for participation. You have to find the way yourself. You create the environment to make it work in your own service or organisation. The ideas and approaches we have been looking at have to be put into practical action. This action can take different forms. In the table below, we have outlined some examples of the ways that different levels of participation have been put into action in homeless services in Europe. It gives a useful first overview of the shape that participation can take in practice in homeless services – but it is far from a complete list! It brings together some ideas. These forms and structures for participation have been grouped together under the “Five Stances” that Groundswell has identified in their work on levels of participation.¹

Stance 1: Information :

Ensuring that people have the information that they need underpins all forms of participation and is important in itself.

Forms:

Informing service users

Process:

Information brochure for service users
Presentations at meetings

Stance 2: Consultation:

Consultation is about getting people’s opinions and feedback and taking account of it in action.

Forms:

Reacting to the wishes of service users

Consulting service users

Acting on the advice of service users

Process:

Complaints procedure

Measurement of needs and wishes service users – maybe by research/questionnaire

Service users advisory committee in a service

Stance 3: Deciding Together:

This means giving people a real say in decision-making and involving them in decision-making bodies.

Forms:

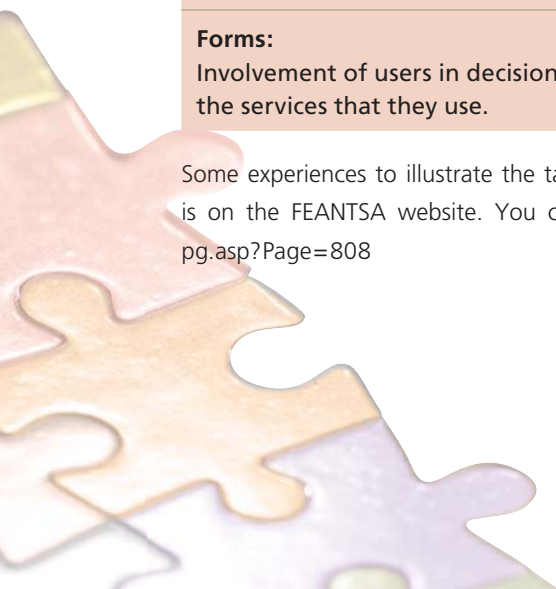
Involvement of users in decision-making affecting the services that they use.

Process:

Representative of service users in the board of a service

Some experiences to illustrate the table above can be found in the Participation Interesting Practice Compendium, which is on the FEANTSA website. You can find it here: Interesting Practice Compendium: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=808>

1 Groundswell UK : « Levels of Participation » available at www.groundswell.org.uk





Think Big!

This toolkit mainly looks at how homeless organisations can develop participation with the people who use their services, but participation can go a lot further than that. People who are homeless have organized their own networks in some countries and work directly with local and even national policy makers. For example, in Denmark a special advisory Council has been set up to work with the government. Five out of twelve of the members of the Council have all experienced social exclusion and different problems or situations such as homelessness, drug addiction, prostitution or mental health problems. They help to shape and set government social policies and priorities. In the Netherlands local authorities work with boards of people who are homeless and get their input into areas of policy. Examples of this kind of participation would include working with public authorities on issues like how services are organized, what the quality standards should be, how they should be monitored etc.

“I had an opportunity, as a person who in the past had been street homeless and a street drinker, to work alongside the Whittington and Homerton Patients Forums in their legal monitoring of the National Health System in the UK”

Jimmy Carlson*

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So really there are no limits to how far you can go with participation. It can open doors and lead to new activities. Participation has consequences for all kinds of decision-making. This wider understanding of the forms that participation can take, and the influence it can have, lead us to the last two stances of participation.

Stance 4: Acting Together

Acting together expresses the idea that service users don't just have a say in decisions, they are part of acting on them. It means working in partnership with other actors for change.

Forms:

Involvement in local decision-making

Involvement in national political processes

Process:

Local authority consultation and involvement of user boards and organisations

Creation of a specific users' body in order to involve it in national policy processes

Stance 5: Supporting Independent Initiatives

This means giving people a chance to develop and carry out their own plans

Forms:

Self-organisation of users

Process:

Action committee of homeless people

Again, it may be worth looking at the Interesting Practice Compendium in order to consult some experiences that illustrate stances 4 and 5 in table above. <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=808>

How do you make it work?

For people who are just starting off with participation, there is a lot to be said for learning from the experience of other organisations that have been down that road. In addition to staff learning from each other, clients from different projects can exchange and learn from each other on how to make it work. When you sit down and look at the experience across the board, some common approaches and findings do emerge. In order to make participation work, it is worth having a closer look at these. You can break them down into 4 steps over time.

Step 1: Getting to grips with the idea of participation

Starting off by having a real discussion and reflection session, on what participation is going to mean for everyone involved, is the best first step. As was mentioned above, it's about working out a shared understanding of what the value of participation will be. It is also a good chance for people to put their worries and reservations on the table so that these can be addressed. In some organisations they have found that it is a good idea for staff and service users to have these discussions separately, so that people really feel free to say what they think and feel about the whole thing. It can be helpful to have a discussion leader from outside the organisation who knows the area well. This person should try and help staff and service users to really get to the heart of the matter and to confront them with the challenges ahead. It can create a safe space for people to exchange. There is often fear and mistrust at the beginning of the process, for both staff and clients.

For staff: it is important to think about the full implications of really embracing a participatory way of working will be. It may mean having to shake up their perceptions of the people experiencing homelessness that they work with. It comes back to sharing out the power and committing to this. An independent facilitator can help staff to address their fears. Staff from other projects may also be able to help and support others who are new to the process. In some countries, umbrella organisations in the homeless sector offer courses to train their member organisations on getting started with participation.

“The view of users about the aims and functioning of the services often diverges quite a bit from the official aim and functioning (that is, the view of the staff and of the organisation as a whole.)”

Rene Kneip*

For service users: the discussion is a chance for service users to explore how they feel about participation. They can think about the contribution that they would like to make and how they would like to make it. It is a chance to look at areas of frustration and how communication can break down in services. Sometimes, at this stage, the fear and distrust can make people just focus on very immediate and uncontentious needs or issues (for example, the channels available on the TV) and the discussion can get stuck. It's normal, but it can be necessary to try and look beyond these. People can want to stay in the “safety zone” for discussion. By recognising it, you can get over it if you don't give up. By letting people discuss separately, you give a chance to explore their fears. You have to get through this phase and recognise it in order to move on. Examining and sharing views and making them a central part of the process is a good way of making sure it will be meaningful. The views of service users have to be taken on board so that participation can meet the needs and expectations of people experiencing homelessness who decide to get involved.

These discussions are the baseline for an action plan for participation that can be drawn up for the organisation on the basis of the needs, expectations and support of everyone who will be involved.

Step 2: Drawing up the action plan and taking practical decisions

A practical framework for participation is vital for the process to really work. Having a person in charge is a good way to ensure that things will keep moving, so if possible it is a good idea to have a staff member to lead and be responsible for participation. Ideally you should have one at every



level in the organisation. These participation “champions” at all levels then regularly meet and work together. You also have to have the resources to make it happen and this means freeing up time and money for the activities that people have agreed on for participation.

The action plan: after the discussion and reflection sessions, a clear set of actions must be identified to put participation into practice. In some organisations, the staff member who has been made responsible for participation takes the lead in deciding what these actions should be, on the basis of the discussions. In other organisations, they have chosen to have an action planning meeting between service users and staff to prepare the process. Their experience shows that it can be a good idea have these kinds of meetings in a neutral venue outside of services, with an external coordinator. To put people at their ease, you can establish “ground rules” at the beginning of the discussion, such as confidentiality and non-disclosure outside the group. This creates a respectful environment where people feel free to say what is on their mind. On this basis, it is possible to decide together what are the structures to be created and the actions to be undertaken.

If you would like to see an example of an action plan, you can find one in the St Mungo’s action strategy on participation which is available in the compendium on FEANTSA’s website. The St Mungo’s Document “Taking Us Seriously” outlines the process of developing a participation strategy and includes the action plan that the organisation drew up on page 16.

Step 3: Executing the action plan

Every homeless service has to take a decision on what kind of action suits it best. There are many different types of participation. The “participation audit”² undertaken in 2005 gives a good overview of the many different types of participation that exist among FEANTSA’s members in Europe. The present toolkit is also completed by an online compendium of interesting examples in the area of participation. It may be worth having a look at them for ideas.

Some pitfalls to be avoided:

Participation must not be used as a way of handing over individual responsibility to people for their own situation. This is a risk that has to be taken into account. The aim is not to assign blame or withdraw support, but rather to empower. There is also a big issue of costs when trying to get participation to work. Money is needed; and how to get it, and from whom, is a really big issue. The necessary resources have to be built into the budget. As was mentioned previously, in some countries the government finances participation, particularly where it is promoted within the legal framework. Getting this kind of recognition of the importance of participation from public authorities in your country will require lobbying and advocacy. It’s also about using participation to raise awareness so that change can follow. Public bodies can be valuable sources of funding, but the service and organisation also have to prioritise it in their budget. This also relates back to the “Consumerist” argument, made in the “Why Do It?” section – investing funds in participation is also a way of investing in improved and more effective services.

Don’t get discouraged and give up!

Organisations with experience in this area point out that it is important not to have overly high expectations at the beginning of this process. Getting participation going is often a slow and difficult thing. There are all kinds of barriers and obstacles. These will crop up over time and it won’t always be easy to overcome them. Service users may be dealing with different social and personal problems that can make it hard for them to engage with participation. Staff will also come face to face with barriers. They may be personal, administrative, ethical, or knowledge-based. The process of developing participation is a painful one, but it is worth pursuing.

“Many organisations warned that participation can be a struggle at first and that many service providers can feel that service users don’t want to participate and can be disappointed that the meetings are not an immediate success.”

FEANTSA*

² Available on FEANTSA’s website : <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/theme.asp?ID=34>

Peer facilitation :

Some organisations recommend developing what are called “peer facilitation schemes”. This means providing support and training for interested service users. They can then take the lead in participation activities among the user groups.

Feedback:

It is very important to make sure that service users who get involved in participation are kept well informed about the results it is having. It is vital that everyone can see the changes and actions that result from it. Not having any information about the impact of participation can be a major source of frustration and can lead people to give up on the whole thing. Even if the results are small or disappointing, it is important that there is good feedback so that service users feel informed about them.

Service User Burnout:

Service users can get very involved in participation and sometimes, this can lead to relapse or burnout, from not having the kind of support system that staff have (leave, supervision etc.). When service users are trying to do too much in the absence of support, they may set themselves up for a relapse into former problems (such as addiction). There can be a feeling of being constantly on call and having too much demand placed on them. There have to be support systems, similar to those available to staff. It is good to find ways that service users can also support each other, such as working together to define goals and maybe “peer supervision.”

Step 4: Evaluating and assimilating results of participation

To learn from your own experience, everyone needs to examine how they feel participation is working and have a look at the outcomes. In this way you can set priorities for improvement and try out different ways of working. The participation actions and structures will go through periods of renewal and change, but it is important to try and make them a real fundamental part of the organisation. The danger otherwise, is that it might become an initiative driven along by a few individuals. This is a potential pitfall, because when these individuals move on, participation may break down, leaving the organisation back at square one again. So, it is always good idea to review progress and to try out new ways of keeping participation going.

The short FEANTSA document entitled “Shared Values for Participation”³ is intended as an audit tool, as it lays out the baseline values for successful participation and possible indicators that they can be measured against. It may prove useful to consult this document, when evaluating your progress.

More advice?

FEANTSA has made a compendium of interesting examples and models from across Europe and it is worth consulting for ideas. You can read the compendium on FEANTSA’s website.

FEANTSA can also put you in touch with experienced organisations, who would be happy to talk to you about participation.

There are a growing number of service user-led organisations across Europe. FEANTSA is in the process of mapping them. It may be possible to get in touch with an organisation in your country or in a neighbouring country and learn from their experience in this area.

You can get in touch with FEANTSA by emailing us:

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FEANTSA Participation Working Group:

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Preben Brandt	Projekt Udenfor, Denmark
Simone Hellenen	Groundswell, United Kingdom
Wolfgang Jeckel	Bundes Betroffene Initiative, Germany

³ The audit tool “Shared Values for Participation” is available on FEANTSA’s website at: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/theme.asp?ID=34>



*The Quotations:

Brian Brady: is a member of the board of directors of Dublin Simon Community. He is a former service user and had a long experience of homelessness. This quote is from the article "My Experience on the Board of Directors of Dublin Simon Community" in the FEANTSA magazine, Autumn 2006 available here:

<http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=35>

Danny Lescauwaet: is the director of the regional network of homeless organisations in Flanders, Belgium. He has been involved in developing participation in the homeless sector there. This quote is from the article "Why is client participation in welfare services a problem?" in the FEANTSA magazine, Autumn 2006 available here: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=35>

Natalie Latour: works in the French national umbrella organisation of homeless organisations. In France, participation in the social sector was written into the law in 2002, so there have been a lot of efforts to develop this work. The homeless umbrella organisation FNARS works to support its members in this process with meetings, advice, guidelines etc. This quote is from the article "User organisation: A right in the making" in the FEANTSA magazine, Autumn 2006 available here:

<http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=35>

Jimmy Carlson: is based in London, where he is a volunteer with Groundswell UK, an NGO that encourages and support participation of people who are homeless. He has been involved in several initiatives, including exchanges of people who are homeless and the "Listening to Homeless People" project to make the NHS more responsive to the needs of homeless people. This quote is taken from a presentation made by Jimmy on his experience of being involved in that project.

Rene Kneip: is the director of Caritas Luxembourg and has been involved in developing participation in the network there. He took part in the participation audit of some of FEANTSA's members in 2005 and this quote is taken from that report. You can read the participation audit on FEANTSA's website here:

<http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/theme.asp?ID=34>

FEANTSA: is the European Federation of National Organisations working with People who are Homeless. It is a European network with over 100 members in 30 countries. This quote is taken from the participation audit carried out by FEANTSA and UK organisation Off the Streets and Into Work in 2005. You can read it here: <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/theme.asp?ID=34>

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