

The Citizens' Summit on the Housing Emergency

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Executive Summary

Shelter is a national housing and homelessness charity that aims to defend people's right to a safe home. As well as offering advice and legal support, Shelter carries out research and policy work to understand people's housing problems and possible solutions. The charity also runs campaigns, both nationally and in communities, to make these solutions a reality.

Through its policy work Shelter has identified four key causes for what it terms England's 'housing emergency': the lack of social housing, insecure and unaffordable private rental homes, a lack of effective regulation of social and private landlords and a lack of rights. Shelter sees government action as central to solving the housing emergency. For Shelter, the next general election (which must take place by January 2025) is therefore a key opportunity to make change happen. Shelter wanted to work closely with people with lived experiences of the housing emergency to develop its manifesto for the general election campaign.

To inform the development of its manifesto Shelter commissioned NatCen's Centre for Deliberative Research (CDR) to deliver a citizens' summit on the housing emergency. The summit had two main objectives:

- 1) **To identify an agreed set of principles to guide Shelter's general election campaign.** These principles set out a vision for a future where there is no housing emergency.
- 2) **To understand which policy solutions people with lived experience of the housing emergency want prioritised in Shelter's manifesto.** The proposed solutions were a combination of Shelter's existing solutions and solutions suggested by participants during the summit.

The two objectives work in tandem, with the principles demonstrating the overarching values and vision that participants want to guide housing policy, and the proposed policy solutions offering ways forward for realising that vision.

The solutions that participants were asked to prioritise were a combination of Shelter's existing policy options and further options suggested by participants during the summit. Shelter developed the policy solutions list by combining those presented by Shelter in session two with those suggested by participants in the same session. These were then collated by Shelter under four main solution clusters, which had more specific solutions within them.

The summit ran for fifteen hours across four sessions, three online and one face-to-face, between the 25th May and 17th June 2023. 75 people took part overall, but not everyone attended every session¹; 58 of those attended all four sessions and there were 66 people who participated in the final workshop. The summit was designed around the core principles of deliberation, providing people with the time, information, and conditions to engage with diverse viewpoints and to come to informed opinions about the housing emergency and what can be done to fix it.

All participants lived in either a social or privately rented home or temporary accommodation and had recent lived experience of the housing emergency (defined by Shelter as experience of at least one of the following issues: unaffordability of rent, homelessness, poor conditions, discrimination in housing, and insecure tenancies). The final sample reflected a range of demographics from across England and all participants lived in, or near to, Shelter's community hub areas.²

The first three sessions took place online and lasted three hours each. In these sessions, participants had the opportunity to share their own experiences of the housing emergency, as well as hear evidence from Shelter and other expert speakers on the causes, solutions, and barriers to solving it. The final session was a longer hybrid session, lasting five and-a-half hours, with the majority of participants meeting face-to-face in Birmingham, and some participants joining online. In this final session, participants were asked to review and agree a set of principles that would guide Shelter's manifesto. These principles were developed by NatCen based on analysis of participants' responses to a series of visioning exercises in previous sessions. They were also asked to prioritise what specific policy solutions should be included in Shelter's manifesto from a list of options that included both those developed by Shelter, and suggestions from participants in previous sessions.

This report draws upon data captured via transcripts of participant discussions, facilitator notes, participant contributions to a digital whiteboard tool, participant voting forms and a survey carried out by participants online after the first session. Our analysis sought to:

- Describe participants' experiences of the housing emergency and their views on its causes.
- Outline the final agreed principles that would guide Shelter's manifesto and participants' reasons for valuing these.
- Report participants' preferred policy solutions for responding to the housing emergency and the reasons for prioritising these options.

¹ This is partly due to medical emergencies or appointments that participants had, and partly due to some participants joining the research later in the process (this is detailed further below in the sampling and recruitment section).

² These are: Birmingham, Bristol, Devon – Plymouth, Dorset – Bournemouth, Lancashire – Blackburn, London, Greater Manchester, Merseyside – Liverpool, Norfolk – Norwich, North East – Newcastle, Sheffield.

Key findings

Experiences of the housing emergency

The summit began with Shelter presenting evidence on the nature and scale of the housing emergency, before participants moved to breakout discussions to discuss their own views and experiences of housing issues. People's testimonies highlighted the complex ways different housing issues intersect and interact with other parts of their lives. For example, those in poor living conditions often reported problems with landlord behaviour as well as impacts on their mental, physical, and financial well-being. Underpinning many of these experiences was a perceived power imbalance between tenants and landlords, which left participants feeling insecure in their homes and often powerless to improve their circumstances.

After discussing their experiences, participants shared what they viewed as the causes of the housing emergency. At a systemic level, participants identified the lack of access to truly affordable and secure housing, the lack of regulation to address the power dynamic between tenants and landlords, and the lack of political will amongst the government to prioritise housing.

Alongside identifying these causes, participants also explained what they felt was needed to overcome, in particular, the sense of powerlessness the housing emergency creates. They felt that empowering tenants was important, for example through the provision of accessible and effective information, advice, and resources to enable them greater choice and control in improving their circumstances.

Principles

Following sessions where Shelter and other experts presented material on the causes, barriers, and possible solutions to the housing emergency, participants were asked in session three to describe their vision for a future where there is no longer a housing emergency. Ahead of the final summit session, NatGen had analysed the responses to this exercise and drafted a set of principles that captured participants' views. This resulted in the following:

1. A home is a human right.
2. Home is the foundation of a secure society.
3. Home is fundamental to health and wellbeing.
4. Strengthen regulation, accountability, and enforcement.
5. Listen to communities and act!

In the final session, participants broadly agreed that these principles reflected their views on what values should guide Shelter's manifesto. The first three principles resonated with people's experiences of insecure housing by highlighting the importance of a secure home in underpinning all other aspects of their lives. Principles four and five spoke to the powerlessness that participants felt, and the importance of empowering tenants in turn.

Participants also discussed the key definitions that underpin these principles, namely, 'basic needs', 'home' and 'secure'. Participants agreed that guaranteeing basic needs should drive housing policy, but there was some discussion between participants around what needs are 'basic' and what are 'non-essential'. 'Home' was consistently understood as not just the place people lived, but its proximity to support networks that enable them to feel secure. A 'secure' home was consistently understood as long-term and the basis of good health and wellbeing, with some participants also linking it to safety in the local area.

Policy solutions

In the final session of the summit, Shelter presented participants with 24 different possible policy solutions to the housing emergency. From this list, participants were asked to prioritise three as 'must have' and three as 'nice to have' that they wanted included in the Shelter manifesto. All 24 solutions received some votes, which suggests participants believed there was a range of important responses to the complexity of the problems they were aimed at addressing. The solutions with the most 'must have' votes all spoke to the need to guarantee secure, truly affordable housing for all (not surprisingly reflecting the agreed principles) as well as to address the power imbalance expressed by participants at the start of the summit.

Two policy solutions, however, emerged as clear priorities: investing in building new social homes and introducing rent increase caps. Investing in building social homes was seen to address the systemic issue of supply through a sustainable, long-term solution that provides secure homes to people in housing need. Participants also interpreted this option as making truly affordable housing available to a wide range of people. Introducing rent increase caps were seen as an immediate solution to the issue of affordability, while working within the private housing market. Our analysis identified four ideas shaping people's priorities here. These build upon the agreed principles and shared experiences:

- **The right to a permanent, truly affordable home:** Participants prioritised solutions that they felt guaranteed people access to secure and permanent homes (by 'affordable' participants meant accessible to those on low incomes, rather than specifically access to homes provided under the government's 'Affordable Homes Programme').
- **Addressing power dynamics:** Other solutions were selected because they were seen to tackle power dynamics and empower tenants, reflecting the lived experience of many participants.
- **Helping those most in need or most harmed by the housing emergency:** Some participants selected solutions because they were seen to guarantee homes for those worst affected by the housing emergency, specifically those experiencing homelessness or a risk of this, and those facing discrimination, particularly on the basis of race.

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- **Timescales:** Participants wanted a focus on solutions that address systemic issues in the long-term, responding to these issues in ways that offered genuinely sustainable solutions. Shorter-term solutions were a focus for participants when these addressed immediate issues and concerns.

The summit has generated both principles and priorities that speak to people's experiences of the housing emergency, what they want to underpin Shelter's manifesto, and what they believe are the specific solutions to the housing emergency.

"I think it's good to have the voice of people that have lived through experiences [of the housing emergency] and everyone on this table has different experiences. However, they're all relevant to what may appear in the manifesto. So, the more people and different types of people that can get involved I think the better understanding higher up, because there's no point them creating things without actual real lived experiences."

– Birmingham participant

