

The Electoral Commission Draft Research Programme 2024-2026 Submission

“The formal, universal right to vote is a minimum condition for democracy but not a *sufficient* one if we wish to properly satisfy the procedural values of democratic equality, inclusivity, and therefore legitimacy. Accordingly, it is important that everyone actually *exercises* their right to vote. High rates of electoral inclusivity and participation are vital to legitimise, not only election processes and outcomes, but also the authority of governments.”¹

The Importance of Including People Experiencing Homelessness in the Electoral Commission’s Research Activities

The Simon Communities of Ireland welcome the opportunity to make a written submission on the Draft Research Programme 2024-2026 to the Electoral Commission.

Simon Communities of Ireland recognizes the positive changes made to the voter registration process in recent years. This welcome reform has notably increased accessibility, making it easier for individuals experiencing homelessness to register to vote.

We note that the Electoral Commission has been entrusted to safeguard and strengthen democracy in areas such as voter education, research, promoting democratic participation and ensuring electoral integrity. Given the Commission's core value of inclusivity and fairness, and its priority to develop new channels for under-reached groups to participate more fully in Ireland’s democratic process, Simon Communities of Ireland highlight the importance of including people experiencing homelessness as a group which is often under-served and under-represented. International evidence, although relatively limited, suggests that people experiencing homelessness have much lower rates of political participation than the general population. When certain groups do not vote, their unique experiences and perspectives is lost to the political system and their alienation from politics is increased.

Frontline services in the homelessness sector and some local authorities do implemented initiatives to facilitate the involvement of service users in the democratic process. However, these efforts can lack a coordinated approach that offer opportunities for shared learning and improvement. This approach could also give rise to legitimate questions around the power imbalances that can be perceived between service users and service providers. The Electoral Commission taking a directive

¹ Coram, Louth, and Hill (2022) Does My Vote Matter? The Electoral Behaviour and Attitudes of People Experiencing Homelessness. Available at:

https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2022/EJH_16-2/EJH_16-2_A2.pdf

lead in this area would offer an opportunity for greater co-ordination, and opportunities for learning as well as ensuring robust protection of the integrity of the electoral system.

The establishment of the Commission and its research programme provides an opportunity to explore best practice in this area and enable and encourage people experiencing homelessness to participate more fully in democracy and electoral matters. The Commission has already outlined its focus on research which explores how to best support and increase engagement by groups such as the Travelling Community, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. Simon Communities of Ireland welcome that the Draft Research Programme mentions considering the topic of increasing political participation and electoral turnout by people experiencing homelessness.

Latest figures show that there is a record 13,514 men, women and children living in homeless emergency accommodation in Ireland.² We are experiencing a housing and homelessness crisis which is impacting more and more people each year. Therefore, Simon Communities of Ireland believe that this topic should be a matter of political engagement of this group and should be a priority for the Electoral Commission.

Prioritising this issue will ensure that into the future we will have a greater insight into the levels of political participation among the homeless population in Ireland and allow us to track progress in the area.

In conclusion, the Simon Communities of Ireland commends the Electoral Commission for its commitment to fostering inclusivity and strengthening democratic values in Ireland. The positive strides made in recent years which have eased access to voter registration for people experiencing homelessness are acknowledged, yet participation in the political system of those experiencing homelessness remains a challenge. The growing housing and homelessness crisis, affecting thousands of men, women and children across Ireland, highlights the importance of prioritising research and action on increasing political participation and electoral turnout by people experiencing homelessness. By ensuring the inclusion of homelessness data in the Commission's improved data collection efforts, we can collectively work towards a more equitable and informed democratic landscape.

About Simon Communities of Ireland

The Simon Communities support over 22,000 men, women, and children. We have 50 years of experience providing homeless, housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. We are a network of independent Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the Northwest, and the Southeast, responding to local needs and supported by a National Office in the areas of policy, research, and communications. We share common values and ethos in tackling homelessness and, informed by our grassroots services, we campaign for more effective policies and legislation regionally, nationally and at European level. Whatever the issue, Simon's door is always open for as long as we are needed. For more information, please visit www.simon.ie.

² Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2023) Homeless Report – November 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ed307-homeless-report-november-2023/>

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Services include:

- Homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment and resettlement.
- Street outreach, emergency accommodation and harm reduction. • Housing with support and Housing First services.
- Homeless specific health and wellbeing services (counselling; addiction treatment and recovery; and mental health supports).
- Personal development, education, training, and employment services.
- Foodbanks, drop-in centres, and soup runs.