



From House to Home

Oral History Toolkit: A How-To and Resource Guide

Social and affordable housing contributes to people's quality of life and well-being. Let us record the stories and narratives that encapsulate the lived experience in community based habitation.

This guide serves as a toolkit for the international, social housing community in order to contribute to the oral history project that began with the International Social Housing Festival in Dublin, Ireland in June 2025. We invite all who intend to create an oral history project or are curious about how to use oral histories in order to document the lived life in social housing.

There are a number of guides available for conducting oral histories available online. Please feel free to explore such resources if you wish to expand your work in this area. For this guide, we have attempted to provide the essential, necessary basics to begin the work!

Accessibility is our number one concern and we will support the use of equipment that is easily at hand for many people, the smartphone. As technology continues to develop the quality of smartphone recorders and cameras have greatly improved. The interviews that began this project in Dublin were recorded on an **iPhone 15**.

Why Are Oral Histories Important for Social Housing?

A quote that is often used at the moment is ‘**Nothing about us without us!**’

There is the Irish proverb; *Bíonn siúlach scéalach* - A walk is a story.

Many people feel they have nothing worthy of recording. Every life lived has a tale if not tales to tell.

This sentiment lies at the core of this project. The more voices we have documenting memories, stories and the way life will contribute to the necessary collective in promoting and celebrating what can be achieved in social and affordable housing. Let us hear these narratives with the tenants’ own words. We are interested in any aspect of the lived experience in social & affordable housing.

But many may find it difficult to begin the necessary conversations in order to direct their interviews. There are a number of suggested topics below to help you begin the discussions.

Topics to consider:

Physical descriptions of the home.

How did your family use the space provided?

How has the community shaped and changed over time?

Is life different today than it was in the past?

Livelihoods, household supports, trades & occupations?

Social clubs in the present and from the past. (Boxing & other sporting clubs)

Food & drink (typical meals in the everyday and special events)

Festive occasions- what happened?

The practice of religions within the community

Education and the relationship and attitudes held within the community?

Marriages, births and deaths within the community?

Health and Illnesses?

Traditional codes of right and wrong?

Important events and people from the past that are remembered within the community?

Sports & pastimes such as card playing?

We define ourselves through story. Let us create a space to listen to those tales. These topics are a foundation for you to begin the conversation and discover the histories carried around inside of us.

Consent

Do not underestimate the importance of gaining informed consent with the people that you interview. At the core of this work is to hold every individual with the dignity and respect they truly deserve. This may appear to be somewhat scary. Do not worry. As long as everyone involved has agreed to take part and this has been documented.

This may appear to be over the top but it is absolutely essential. Dignity and respect is at the heart of every conversation.

Informed consent

Oral history operates within a context of informed consent which can be said to have been given if it is based upon a clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications, and future consequences of an action. In order to give informed consent, the individual concerned must have adequate reasoning faculties and be in possession of all relevant facts at the time consent is given. Impairments to reasoning and judgment which may make it impossible for someone to give informed consent include such factors as basic intellectual or emotional immaturity, severe [learning disability](#), severe [mental illness](#), [intoxication](#), severe [sleep deprivation](#), [dementia](#), or being in a [coma](#).

Oral historians need to focus not merely on gaining informed consent to enable the recording to begin, but should also inform participants about how the recording will be stored, preserved and used in the long-term, and how [confidentiality](#), where promised, will be maintained. To ensure that consent is informed, consent must be freely given with sufficient information provided on all aspects of participation and data use and reuse. There must be active communication between the parties. Consent must never be inferred from a non-response to a communication such as a letter.

It is important to recognise that this notion of ‘informed consent’ that has underpinned oral history ethical best practice (and much other research) is different from the GDPR definition of the term ‘consent’. Interviewees still need to be fully ‘informed’ about, agree to, and be able to withdraw from the process which they are participating in. This can be achieved by using a pre-interview participation agreement.

Consent is only one of the legal bases available under GDPR to legitimise the processing of personal data, such as the making, storage and use of an oral history interview. You should be certain of your legal basis before beginning the interview, and the interviewee should be informed of the basis on which the recording is being made. Note that the legal basis that you choose to use determines which of the individual’s rights and which exemptions may apply to the activity.

You should also be aware that, when relying on consent for the publication or dissemination of an archive recording, you will also need the consent of every person who is identifiable from the interview, not just the interviewee, and this may be prohibitively difficult.

If you do choose to use consent as your legal basis, one of the key changes under GDPR is that consent to the use of personal data must be active (no pre-ticked boxes), clear, affirmative and distinguishable from other matters, and provided in an intelligible and easily accessible form, using clear and plain language. Consent needs to cover both the holding of personal data and its further processing (use).¹

¹ The information on Informed Consent has been taken from <https://www.ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice/informed-consent/> [Accessed May 2025] We would like to acknowledge the help and advice the UK Oral History Society provides to the community of practice in oral history.

And the final note:

Please have fun with this; bringing people's stories together and hearing about each other's lives is wonderful. It may not always be easy but creating a space for our stories to sit can be very powerful. Life is beautiful and sharing our lived experiences allows us to capture the pain, the joy and the mundane all under this project.

Resources:

Oral history Network Ireland:

<https://oralhistorynetworkireland.ie/>

National Public Housing Museum in Chicago, IL:

<https://nphm.org/listen/oral-history-resources/>

Oral History Society, London, England:

<https://www.ohs.org.uk/looking-after-yourself/>

Clúid Housing in Ireland:

<https://www.cluid.ie/news-stories/the-elsie-black-oral-history-project/>

