

## Aspire & LEAF stories

Included in this document are the stories of 8 people involved in different ways in LEAF (Lived Experience Advisory Forum), which were collected by members of the LEAF and Aspire team using the Storytelling approach.

Storytelling is an evaluation methodology based on the Most Significant Change technique, which involves collecting stories from people about their experience of a project or area of focus, and then analysing these stories in a participatory way to understand what we can learn from them.

Members of the LEAF and Aspire team were trained by the Old Fire Station in using the methodology, including how to collect and edit stories and put the approach into practice. They then went on to collect stories from people involved in different ways in LEAF – staff, partners and members. They had conversations with these individuals (the storytellers) about their experiences and what had been significant for them. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited down into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller’s insights, while keeping their ‘voice’ in the story – telling it in their own words.

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Thank you to all of the wonderful Storytellers who shared their stories.

## 1. There is Hope

I've been involved with LEAF right from the beginning, right since we all sat down, about ten of us, in Little Clarendon Street. My role is about helping and nurturing the other members, getting them information and trying to make services better for the homeless. I've been through the homeless system. Not many people that you work with in these services understand, because they've probably got homes and jobs and that. It's good to put my view on homelessness, to pass on my experience. I feel valued.

I didn't think that helping others would also help me. But in the two years that LEAF has been going, it's benefited me a lot. I'm more confident speaking to people in authority. I'm more confident to say how I feel and to raise opinions. And if I don't agree with something, I'm better at saying so. In the past I would have buried my head in the sand. I'm 54 and like no one's listened to me before. But with LEAF, don't matter whether I'm saying something stupid, the other members listen to me. If I say something wrong, they tell me back. And I learn from it. They're always steering me in a good way. It's a sense of responsibility.

If I've got problems, I've got all the other members and staff to talk to. I think that's how my confidence has grown – being able to ask for help when it's needed, and not just shutting myself away. Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness. Before I joined LEAF, I thought it was. I wanted to do everything on my own, but it got too much for me. I realised that by going to meetings and sharing. There's the Women's Group on a Thursday, 11:00 to 1:00. Plus, there's lots of different activities too. If I didn't have LEAF to go to, I'd only be sat at home. And then probably that would be worse because then my depression would start. Sometimes I still get depression, so my home life I just forget and don't bother doing anything. But then again, if any member asked me to do something with LEAF, I'd jump at the chance! If I'm kept busy, I don't think so much. And then my depression don't happen. Plus, I'm on medication.

My ideal job would be a support worker for the homeless. It took me four years to get my own property because I kept messing up. I never learnt from it back then. But I've been in my property now nine years in May. I know I gotta do things on my own. But then again, I'm not on my own. I've got LEAF members to ask if I need advice. And if I can do it, anybody can. When I was in Simon House I quit drinking. Some homeless people got addictions so it's harder. But there is hope. I want to show people that life can get better. It does get better. It's just if you choose to want it to get better.

## 2. Momentum Energy Passion Desire

I had a few ex-colleagues who'd done similar work to what we now do at LEAF. One of them was in London, at Revolving Doors, and I'd attended one of their forums – this was around March 2019, and I'd seen the stuff that they'd been doing, involving people with lived experience and co-production. It gave me ideas. I was thinking about what was happening here in Oxford, and there wasn't really anything specifically for homelessness and Oxford. So I remember sitting down with my line manager and making it part of my appraisal objectives, saying that I'd like to build a set-up – a lived experience advisory forum in Oxford. I sort of set it as one of my goals.

I'd been speaking to other organisations, experts, citizens, to get an idea of how we could make it happen, but I wasn't sure in what format or what it was going to look like. There were quite a few meetings, we had to do a consultation before. We were sort of looking for the perfect answer as to how we could set up, but it got to the point where it was like, just get on with it. So in September 2019, we ran our very first forum. We just wanted to see how it would go. There was quite good attendance. It was a really nice day. We had quite a lot of people coming along who were keen to find out more, who wanted to get involved. At that time it wasn't even called LEAF. Folk were just calling it that because it was the acronym for Lived Experience Advisory Forum, and later everybody voted for sticking with LEAF as the name.

So it's launching, building up a bit of momentum, we'd been involved in this feasibility study, to see what the new homelessness system could look like. And then as that came in, boom, it was late March, lockdown, everything got moved online. Everything was Zoom. The group that we'd been working with before then, we were meeting them face to face, and it all just changed. It became a huge barrier for engagement – people couldn't log on, they hadn't got a laptop, it was a huge struggle. It was good for professionals, but I think that proved a really big struggle for us as well, as we tried to continue. But we did.

There was a lot of good will, a lot a good intentions, and a lot of new ways of working coming into that as well. The tricky one was in how you actually make sure that everybody from CEOs to commissioners, to managers, to people who have been in that situation – how can we all get together to see what actually is best? If somebody makes a decision about what you think's best for somebody else, it might not be right. What we've come up against along the way is that when you're doing something new, you've got to change cultures, like some of the language, for example. If you have two or three people that have never been in a board meeting, or a strategic meeting, and you bring them into that situation, people are speaking about all these acronyms, and at a certain pace. Some people might be absolutely fine with that, but if you've never done that before the experience isn't going to be positive. So then are you actually getting the best out of people, and is it fair? So then you're asking boards or leaders, 'How can you make that more inclusive?' Or, 'What changes are you willing to make to see people contributing in a way that's meaningful?' It's unearthed a lot of things.

You want to ensure that people are consulted and they're a part of it. You could say 'embed co-production', but what that actually looks like and the amount of change that needs to happen for it to be meaningful, is very difficult. That's what's been highlighted for me: the change was important, because it's important to listen to people, and people should be consulted, and people should be seen as equals. Lived experience should be as valued as professional experience, especially in this line of work. If you've stayed in a hostel for eight years, the insights that you've got, the failures that you've learned from, the insights around what actually has made you trust somebody, or want to work with somebody – all the insights are so valuable, but they're not always consulted, or made part of new projects and new commissioning, all that sort of stuff.

I don't think we've found the perfect way of doing it yet. But we get inspiration from a lot of other places, and we listen to their ideas. On a practical level, trying to really embed it is quite complicated. But I think everybody knows that it needs to happen. I just hope that this is the start. I've seen a bit of a domino effect from LEAF's early work, the impact driving co-production and working with partners. Like, it's mostly common within strategies now, and there's been more recruitment asking how you would embed or work closer with people within your service. People realise that they need to just ask. And it's not rocket science.

I think the only way you can really understand if a project is successful is if you've had people that went through the project tell you that it's been successful. Sometimes things operate in a way where people that are higher up decide on what outcome should be used to measure the impact of a project. But I think if you bring in people that have had that specific experience – like experiencing homelessness – if you've spent years in that situation, you've got so many insights, you've probably got ideas about what works. You get ideas around what you could do to improve it, just by involving people as much as you can in that process around consulting, asking, and working together. That was the whole idea.

What's been massive for me is just to see something that started as an idea, to then go on, really believing in it, banging on the doors, and having other people come in, and recognising that within the wider sector, a lot more people really wanted to do this type of work. Seeing that it was creating momentum and energy and passion and desire for a project which didn't exist, and seeing it sort of materialise and develop and grow into what it is today, from something that's really grassroots... It started right there, didn't have any funding. And look at where it's at now, working with loads of partners. It's working with the Homeless Alliance, it's working with the councils, it's working with researchers, all these different organisations and charities. It's been really nice to see that if there is a gap in provision or if there's a lack of something, if you've got the right people around you and the right amount of energy, then you can set up things that go on to influence change and make an impact. If there is a group that has a need or there's a lack within the system, instead of trying to make things fit, sometimes you can just bring in a new idea. And it can make a positive change. It's just amazing.

It's come with a huge amount of challenges, but I think the group, seeing their commitment, the energy that they've got and what everybody contributes, the ideas – that's what it's all about. It's then created a forum or a platform, opportunities for people to just be involved with something and have your say through this process as well. Sometimes you don't even notice it, because you've met people that have been in LEAF right from the start. But then when you hear their stories what the change has meant to them, it's like actually, *that's* what it's all about. We're looking at trying to embed co-production within the sector and saying, 'You need to listen to people with lived experience', and working with commissioners and all that, but when you've got people that feel part of something, and they've got development and growth through it, and it's built confidence and self-esteem, and it's given them purpose, a structure – all that stuff's what's most important. It's amazing, some of the people that have been involved, people have gone on to find jobs, to do other bits of training, people have suddenly become mentors, or gone onto other advisory boards and things like that as well. So I think it's capitalising on people's strengths and goals and what they want to achieve. Just slowly, like. It's slowly evolving and it's its own wee thing. It exists.

### 3. The Richness I've Taken

My involvement with LEAF started when Oxfordshire Homeless movement, two or three years ago, got different organisations coming together and talking about homelessness. I went as a service representative, and I was a bit of a pain in their side. They'd say, 'We've got all the experts around the table here'. And I'd say, 'That's not true. We've got experienced members of staff here, but where's the lived experience representation?' I just banged on about it. At the time it was probably quite an unpopular point of view. And then, lo and behold, that got through, and Oxfordshire Homeless Movement wanted to work in partnership with Gatehouse, where I'm CEO, and Aspire, in founding the LEAF - the Lived Experience Advisory Forum. So that's where my involvement started.

We've got probably about ten core members with lots of different backgrounds, and then different people coming in and out. For me it was about not just getting a forum together, but a forum that could influence change and sit at the same table with strategic decision makers and commissioners. And not only for LEAF's development, but also those professionals' development, and that service development, because you're getting somebody that's lived that life and a whole range of people. So it's not just one voice. What you want is a broad range of voices. Co-production should just become seamless, across every area of whatever service it is, whether it's a statutory service, whether it's a charity. So that's at trustee level, down to the ground and everything in between.

It's definitely beyond anything that I thought it would be, the partnership with Aspire, and also the Forum of members' ideas and development. Co-production is currently a kind of buzzword nationally. And I suspect it will become more common, as it should do. I've done a lot of it over the years. But I don't think we've ever got it on a strategic level in the way that we've got it now. Aspire have got this amazing ability to bring something to the table that the Gatehouse wouldn't necessarily, or wouldn't have time to develop. And the Gatehouse can bring something to the table, because we can talk to people that are currently, in real time experiencing it. So I've learnt loads from Aspire. I've learnt loads from LEAF members. I've learnt loads from professionals that I now talk to. I'm continuously learning, which is a beautiful thing.

The Gatehouse manages the LEAF coordinator, but we've not had a coordinator for about six to eight months. So I have been LEAF's Admin Assistant in the absence of a coordinator. I've been in the sector for 30 years. Because we didn't have a coordinator, it was my role to listen, *really* listen. And that is so powerful. Because if we're not stopping to ask the people whose interests we're trying to have at heart, how do we know what they actually want? Or if they don't have access to *you*? So it's been really nice to work as a team. I also had to strip away my CEO role at the Gatehouse and be aware that this is an independent group. And that I am in a position of power, if you like, so not to influence it, to steer it, but just to support it, to facilitate it. That's been interesting. Going back to the sort of frontline. To be honest, the Forum members would have recognised that it wasn't authentic a mile off. I'd never have got any buy-in if it wasn't, because you've got to be accepted on that group to facilitate it. And it's interesting as well, being held accountable, by people that weren't above me: not trustees or a line manager or things like that. Definitely humbling.

I am a lived experience CEO. So in that space, I kind of put my lived experience hat on. I still feel more comfortable in a forum of lived experience than I would in a forum of CEOs. It was the best hour of my month. So I always say to them, you know, 'Once I step back a little bit, I'll miss you more than you miss me.' But that's my role now. So I do need to step back, and let the LEAF coordinator flourish. I'll still be present sometimes. Because I think it's important, if I'm championing lived experience and co-production, that I actually have an understanding of what is going on, not just third-hand through a staff member. The most powerful tool you have is listening, because you've got all sorts of messages coming out of that. I think just I've just been learning again, around group

dynamics, the different skills, flavours, characters, passions in different areas people have – some around mental health, some around domestic violence, some around rough sleeping, some around the justice system and prison leavers.

It humbled me, for sure. I've learnt that what was my idea, originally, is somebody else's now. It's not something that I or the other founders have conjured up. It has a life of its own now. I came into it with the idea that there would be a forever changing group of individuals that have the space to express their needs, their experiences, their ideas, and that could develop services. That's as far as I got with it. I didn't come in with a massive idea, what I wanted was people to have the same seat at the table as myself, as commissioners, as anybody with any strategic role or position, and for them to be equal partners. If you let it grow organically, it will be something wonderful. But actually sitting in the Forum and hearing people's ideas and hearing people's feedback has broadened my brain on what LEAF can achieve, really.

LEAF are about to start their own independent research, which is something I've never done. It's been really important learning what support they need to become researchers, the parameters around research. We want it to be taken seriously. So that's going to be a big piece of work, which will hopefully develop that group bond and use everybody's skills. And then working in co-production with LEAF was included in the Oxfordshire Homeless Alliance terms and conditions. That blew my brain! I never thought we'd see such a huge Commissioner get there. No disrespect to Commissioners, it's just, what access do they have to the frontline? That was a pivotal moment for me. I thought, 'Okay, this is bigger than me. Much, much bigger than any idea I could have had'.

It's also made me reflect as a practitioner, why I still feel more comfortable in a Forum of people with lived experience than I do in a board meeting. I've got a personal and a professional side with this. And I think I just needed to recognise that sort of personal element. It's made me step back a little bit. I think it's partly that in the Forum I have to be more vulnerable. I mean, I haven't admitted that I've had lived experience until probably the last three years. That's never come out in a professional capacity. But if I'm putting ideas forward and asking other people to be brave and vulnerable, then I probably need to check myself and say, 'Okay, this is not something to be hidden. It is something to be proud of. It's actually a lot around strength, resilience.'

People have aspirations, and they have a massive amount to bring to the table. They can look at me and say, 'Well, this is where she was, at some point. And this is where she is now.' I think if I'd had the opportunity to see any disadvantages that I might have lived through as a strength, and a significant skill that you can bring to the table, it would have got me where I am now a lot sooner. So seeing somebody, and looking firstly at what they can bring to the table, and then supporting them to reduce their barriers, is really powerful. Rather than looking at somebody and saying, 'You've got all these barriers, until you've reduced those, you haven't got a seat at the table.' I've always looked at it the other way around, you know, 'Look how colourful this person is!' Colourful in character, abilities, skills, personality. Get to know that bit first if you can.

It's quite an extraordinary piece of work, really. Ideally, it will go on, past any of the founders ideas, continue to be independent. LEAF is about enriching experiences for people with lived experience. But I think there's something really powerful about what professionals can take from it, too. I think it just builds up trust. And it builds up respect on both sides. The Forum members won't perhaps understand what richness I've taken from it. So I think it's probably important for me at some point to let them know.

## 4. It's about connection, isn't it

I'm the Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF) coordinator. I think I was ready in my old job, ready to make a change. I'd been there for some time, I'd done my diploma in management in health and social care level five and I was like, 'Okay, I could go on to be a manager somewhere.' So, I saw the advert for LEAF and I was like 'This is amazing, you know – a coordinator to get the voices of people heard... you know, to make change.' Yes, I'm here for that.

I have come into LEAF and recognised all the good work that they've been doing. I could see that they lacked communication and transparency as a team purely because there was no coordinator role in place. I think everybody tried their best to do what they felt was right for LEAF, but there wasn't a mutual goal for everybody. And, if people are not working to the same goal, you're going to get different outcomes. So, we're just kind of starting to embed and build the foundations for LEAF, ensuring that they've got support for development and growth as well as maintaining the good work they're doing. So yeah, it's been interesting, very interesting. I think everybody's trying to figure out their roles, what we're doing, what I'm doing. I think that's what the coordinator role is there for, to kind of make sure everybody's swimming in the right direction, so, everybody's going to benefit.

What we've been developing is an induction package that supports the needs of the individual, recognising any disabilities, barriers to education and training. We've looked at tablets to break down barriers for contact. A lot of people don't have emails, a lot of people don't even have a phone. Not everybody in LEAF will want to have the development package, which is fine. We'll go out and try and do some outreach, whether it's at services, or for people who are currently still street homeless, we're kind of looking to ensure that a lot more voices are heard, from LEAF's side, breaking down barriers for the county. I kind of always think too far ahead, but I think obviously we want forum members to be paid as well - that's a tricky barrier.

One of the changes in my new role is working with people at a strategic level, which has been very insightful, trying to understand what part does what and looking at what is working well and what isn't. A lot of work is needed to build the gap between people making the decisions and people who use the services. But if you've got evidence-based research to kind of go 'Actually no, this is what's happening on the ground, you need to make changes.' I feel that may support change quicker. I think that's the reason why I took the post, to advocate for the people, and recognising that stats and data are not always, or perhaps never, the right way to go. And feeling heard, because in previous jobs I'd always question my work. I would be asking 'Why are we doing this?' and on occasions it would be 'Just get it done.' Whereas here you can question, voices of lived experience are heard at a higher level, so it feels like things are working which is nice.

It's already helped the people who were using the services. So, I think that's a massive change, and I've really enjoyed being part of it – doing stuff which is more worthwhile. Working on my own and then managing my time, that's fine, I don't mind all of that. I think I just need to use the team at Aspire and the Gatehouse as well because I'm kind of a social person. But I'm adapting to that and knowing what I can and can't use. So, for me, that's been a massive change. And just the people. Obviously, that's a huge change. I guess, for me, not working in the drug and alcohol sector, it's more homeless focused. I feel like that's changed, and that's expanding my knowledge and information, from my own personal growth as well. That's been really nice.

I've always advocated for service users who I've worked for. Going through the services myself, it was the people I met through my journey that really prompted me to make a change. It was a housing worker who prompted me to just get a grip. And I think that speaking to me with honest, real talk, whilst also showing me empathy and passion, meant I knew it was coming from a good

place. She showed me that she actually cared, and I kind of felt I could listen, and I was worth more. It's hard going through the services. And I think all of that experience has kind of led me here. I think it was just meant to be. This...LEAF.... I just love it. And, again, advocating for the individuals, having that empathy and passion is a must. When I worked for my previous service, there were staff that showed compassion and care. You could see the relationships form, and that's when you see change in individuals. And I just think if everybody had staff like that, God, it wouldn't be a bad place, would it? That's kind of why I think that's important to me, very important to me. It's knowing that we can together make change for the people who are still using the services and know that there's hope and faith there for everybody.

LEAF is working. At the moment, education and development is a vital part of the change that is happening. But I just feel on a bigger scale a lot more could be done if people were empowered more with communication and research skills. Empowering the LEAF forum in this way, that would make a massive change, I think. That would bring just so much more to the table.

When I started at LEAF, I got asked to go to the Gatehouse to meet the staff team. But when I got there, there was a queue of people waiting for hot food. And I could have just knocked on the door, but I didn't – I joined the queue. And I just started talking to the guys and they were like 'Oh, here's an umbrella!' and I was like 'I don't need your umbrella,' but we just... built that kind of rapport up. And I was like 'How long you been using it for?' just chatting, and it was pissing it down with rain. So, I built up trust. You've got people standing out there for an hour to get some warm food and that, you know? And just talking to individuals. I love it. I like to get to know the people. And then before I knew it, the guy was like 'Oh, are you supposed to be going in to see the staff?' and I said 'Yeah.' And in order to get inside I climbed underneath the table. So, for the first introductions to the staff at the Gatehouse I literally just crawled through some beans and cheese, and I was like 'Hi...' and they were like 'Oh! Hi, there! You know there is a door on the other side that you could have come in.' I think difference is wanting to be connected to people. It's about connection, isn't it?

At the moment, the forum is once a month. I've submitted a proposal for weekly sessions. One-to-one work, by appointment only, to support signposting on development, training, education activities, which will help people's self-esteem and confidence. And inductions as well. So, if we know if there's barriers into education or anything, then we can try and break that down and try and ensure that they've got all the opportunities everybody else has.

We will also have a coffee morning. Which is going to be literally just a coffee morning, so coffee, cake, and just get to know each other, team building. I'm building that cohesion between the forum that will then support the buddying up system. So, it's kind of like using the forum and their skills to be able to develop other forum members as well. And then we'll have fortnightly development and forum meetings. So again, that will kind of help the development, and having their voices heard, and continuing the good work that they're also doing with the forum. So, that's the idea and that's the pilot, and then we'll just adapt it to whatever is working and what's not, then we'll just kind of, push it to the side. But yeah, it's all about trial and error. Let's see where LEAF can get to.



## 5. Transparency, Honesty and Openness

I approached LEAF because I wanted to ensure that the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness are central to the development of services. I'm very privileged to have never been homeless so it was vital and continues to be, that I speak with people who have been, to understand their perspectives, their experiences of services and what is working well as well as what isn't.

I think there's always a challenge with commissioners and providers asking people within services about the quality of them. And I'm conscious that people who might have had negative experiences with institutions and services in their lives, might fear being open and what consequences this may have for them.

I wanted us to be able to hear from people within services in an independent way, and LEAF was best placed to do this. Because of the pandemic, we were not able to meet people face to face as we had intended to, but we were able to at least hear from people through questionnaires. It was in no way ideal, and we all recognised this, but it did nonetheless provide us with invaluable insight into services and what people wanted us to improve and what they wanted more of. The comments people gave us helped to inform our requests for funding to central government; we now have additional resources to work on homelessness, which is wonderful. And that's as a direct result of what people have told us. We genuinely listened and amplified people's voices.

At the time I was working with LEAF there were two active members, and I considered 'How representative are those voices?' But their perspective enabled me to reach out to other people, and I witnessed how much easier it was to engage with people with lived experience, while having my County Council badge on, when I'm with other people who've experienced homelessness. LEAF was crucial in providing that link and were clearly respected and trusted by the people they work with – I was humbled by my experience working with them.

Today, LEAF is a central part of Oxfordshire's Homelessness Alliance; what that looks like is still being figured out, but we are working together to determine how we ensure that people with lived experience continue to inform and shape the future of services and help us to improve them.

I wanted to be involved, in this co-production with LEAF, with transparency, honesty, and openness. In hindsight, I should have set clearer parameters to the scope of our work as there are sadly limitations as to what we can and cannot do due to funding constraints. If I were to go back, I would have spent more time discussing this, I would have also looked at the different skills sets needed for the work we were trying to achieve together and outlined any training needs.

I have and continue to value LEAF being honest and open and offering perspectives that I would never, ever be able to have. It's refreshing, because often in professional environments we might not be so candid with one another.

We've got an opportunity with the Alliance, to bring the voices of people within our services to push for change within the system. These are people's lives. This is what's happening. And no one can argue against someone's life experience, which is why it's so powerful.

## 6. Still Telling My Story

My past was...I went through child abuse, was put in care, went through domestic abuse relationships. I was in care from the age of 16, up to 20. My mother was abusive. I was raped at the age of 13. It had quite an impact on me. I blamed myself for quite a long time.

I ended up on the streets, homeless at the age of 22. I was on the streets for six weeks before I was picked up by the police. I got put into shared accommodation, and then I moved in with my nan. I got the right support through Connection Support, I got the right support from the police. I had a really good police officer that was with me all the way through, you know, as a role model, and supporting me. And my grandmother was a real huge impact on my life.

I also went through quite a lot, emotionally, with my kids. My kids were put on Child Protection and Social Services wanted to take my kids. They kept blaming it all on my mental health. I was fighting against them seeing their dad, who was abusive, not only to me, but to the children. I fought them so much, but I always stood my ground. Now when I look at Social Services, I think 'You know what? I'm the one laughing now. Look where my kids are, look where I am. You can't come back and tell me it's my mental health.'

So I went through quite an emotional time. What changed for me was, I started volunteering with the homeless when I moved to where I'm living now. It is the homeless, actually, that got me to where I am. So really, even though they thanked me for supporting *them*, I'm thanking them because without them, I wouldn't be in a job now. When I first moved, I walked past O'Hanlon House one day, and there was a group of guys sat on the corner bit there. And they just started chatting to me, and I sat there chatting to them. I could really sort of relate, how my life story is compared to theirs. And I thought to myself, 'You know what, I really am in a better position than them. So I want to do something to help.' That's when it all changed for me.

I started going to The Gatehouse and I started talking to Kat, getting chatting with her. I sort of said, 'Maybe Gatehouse can do things this way? Or that way?' She said it planted little seeds in her head, and then one day she said to me, 'There's a job going for the casework team.' I'm like, 'No, I'm not good enough'. Because I didn't have no belief in myself. I didn't think I could do it. But she said, 'Well, I've got belief in you.' And I think that's when my whole life just sort of changed around.

I do casework, which is supporting people with housing benefits, emotional support. And now I also run the Women's Safe Space with Aspire as well, on a Thursday. So my whole life has sort of gone around. I'm also part of LEAF, the Lived Experience Advisory Forum. I'm now the member development project worker there. So I develop the members with their confidence in training, supporting them emotionally, making sure that they can attend the co-production meetings. Making sure that they get their voice heard. One of the people that comes, he said to me, 'If it hadn't been for you dragging me here, I don't think I would have ever got the motivation to do anything.' To the point where he's now housed, he's now looking for a job. It does make you feel good. I can see that his whole persona is different to what it was before, a lot happier. He's got a roof over his head, he's done his CV and it's all over Oxford now. That makes you really proud. You know that you've had a part of that journey.

I've got my own place now, my two boys are doing really well. My youngest wants to become a police officer. My oldest wants to be a paramedic, and he's off to university in September. I'm really proud of myself because, you know, I've fought for everything and I'm still standing strong. And I do my TikTok. People say, 'You're stupid doing TikTok.' But for me, it's a way of releasing, you can just

be yourself on there and not worry about anyone or anything. You can use the platform as well to highlight different subjects, which is what I do. I highlight homelessness, I highlight domestic abuse, I highlight mental health on my platform. So it's really good.

I never give up. So if somebody sets me a challenge, I will complete that challenge. I've just done a 40-mile challenge over the month of April for Air Ambulance. I walked that. I do a lot of hiking. I just completed the Roaches and Lud's Church. I climbed all of that, and then I did the Malvern Hills. I did Cheddar Gorge, Durdle Door, Cannock Chase. I do challenge myself a lot mentally. I suffer with a condition called fibromyalgia which is in the bones and the muscles and everything. And, you know, people say, 'Oh, I can't do this. And I can't do that.' Well, I've got the same condition, but I push myself. I've just got a personal trainer, I go three times a week. I write down everything I eat and I write down my thoughts. I've got a journal. Don't never say you can't do something until you try it.

That just goes to show, because it's rubbing off on my children. I'm really proud of them. My oldest, he's got autism. But he's achieved so much, even with that. He's like me, he says, 'Mum, there's no such word as 'I can't.' My youngest is the same as well, he'll always say, 'Don't tell me I can't do it. Because I will go out and show you that I can do it, I'll prove them wrong!' Without that, we wouldn't grow as people. All the shit I've been through in my life, right? But I'm not a victim. And I never want to be seen as a victim. What I want to be seen as is a survivor. I went through so many years of blaming myself for everything that happened to me. Why did it happen to me? Why should I be here? But I'm still stood here, I'm still telling my story. I'm an open book, if anybody's got anything to say. They can come and ask me, because I'm not afraid to talk about anything. My whole story is in The Guardian newspaper. I have good and bad days. But, you know, you just get on with it. And you just push through it. I've seen so many people that have turned their life around from being on drugs and being on drink. If you want change, you got to be the change in your life. That's how I've always seen it.

There was a particular police officer that I started chatting to when I first started volunteering, and even now, when he sees me, he says, 'I can't believe the change in you! From the first time I met you in 2016 to now, I just can't believe the change in you.' And that's what gave me the push to carry on. And because I knew there was people out there still going through far worse than me, you know, sleeping on the streets. Seeing so many of the homeless pass away, it does affect you. Because I've built up a relationship with them, a good relationship where they trust me. That's what gave me the push, that and Kat believing in me, you know, and creating all these roles for me. I think I'm the one with the most roles at the Gatehouse at the moment! But when people do believe in you, it changes your whole life.

## 7. Don't Give Up

Homelessness goes back thousands of years, it's not a new thing. Drugs and alcohol isn't a new thing. They were a major scene in Victorian times, especially cannabis and cocaine. It was the same with alcohol abuse. And even though we've had policy after policy after policy, probably a thousand times policies, we're still in the same environment today as we were then. In the last three years, there has been 37 deaths of homeless people, the majority of which have been in supported accommodation. The question is, why? That's what our work within LEAF is looking at. Why is it these deaths keep occurring? And why is it we are not learning from each death?

My involvement with LEAF goes back to May 2021. I was a serving member of the housing the homeless scrutiny panel for the Oxford City Council. LEAF came along to explain who they are, what they did, and I was quite interested in what they had to say. Afterwards I asked one of the members how I could join? And they basically told me what the procedure was. Nikki explained more about LEAF, I attended one of the meetings to see what it was like, and it grew from there. I'm now the Vice Chair in LEAF, working closely with Nikki in Aspire and the Oxford County Council, and I've written several documents on homelessness and its history, which the council have taken on board.

I've had my own issues in life, breakdowns in relationships, alcohol abuse. I ended up at a place called Simon House, and I spent three years trying to put my life in order. I was struggling quite a bit because I lost my way and I didn't really know what I wanted. I was under the Littlemore Mental Health Centre with a community psychiatric nurse and a psychiatrist. They were helping me put my life back together. Through that, and with my own experience of homelessness, I found ways of looking at what needed to be changed in the way we help the homeless community. For instance, one of the biggest areas was that people didn't feel that they were being heard, or they didn't feel that they were being taken seriously. People felt that their individuality wasn't being recognised. They were being seen as a collective, rather than an individual, and that meant any policies or procedures that services had couldn't account for individual needs and support structures. That's where I felt that I really needed to concentrate on.

What's changed for me is the fact that I learned that there's people worse off than I was. I've got my family, there's people out there that don't have a family. I've got friends, these people out there don't have friends. And I learned that rather than feel sorry for myself, I want to make a life for other people, and use my experience to be able to shape how people's lives can be. I was lucky that because I came under the Mental Health Service, I got a lot more help than many other people did. I was able to get support from Connection Support who helped me with my benefits, my rent, and setting up my home. By understanding how Connections worked, I was able to advise other people on the services that they offer. So I think for me, it's about paying back what I was given. I want to be supporting people in the same way that I was supported.

In the last three years, there are people within our homeless community who don't have access to Mental Health Services, or a proper doctor, or housing support. I've set my sights on making sure that these people's voices are being heard. But what's more is important: there are people on the streets who want to be there. They're happy taking their drugs, they're happy with alcohol abuse, they're happy with that life. Do we still turn a blind eye? No we don't. Because you might go to somebody one day and you say, 'Have you thought about this - these services?' They might turn and say, 'Well fuck you mate, I don't wanna be there.' Do we then say, 'Okay, that's your choice'? No we don't. We say, 'I can hear what you're saying, but can you tell me why you feel that way? What's causing that anger inside you when I mentioned services?' And sometimes, you realise that these people have been in services before, they've been messed about, some have been abused in services throughout their

childhood. So they have this deep-seated hatred for anything authoritative. What we need to be doing is saying to services, 'Look, these are the areas you need to be addressing.'

I also work for the Oxfordshire Recovery College. They work co-productively with their students, delivering 35 different forms of mental health courses through a tutor 'by experience' like myself, and a tutor 'by training' like a doctor or a psychiatrist. And when we develop courses, we ask our students what type of course they want to do, and then we work with them on developing those courses. I'm working with LEAF on getting support services to do something similar. When we develop new policies, structures, methods of delivering services, we should be speaking with their clientele first, asking what they want from a service. It's about listening and it's about people going away and saying, 'Do you know what, I really learned something today because I learned from other people.' So using that concept, LEAF is saying, 'Let's talk to the homeless community, let's find out what they want from services, and let's find out what is going right and what's going wrong. What is it that keeps people bound to the streets?' If services get together, and use the same concept as with the Oxfordshire Recovery College, they will learn a lot more about what's going wrong.

I feel proud of myself. I feel that for once in my life I'm doing something that benefits other people. I'm fighting for justice. I'm fighting for people to be treated as equals. I'm fighting because everybody should have a chance of a home. My past has helped me see the world in a different way. People reached out to me but I shunned them because of the addictions I had. I wasn't prepared to listen. Things only changed once I lost my home, once I ended up in the hostel, once I started thinking to myself, 'I've got to stop feeling sorry for myself, and start putting my life right.' I realised that the only way I can do that is by accepting that there's people out on the streets that are in a far worse situation than me. That's where my life changed. When I stopped and talked to people on the streets and they told me about how they feel about services, how they feel about their life. Some of them said, 'I'm happy the way I am.' But were they really happy? Or was it that they'd just given up? I've made it a mission that even though some people have given up, I won't give up on them, because every time I walk past somebody on the streets, and I walk past the same people time and time again, I always say to them: 'Are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?'

Those people are human beings, and they deserve to be treated with respect. Despite whether they tell you to fuck off or not. That 'fuck off' doesn't mean what other people think it means. It means 'not now.' So that's why I keep going back, because one day they will say, 'Do you know what, you can help me.' We need more people on LEAF. We need to make sure that the voices of the homeless are heard. And this isn't just about Oxford, this is national. The government might turn and say that right, we're giving £168 million to tackle homelessness, but that's a pinch of salt in water, that's nothing. What I strive to do now is to make sure that those I support have their voices as well, because it's no good saying, 'This is what we're gonna do.' You have to consult them. It's about saying to people: 'Don't give up. Keep fighting.'

## 8. Just because nobody's done it before, doesn't mean that somebody shouldn't

I'm the Project Manager for Oxfordshire Homeless Movement (OHM). When we started the Movement, one of the things we wanted to do was to embed the voice of lived experience throughout everything that we did.

You can't live in Oxford as long as I have without understanding that we have a real housing crisis. I had to learn about why people become homeless. But actually, you can't go through homelessness strategy, building plans about how things should look and how it should work if you've never asked people who have experienced it.

It wasn't going to be enough to just have one person sitting on our steering group. It always felt like people with lived experience would be asked their opinion, but it would always be one person. It felt like for some, people were ticking a box to say, well, we checked with people with lived experience, that is fine. But that's not a wide enough way to ask the question. So that's where the idea was born, to have this group of people with lived experience where they were getting what they needed out of being in that group but also that we could get them involved in decision making. We wanted it to be with people involved for their own reasons, not just because we needed some help. People with lived experience of homelessness should be getting more out of it than anybody else.

In terms of the actual involvement of OHM, I didn't need, or feel it was right to be involved in how the group developed or what it looked like. I didn't have the right to do that. What I did have the ability to do was bring in funding to make sure that whatever that group decides it wants to do, the money will be there to help them do it. Ultimately, it's run by and for people with lived experience of homelessness. I just am there on the side lines but am always there to provide the funding, pass comments, support the group or offer help whenever needed.

I think the reason I was brought in to my role was because I come from a background that isn't homelessness, so I can see things with a different perspective, a different set of eyes. But this is people's lives. This isn't a game. And so I think I would say that my nervousness with launching something was that I didn't want to get it wrong, because it was so important to get it right. But there comes a point at which you have to say, look, nobody else knows how to do this. I did lots of investigations into how other people had done it and actually worked out that nobody was really doing it very well. So we've got to work it out ourselves.

There's nothing wrong with inviting people to talk to you about their experiences. It's exactly the right thing to do. Sometimes it might be a bit uncomfortable. But we just have to get over it. What LEAF taught me was sometimes you have just got to do it. Yes, it's frightening, because nobody's done it before. But actually, just because nobody's done it before, doesn't mean that somebody shouldn't. Things might go wrong, that doesn't mean it's the wrong thing to do. It just means that you might need to do something a bit differently.

I'm not saying you can recruit people with lived experience for everything. But there's a significant proportion of people that are more than capable of doing jobs in homelessness, and there's no reason why they shouldn't. And actually, their background means that they have a much deeper understanding than, for example, I possibly ever could. I think sometimes people have a certain view about what homelessness is, and they might see somebody sleeping rough, and therefore make assumptions about them and what they are or aren't capable of. Things may have happened differently for me that meant I ended up homeless. If I had ended up homeless, would that have

made me less intelligent, less hardworking, or less of the things that made me me? Of course it wouldn't. So I think that it's really important to remember that people who experience any sort of homelessness are just like us - their lives just took a different turn.

When the Crisis Feasibility Study on Housing First came out, that was led by Imogen Blood Associates, because of the important we place on lived experience, I checked how many times the words 'lived experience' came up and it was over 40 times. That felt like a massive achievement to me. Ultimately, it's about the people that we're trying to help. It brought me to tears when I was reading the report. We played a key role in ensuring that Imogen and her team were talking to all the right people to make sure that the answer was as wide as possible. To also have the LEAF group established and able to fully engage with the study was brilliant. It almost felt like the change had started. And then almost like a snowball effect it's kept going and going.

I'm incredibly proud of what LEAF has achieved. I'm proud that in Oxfordshire, we've got a group of people who care enough to want to get together to try and offer advice, help each other, make a difference. And I know that it's the start of something even bigger and OHM are going to continue to support that. Nobody needs to even ask us whether we will be funding it next year and the year after because the answer will be yes.

I genuinely believe now that people will no longer ignore people with lived experience of homelessness, because I think they realise they can't, and they shouldn't. Now, it feels like people almost instantaneously think of LEAF. It's just this constant thing. It's always in people's minds.