SHELTER

Learning Out Loud: reflections on adopting an Anti-Racist, Peer-Led Research Approach

June 2025

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Background and Purpose

This work would not have been possible without the collaboration of peer researchers with lived experience

Purpose of this guide

In 2024, Shelter undertook its first explicitly anti-racist, peer-led research project. Over 18 months, we collaborated with peer researchers to explore access to social housing for Black and People of Colour in England. This marked Shelter's The journey has not been without its challenges and limitations, but centring inclusivity and equity has enriched both the process and its outcomes.

This document aims to openly share our insights, and learning from adopting anti-racist, peer-led research and deliberative policy model. This document reflects that complex journey. We share it not as a model or finished product, but as an account of what we tried, and what we learned. We are early in this work, and this process raised questions we are still grappling with—particularly around how our structures, leadership, and ways of working must change to genuinely align with anti-racist practice.

By documenting this work, we hope to contribute to a growing body of sector-wide learning about what it takes to do peer-led and anti-racist research with integrity. We offer this document as a springboard for collaboration: to learn from others' expertise, to support organisations exploring similar approaches, and to help foster a wider culture of critical reflection, accountability, and collective growth.

This work would not have been possible without the collaboration of peer researchers with lived experience, Power With (a specialist lived experience involvement agency), Stakeholder Advisory Group members, Shelter's research and policy teams, and others across the organisation who supported and challenged the process.

Background

Shelter was established as a social justice organisation and we realised that there is no social justice without racial justice. This research project emerged from Shelter's 2020 commitment to becoming an anti-racist organisation and putting racial equity at the centre of our work. Shelter's 2025-2029 strategic plan includes both "Demand and secure a new generation of social homes" and "put anti-racism, equity and inclusion at the centre of our decision-making". This project responds to both goals.

Background

A growing body of evidence shows that the housing emergency disproportionately affects People of Colour, yet there were significant gaps in Shelter's understanding of how systemic racism shapes their access to social housing. The research aimed to increase awareness and understanding of historical and contemporary racial discrimination in access to social housing among relevant stakeholders. This included housing authorities, policymakers and the broader community of Shelter supporters and the public. Specifically we aimed to:

- Describe how **historical** national and local authority social housing allocation policies contributed to and/or created racial inequalities in access to decent and suitable social housing.

- Explore whether features of **current** national and local authority social housing allocation policies contribute to racial inequalities in access to decent and suitable social housing.

- Explore the ways in which the **design, affordability/rental costs and provision of social housing** might produce discriminatory outcomes for POC

- Explore the impact of **frontline local authority practices** around allocating social housing or experiences of services for People of Colour
- Describe the impact of unequal access to social housing for POC drawing on **secondary sources.**
- Conduct **co-produced research with People of Colour**, and/or organisations representing POC, who have lived experience of homelessness or unfit housing, or experience of social housing (whether that is living in social housing or applying for it)
- Develop **recommendations** based on the insights gained from our research in consultation with stakeholders and people with lived experience

Shelter's Anti-Racist Principles
The anti-racist principles are six concepts that have guided research practice across and ways of working across the various project cycles. These principles were formed by a previous Anti-racism steering group which included representatives from directorates across Shelter and Colleagues of Colour. The visibility of these principles of these principles in Shelter more widely is currently a live discussion, but have been instrumental in shaping the current research project.

The social research sector has and continues to be shaped by White racial frames that privilege whiteness and marginalise People of Colour. This often reinforced by traditional and positivist methodologies that privilege Eurocentric or 'objective' forms of knowledge. The project aim has been to embrace alternative research methodologies and centre the knowledge and experience of Black and People of Colour. The document will include details of where we have embedded anti-racism and tried to do things differently and importantly, where there have been gaps in our approach.

TRANSPARENT
We share power, are transparent and accountable in decision-making, processes, actions and systems

AMPLIFYING
We centre marginalised voices and lived experience

COURAGEOUS
We do what's right, not easy. We challenge each other and ourselves

LEARNING
We provide safety, space and time for growth and continuous improvement

OPTIMISTIC
We identify how we can change things for the better rather than default to how we have always done things

INTERSECTIONAL
We recognise racism intersects with other structures of oppression and adopt an intersectional anti-racist lens across our work

Note on Language

The language used to describe one's 'race' or racial identity is therefore inherently fluid, subjective and deeply personal. Language also evolves over time, so terms used at one point might not feel comfortable at another point.

This section presents key terms used throughout the document, detailing the roles experiences, and methods that informed and shaped the research.

Defining the terms

Anti-racism - the proactive dismantling of systemic racism and racist policies underpinning the white privileged society in which we exist. It addresses the specific harm and impact of racism on all racially marginalised communities and proposes equality of outcome, not just opportunity.

Barriers to accessing social housing – institutional or systemic obstacles, practices, or policies that unintentionally or deliberately exclude certain individuals from accessing social housing (in no way is the barrier a shortcoming of the individual themselves).

Co-design – an approach involving a collaboration between lived and learned expertise in designing outputs or solutions (designing with, rather than designing for).

Lived experience - first-hand experience of systems/situations, especially when these give the person knowledge or understanding that people who have only heard about such experiences do not have i.e. lived experience of homelessness or social housing.

Peer Researcher- use their lived experience and understanding of a social or geographical community to help generate information about their peers for research purposes. They may be involved in assisting with research design, developing research tools, collecting and analysing data, or writing up and disseminating findings.

People of Colour - used to refer to anyone who does not identify as 'White'.
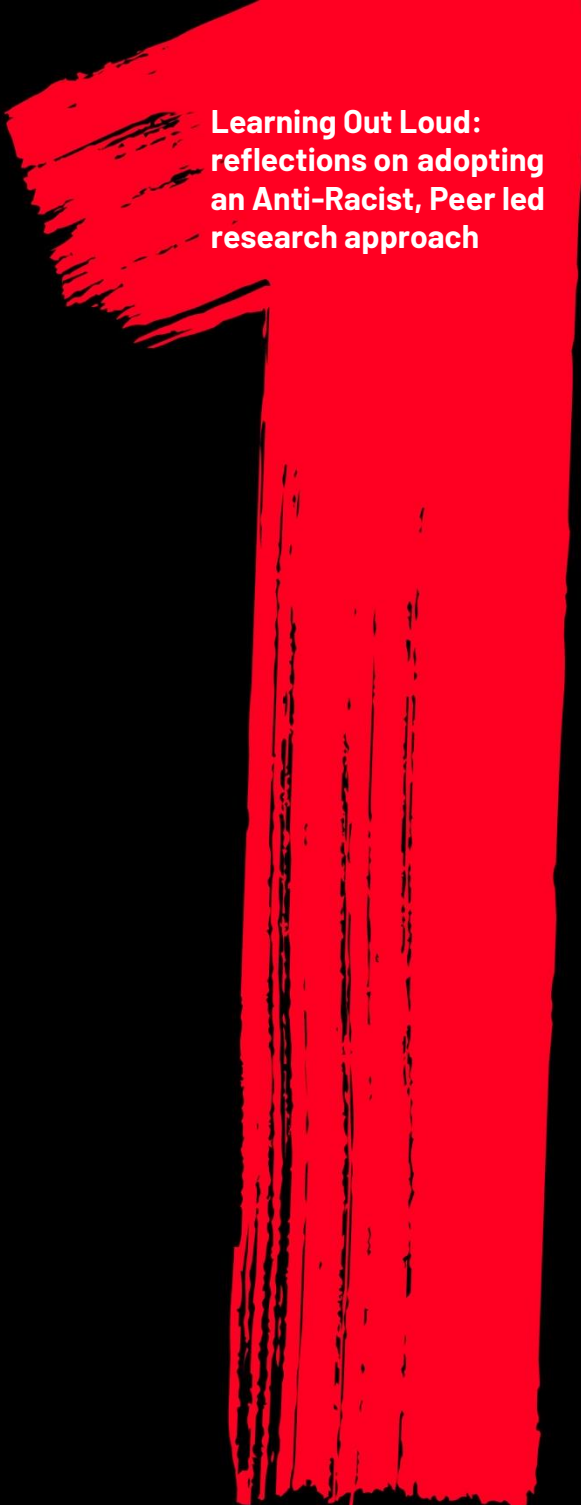
Photovoice – a visual qualitative research method that involves participants using photography and storytelling to document and share their or others' experiences. This approach is particularly effective for highlighting the perspectives of marginalised or underserved groups.

Racism - the oppression, discrimination, marginalisation, fear, hate and/or prejudice faced by racialised groups, based on a socially constructed hierarchy that privileges and prioritises White people. Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalises racial inequities.

Social housing - these homes have rents linked to local incomes and provide an affordable, secure housing option for people across the country.

The following acronym will be used:
B/BMH = Black and Black Mixed heritage

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Lived Experience Consultation

Lived experience consultation

To refine the research aims and methodology, we consulted 11 People of Colour with lived experience of challenges accessing social housing and advice services. This informed the research questions, methodology, themes to explore, community engagement approach and ethical considerations, while also helping identify and address barriers to participation. A central goal of the consultation was to reflect on how to make the research inclusive, safe, and empowering for diverse racialised communities.

Activities included presentations, breakout discussions and creative exercises, informed by project context shared by the facilitators. Participants explored the historical and current context of social housing policy and how these intersect with racial inequality.

We held a group workshop and four one-to-one conversations. The group workshop allowed participants to respond and build on different viewpoints, reduced the pressure on any one person to contribute and increased the number of different demographic groups we were able to consult. The one-to-one conversations ensured accessibility and inclusion with individuals who were unable to attend the workshop or who had additional language and communication needs.

Ways we embedded anti-racism
Consulting People of Colour with lived experience about the research aims and methodology was an intentional move away from traditional, top-down decision-making.

Reflections on our approach
The workshops provided rich, nuanced insights that were crucial in shaping the research approach, particularly around systemic racism, deep-rooted institutional mistrust, and the risks of homogenising language. Participants told us they felt valued and able to meaningfully contribute to the research design.

Participants found research objectives abstract and difficult to absorb in a short workshop.

Participants were eager to share their experiences and a flexible agenda led to unexpected and valuable insights. Reactions to the use of statistics were mixed—some valued their impact, while others cautioned against prioritising data over lived experience. Technical barriers, such as slides not being readable on phones or difficulties accessing platforms like Zoom, caused frustration.

Recommendations for future projects
Offer training and resources: Such as systems thinking or relevant policy topics, to support people to connect personal experiences with broader research aims. Simple pre-readings can support different learning styles to engage in the workshop.

Structure matters: Hold separate sessions focused on different aspects (e.g. research aims, methods, recruitment) to allow for deeper, more considered contributions.

Set clear expectations: Be transparent about people with lived experience's role in decision making (informed, consulted, co-deciding or leading) and who the final decision maker is. When people with lived experience provide insights, but those suggestions aren't taken forward, clear reasoning should be provided. If plans are already finalised and feedback won't meaningfully influence direction, it's better to avoid tokenistic consultation.

Reduce reliance on visual materials: So participants can effectively engage, particularly on mobiles, prioritise open discussion and share information verbally, or in pre-readings, rather than by PowerPoint.

Build digital confidence and access: To reduce risk of challenges accessing technology such as Zoom and Teams, offer a short pre-meeting or Q&A session to help participants feel more confident and able to fully take part.

Establish forums for lived experience input to strategic decisions: build sustained relationships over the longer-term so people with lived experience can understand the organisation's goals and have the knowledge to meaningfully inform strategic decisions.

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Literature review

At the start of the project, a literature review was conducted to uncover existing evidence on the impact of social housing policy on People of Colour. This helped refine the research scope, ensuring we avoided duplication and focused on addressing key gaps. We identified 46 unique and relevant sources, including academic and grey literature from third sector organisations and thinktanks.

People from teams across Shelter collaborated to review each source and extract key information e.g. findings, methodology, limitations. The extraction template was iterative and expanded in line with researchers' suggestions. This information formed the basis of the written literature review, which four people co-wrote.

Alongside, a review of the policy and legislative framework overing allocation of social homes was completed. This was informed by policy and legal colleagues, outlining how social housing allocations has changed over time and any equalities issues the potentially exist in the current allocations framework. This shaped the literature we sought out and gave context on the literature review findings.

Ways we embedded anti-racism
We established specific criteria to adhere to an anti-racist approach to the literature review. Unless of exceptional relevance to the study, all sources centred the voices and/or experiences of People of Colour either in authorship or methodology – this might be a participatory qualitative piece, or a quantitative analysis of ethnicity data.

Amplifying the voices of people with lived experience is one of Shelter's anti-racism principles. Through this approach, we wanted to avoid perpetuating the production of more research looking at People of Colour's experiences against " the sharp white background of academia" i.e. produced by white researchers often working within predominately white academic institutions[1].

Our collaborative approach was also intentionally transparent. We aimed to reduce the impact of researcher bias by involving many voices in reviewing the literature and drafting the review. Non-researchers were given basic training in literature reviewing and a detailed task overview.

The policy and legislative review intentionally looked at changes over time, rooting our literature review and primary research in a wider historical and systemic understanding of racial inequalities. This recognised that modern day inequalities in housing outcomes are shaped, in part, by historic policy and legislative decisions.

Reflections on our approach
Adopting a collaborative approach to the literature review enriched our interpretation of sources by incorporating diverse perspectives, including those with lived experience of the housing emergency.
This approach required time and resource to build the confidence and capability of non-researchers.
Our approach was iterative and exploratory. While the inclusion of literature centring People of Colour is not new, there is not a standardised approach to literature reviews that centres anti-racism. We found it challenging not only to determine whether authors met our inclusion criteria, but also to navigate broader gaps in the literature — specifically, the limited number of studies led by People of Colour or designed to centre their perspectives.

Our review was limited to written reports, accessed online, which felt out of step with the visual nature of the photovoice methodology subsequently used.

[1] Johnson, A, 2020. Throwing our bodies against the white background of academia. Area

Recommendations for future projects
Lived experience enriches foundational outputs and facilitates skills exchange: Involving people with lived experience in literature reviews not only challenges blind spots and anchors the work in the realities of those most impacted. It also facilitates skills exchange and capacity building, strengthening research capabilities of those involved.

Literature reviews complement participatory research: Reviewing the existing evidence base is a vital step in participatory research, helping to contextualise lived experience within broader knowledge, and strengthening the rigour and coherence of co-produced insights. Importantly, as communities of colour are often over-researched, this is a sensitive approach to avoid redundancy.

Historical and political context matters: Exploring racialised and marginalised experiences through literature reviews helps surface the systemic, historical, and political backgrounds. This provides critical context that deepens the research.

Look beyond academic sources: Valuable knowledge often sits outside of peer-reviewed journals. Drawing from archives, community reports, oral histories, and other non-traditional sources builds a richer, more representative evidence base — particularly for marginalised groups whose voices may be underrepresented in academic literature.

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Peer Researcher set up

Promoting the Peer Research opportunity
The peer research was designed to involve Black and Black Mixed heritage people. This was shaped by several factors:

- **Evidence of need:** The data showed disproportionate rates of homelessness and temporary accommodation for Black-led households[2]. In addition, insights around discrimination in the allocation system were reported by community activists and in the literature, Black women with children and Somali communities[3,4]
- **Balancing breadth and depth:** Intentionally focussing on one 'group', rather than all communities of colour, recognised that racialised experiences are not homogenous. It offered recruitment feasibility, as Black people make up Shelter's second-largest client group.

We actively sought individuals with no formal research background who:

- Had shown an interest in or made efforts to access social housing (successfully or unsuccessfully) in Yorkshire and Humber, the East Midlands or London.
- Had experienced homelessness, or unfit or unsuitable housing situations (e.g., overcrowding, feeling unsafe in their home, living in poor conditions).

We promoted the opportunity through:

- Shelter's social media (Instagram Stories, LinkedIn)
- Local Shelter hubs and community partners
- Email outreach to former and current clients
- Email outreach to Power With's networks.

We initially selected 10 Peer Researchers. To account for dropouts, we subsequently brought on additional participants, bringing the total to 16. Power With a specialist lived experience agency, held screening calls to find out about each individual's experiences, check they were eligible to take part and answer questions about the project. These were informal and person-centred — focused on whether this felt like the right opportunity for each individual. Throughout we emphasised that participation was designed to be flexible, supportive, and optional.

Introduction and ongoing support
The project began with one-to-one inclusion and wellbeing calls with Power With to understand each Peer Researcher's access needs, preferred ways of working, self-care strategies and availability. This was to help manage and track their own wellbeing and to find out what support they needed from us.

This was followed by:

- A group induction online-session to give peer researchers a warm welcome to the project and connect them to the purpose of the project.
- An in-person film night social — an informal session designed to build early connection and lightly introduce the principles of storytelling and photovoice.

During the film night, a filmmaker shared a presentation on historical access to social housing for Black people and People of Colour and screened a short film exploring her father's story of forming a Black-led housing association. The talk underscored the importance of the topic area and was an inspiring way to kick off the project. We also enjoyed pizzas together after the film so that everyone had chance to get to know one other.

These early touchpoints helped establish a welcoming, collaborative atmosphere and introduced the project's purpose in a creative, engaging way.

[2] MHCLG, 2025, Tables on homelessness
[3] Mureithi, A., 2023. Somali families say they're being forced out of east London community.
[4]Fitzpatrick, S, Watts, B & McIntyre, J 2024, Taking a race and ethnicity lens to conceptualisations of homelessness in England. Heriot-Watt University

Following the initial sessions, Peer Researchers received:

- **A Peer Researcher Handbook** with practical information, key contacts and an overview of the project
- **Two half-day training sessions** covering the research approach (photovoice, peer interviewing, research ethics, safeguarding, confidentiality and support)

Group Agreement

In the first session, Peer Researchers co-created a Group Agreement to support a respectful, inclusive and safe working environment. This agreement reflected shared values around:

- Respect and active listening
- Confidentiality and care when sharing lived experience
- Non-judgemental curiosity and room for different perspectives
- Openness to learn and unlearn

Peer research workshops

Participation remained optional and flexible throughout. Peer Researchers were invited to join monthly workshops and undertake one or two independent research activities per month. They could opt in and out of activities depending on what felt right for them at the time. This included:
- Exploring personal and collective experiences of accessing a social home
- Developing and carrying out peer-led research methods
- Reflecting on findings and themes together

To increase access and engagement, we offered:

- **Tech support** (e.g. laptop or dongle loans) for the length of the project
- **Access to local Shelter hubs** if they needed a quiet space and tech support to join calls
- **Trauma-informed safeguarding protocols,** including a distress protocol and guidance for debriefing after emotionally challenging sessions
- Shorter catch up workshops for those unable to attend the group session
- **One-to-one** debriefs from Power With after each group workshop
- **Opportunity to meet in person and connect:** Theatre trip to see West End production 'Standing at Sky's Edge' exploring life on social housing estate in Sheffield over generations.

Vouchers

As a thank you for their time and expertise, Peer Researchers were offered £40 Love2Shop/Gift card Centre vouchers per research activity e.g. attending a workshop, capturing photovoice images and reflections.

We stated upfront that accepting vouchers might impact benefits or immigration status. Power With provided tailored guidance to help Peer Researchers make informed decisions based on their personal circumstances.

Where required, we also covered:

- **Travel expenses** for in-person sessions
- **Support for one another's wellbeing**
- **Childcare**
- **Access costs** e.g. a companion for the travel

Wider Project Set up and management

Monthly reflective sessions for Shelter staff were introduced to interrogate decisions around language, power dynamics, positionality and inclusive practice.

Feedback from Peer Researchers and colleagues was actively documented and, where possible, incorporated into research design, materials, and language used. Examples of this were adapting to the communication preferences of Peer Researchers and changing activities based on group needs/interests. Where suggestions couldn't be implemented, clear communication of that decision was provided to peer researchers.

To ensure that the wider insights, experiences, and expertise of the sector informed the research, we formed a Stakeholder Advisory Group. This brought together sector experts, academics, grassroots groups and charities.

The group reviewed research questions, peer research materials, and key findings from literature and policy reviews—helping us interrogate assumptions and adopt a more inclusive approach.

Ways we embedded anti-racism

In line with our intersectional anti-racist principle, we recruited a group of Peer Researchers from a diverse range of different backgrounds and experiences, including age, gender, location, migration status, and housing experiences. The case study approach proved effective in amplifying underrepresented voices while informing broader discussions on systemic racism in housing.

In line with critical reflexive research practice, regular reflective sessions gave team members time to pause and discuss ongoing work on the project.

Reflections on our approach

By centring Black and Black Mixed heritage communities, the research revealed nuanced, community-specific insights often missed in broader analyses. This focus encouraged meaningful dialogue about the importance of confronting and naming anti-Blackness. Being even more specific may have helped avoid generalising the experiences of Black and Black Mixed heritage people, particularly across factors such as ethnicity and migration background, but this would have made recruitment challenging.

Online survey forms were useful for gauging interest, but follow-up calls were essential to better understand participants' experiences, such as applying for social housing. Developing a group agreement early on and revisiting it at the start of each workshop helped establish an inclusive and safe space for collaboration.

However, too much information was shared at the onboarding stage, overwhelming some Peer Researchers. The project handbook was rarely used, suggesting it could be streamlined or reconsidered altogether.

The project also raised important questions about fair remuneration in peer research, including payment methods, voucher values and role categorisation. Providing access to devices for those who needed them was complex and time-consuming, delaying recruitment and causing participant's stress. Power With's involvement further strengthened the co-production by ensuring safe, meaningful participation.

Working with Power With also introduced the research team to a more reflexive, flexible and dynamic approach to facilitation — incorporating ongoing feedback from Peer Researchers and colleagues, adapting communication methods, and tailoring workshop activities based on group needs and interests.

Recommendations for future projects

Consider intersectionality in recruitment: Spread the word about the opportunity far and wide to generate interest from people with a range of lived experiences.

Plan for and mitigate participant dropout: Anticipate that some participants may need to withdraw and build flexibility into your approach. This could include over-recruiting, maintaining a reserve list, or designing the project to adapt to a smaller group if needed.

Dedicated capacity for wellbeing: Either through an internal role or external support (e.g. a freelancer or organisation like Power With). Ensure there is consistent and intentional space for wellbeing discussions. This is essential to enable safe, meaningful involvement of people with lived experience and to support high-quality co-production.

Invest in relationship-building beyond the research: Create space for informal connection, such as shared social activities. Moving beyond a transactional model builds trust and belonging.

Prioritise development opportunities from the start: Ask Peer Researchers what skills they want to build at the outset and make time for tailored development throughout the project. This supports personal growth and moves beyond a purely task-focused approach.

Offer expert, personalised advice to enable participants to make informed decisions about whether to accept vouchers: Either by having this expertise in the team or organising personalised advice from charities such as Citizens Advice. Remember that people's circumstances can change and this might mean new advice is needed.

Hold an in-person kick-off event: So group get to know each other from the start, particularly when most sessions are virtual. Having in-person touchpoints every 3-4 months helps build and maintain relationships.

Have a budget for additional support needs: This is vital for inclusive participation – people might need to bring a carer for support at an in-person meeting or stay in a hotel to limit travel in a day. This support can be the difference between someone being able to get involved or not.

Produce a robust, legally-reviewed lived experience payments policy: To reduce risks to participants and your organisation. Alternatively, conduct a legal 'deep dive' of the Peer Researcher role.

Embed reflective practice and feedback systems: Build in time for regular reflective practice across the project, including sessions that Peer Researchers are remunerated to attend. Establish clear internal and external feedback mechanisms, and ensure there is transparency around how feedback is used—or why it may not be implemented.

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Data collection and analysis of findings

Photovoice

Peer Researchers used photovoice to explore their lived experiences and the collective impact of racism on access to social housing for Black and Black Mixed heritage people.

A photography masterclass was delivered by Shelter's in-house video team to inspire ways to creatively tell their stories. This also helped Peer Researchers feel confident, supported and equipped to do photovoice research. Following the masterclass, a pilot photography task aimed to build Peer Researchers' confidence and test the approach before the full research began.

For ease, Peer Researchers could share their images and reflections via email or WhatsApp. Reflection logs or one-to-one catch ups provided additional context, nuance and thought behind each photo. This included explaining why the photo was chosen, how it related to racism and discrimination (including structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalised forms) and the emotions it evoked. Monthly group workshops were held to analyse and discuss the images, identify recurring themes, differences and deepen collective understanding of the issues raised.

Peer-led interviews

Peer Researchers then conducted 46 online interviews with B/BMH interview participants with experiences of trying to access social housing.

First, an interview topic guide was collaboratively produced. Members of the research team developed a draft topic guide based on the literature review and research objectives. This was refined by the wider research team before being shared with the project's stakeholder advisory group and Shelter's community services colleagues for feedback.

The draft guide was then reviewed in a workshop with Peer Researchers for clarity, relevance and whether it reflected the photovoice themes.

Peer Researchers were paired to conduct practice interviews, supported and facilitated by the research team. This built confidence and familiarity with the interview process and topic guide. Peer Researchers gave feedback from the practice interviews to refine the topic guide and this iteration continued throughout the interview process. For example, we had honest reflections on the need to add new questions, remove and reframe questions to ensure that we adequately explored the topic area.

Interview participants were selected predominantly through Shelter's client records. Other routes included community service colleagues, Peer Researchers' networks and external organisations across England.

Shelter's research team conducted screener calls to check eligibility to participate (e.g. had relevant lived experiences), ensure informed consent, assess accessibility needs and match participants with a Peer Researcher.

Shelter staff attended the beginning of all interviews to resolve IT issues and record the interview. To provide extra interview support and feedback, a Shelter research team member observed Peer Researchers' first interviews. All subsequent interviews were undertaken without a Shelter team member observing, unless the Peer Researcher requested additional support.

Debriefs with Peer Researchers after each interview focused on how the Peer Researcher found conducting the interview, identified any wellbeing or safeguarding concerns for them or the participant, and reflected on themes emerging from the discussions.

Analysis of findings

Data from reflection logs, workshop transcripts and interviews were analysed using software research tool Dovetail by Shelter's project team. A collaborative thematic analysis approach consisted of reviewing data, tagging key concepts, grouping similar ideas into themes and refining them in line with the research question.

Coding was shared across the team, with resources and peer support provided to ensure those without prior research experience were well-supported. Regular check in meetings helped maintain consistency, reflect on reflexivity and positionality, consider anti-racism principles in analysis and review emerging themes collectively.

The drafted themes were presented at a co-analysis workshop attended by Peer Researchers, Power With, and Shelter's Research and Policy colleagues. Through collaborative discussions, Peer Researchers refined the themes and added detail. We ended the day by collaboratively producing insights that responded to the research question.

Ways we embedded anti-racism

We used photovoice, a creative research methodology, to centre voices and experiences of People of Colour rather than defaulting to traditional research methods. The visual nature was intended to capture concepts and experiences that might be challenging to put into words. Peer-led interviews as opposed to traditional researcher-led methods was another way to centre and amplify perspectives of people with lived experience.

Inanalysis check ins, we reflected on anti-racist principles, by asking a range of questions about our expectations, theoretical preferences, and potential biases—particularly around Black and Black Mixed heritage people's experiences with social housing—and how these might shape our coding and interpretation.

We engaged people with expertise beyond Shelter's project team, including the Stakeholder Advisory Group, the Peer Researchers and colleagues across Shelter's community services, to shape the research tools such as the photovoice research question and interview guide.

Reflections on our approach

Combining photovoice and peer interviewing produced insights that were rich, layered and nuanced. Despite some initial nervousness around photovoice, Peer Researchers built confidence and found the process to be an interesting and novel way to reflect on, document, and convey their experiences, local contexts and broader social contexts of accessing social housing. Many experimented with different stylistic effects (e.g. black and white, montage, adding text to photos) and symbolism which added depth of meaning to the powerful images produced.

Photos captured by peer researchers played a crucial role in facilitating in-depth discussions and building collective understanding of the issues raised in the workshops. On reflection, more thought could have been given to treating these images as data in their own right, rather than primarily as illustrative tools to support dialogue e.g. through visual pattern analysis[5].

The peer-led interviews attracted strong interest and engagement, ran smoothly with consistent attendance and yielded high-quality data—testament to the effectiveness of the training provided and the impressive interviewing skills developed by the Peer Researchers. Involving Peer Researchers in topic guide design greatly improved the quality of the questions.

However, challenges around trust, particularly regarding disclosure of participants' immigration status, surfaced during screening calls and interviews with participants. These likely reflect broader concerns about institutional affiliation and perceived risks of disclosure. We adapted our approach to screener calls with participants to improve clarity and reassurance, but some hesitancy remained. This continues to prompt reflection on how to build trust in sensitive research with marginalised communities.

[5] Cleland, J. and MacLeod, A., 2021. The visual vernacular: embracing photographs in research. *Perspectives on medical education*, *10*(4), pp.230-237.

The amount of qualitative data and access issues with the software made it challenging to involve Peer Researchers in the coding process. While the co-analysis day was hugely valuable, this process felt more consultative compared to earlier stages of the project.

Recommendations for future projects
Invest time and capacity-building to support Peer Researchers in using new and creative methodologies: Ensure peer researchers have adequate training, practice opportunities, and support to build confidence, especially when using unfamiliar methods.

Provide access to quality equipment for photovoice projects: Good-quality cameras will mean consistent quality images, which is valuable for publication.

Use a phased approach when combining multiple methodologies: Stagger the training to avoid overwhelming lived experience experts and to allow time for reflection on how they are working.

Actively involve lived experience experts in data analysis and sensemaking: Co-analyse insights with Peer Researchers, to ensure findings are grounded in lived experience.

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Policy development

The policy development process involved two workshops with Peer Researchers and Stakeholder Advisory Group.

The first workshop, identifying core policy principles, organised participants into six groups, each focussing on a key research finding (Intergenerational experiences ; Government, policy and wider housing emergency; Experiences with Local authorities/housing associations; Coping strategies and resilience; Slippery discrimination; Experiences of migrants). The cross-cutting themes of anti-blackness and intersectionality were discussed throughout.

Between the two workshops, the policy team identified a series of common threads (e.g. Power sharing, B/BMH representation, choice, autonomy, eliminating anti-Blackness, good communication, physical and mental safety in a respective local authority's area and respect) from the first workshop discussions. These principles were organised into six 'buckets'. This helped structure the discussion in the second 'solutions' workshop.

In the second policy deliberative session, participants assessed the challenges and barriers in each 'bucket', then identified and prioritised top policy solutions.

The policy team then fine-tuned proposed solutions, grouped them into themes and worked with a Peer Researcher to finalise a list of recommendations. This was then presented back to Peer Researchers to amend and approve. Shelter's Policy team continued to welcome feedback and additional solutions were added to the list, including specifics on major development and regeneration.

Ways we embedded anti-racism
Peer Researchers and members of the Stakeholder Advisory Group took a lead in identifying core policy principles – the changes they wanted to see – and policy interventions – the recommendations to get there. Shelter staff facilitated and summarised the views of Peer Researchers and stakeholders, intentionally taking a backseat in the workshop discussions so the recommendations were peer-led.

Sharing expert evidence is a common part of deliberative process to ensure everyone has the same information when deliberating. The Stakeholder Advisory Group strongly felt that expert evidence risked exacerbating power dynamics in the space and risked Peer Researchers feeling less able to contribute. As a result, we ran the deliberations without this stage, relying on Peer Researchers lived experience and knowledge of the project.

Shelter's policy team actively took a backseat in the deliberations. This meant we were peer-led and the recommendations reflect the views of the Peer Researchers. It did mean that some policy analysis which we might usually do was deprioritised, to avoid filtering Peer Researchers' views. There may be ways to involve people with lived experience in more traditional policy analysis methods (such as root cause or SWOT analysis) so that both types of expertise inform our recommendations.

Recommendations for future projects
Focus on solutions from the start: often research projects can focus on problem diagnosis, which risks being re-traumatising. Making detailed policy development a central aim of the project may be more hopeful and positive for participants, and develops different skills.

Go beyond recommendations: there are rarely quick fixes to systemic problems. While actionable recommendations are valuable, 'frameworks for change' which identify the deep shifts in mindset, understanding or approach that are required for sustained change, can help organisations or systems move from transactional to transformative activities.

Sharing lived and learned expertise: at its best, co-production enables people with lived experience and people with learned experience (for example, learned through work) to collaborate equally. Consider how you will manage power dynamics in these spaces and the tools, guidance and mindsets both groups need to effectively learn together.

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research approach

Report writing

Peer Researchers were invited to contribute to the final report by authoring their own section. The research team spoke individually to Peer Researchers to discuss their contribution and what they wanted to write about. The vast majority of peer researchers chose to write sections using their photovoice images, drawing on the themes these raised or other areas of personal interest, such as reflections on the peer research methodology.

To guide their writing, Peer Researchers were given templates with suggested word counts and prompts. These included questions on how to describe their photo(s), why key themes resonated with their experience, what they observed during interviews, and how their insights connected to the overarching research question. The drafted sections from Peer Researchers were reviewed by a member of the research team, with any edits approved by the Peer Researcher.

Ways we embedded anti-racism
At Shelter we have not previously involved people with lived experience in the analysis and report writing stages of research. By involving Peer Researchers as co-authors, we aimed to challenge dominant norms on who produces and holds authority in knowledge production.

Reflections on our approach
Having Peer Researchers as co-authors has been instrumental to the authenticity of the work. Building in additional feedback loops to review and refine their written sections once drafted helped foster ownership. This was described by Peer Researchers as rewarding and distinct from other lived experience projects they have done.

It also helped rebalance narrative power. Rather than findings being mediated by the research team or reduced to quotes, it tries to centre lived experience. This is especially important given the fact that the core research team was predominantly White.

[3] Fighting to end racism in housing | Shelter - YouTube

We still used a traditional research report format, which may have limited how Peer Researchers felt able to express themselves. As we continue this work, we will explore opportunities for Peer Researchers to get involved in other formats, such as videos[3] or blogs.

Recommendations for future projects
Create space and flexibility for Peer Researchers to contribute to report writing: Offer opportunities for peer researchers to write/co-write sections of the report, with choice over what and how they contribute. Writing prompts can be inspired by their previous contributions.

Preserve individual voice and resist over-editing contributions: Support Peer Researchers to write in their own tone and style, rather than your organisation's in-house style, and avoid excessive 'polishing' that flattens distinct voices. This challenges norms around professionalism and neutrality, and affirms lived experience as valid and powerful knowledge.

We exist to defend the right to a safe home and fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on people and society.

We do this with campaigns, advice and support – and we never give up. We believe that home is everything.

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