

LEAF & Aspire Storytelling Report, October 22



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Executive Summary

LEAF began working with Aspire looking at new ways to evaluate homeless services in December 2021. What we were looking for was a mechanism in which we could measure how effective a service was in addressing an individual's needs.

Working with people who are either homeless or vulnerably housed using Storytelling has helped LEAF to evaluate the experiences and journeys of those who have lived insight into dealing with local services. We invited people with different perspective and experiences to meet individually with a story collector, who guided a conversation with them about their experience.

The stories we collected provided us with a chance to step out of our own lives and learn about a person's experiences, and showed that there is power in stories in their ability to affect a readers in ways that other forms of communication cannot.

Tony Buchanan, Co-Chair, LEAF

LEAF's ambition was to find alternative ways to capture and measure impact in a way that was led by the person, meaningful, honest and that filled the gap in traditional approaches using figures and case studies. LEAF found that traditional case studies can be written from the perspective of the key worker or support worker which can (on occasions) misinterpret the experiences and valuable insights of the person involved. Nobody can tell of your experience better than you, right!. LEAF wanted to advocate for people in a way that had no constraints on what was to be said and would allow valuable insights and learnings. LEAF heard about the storytelling approach used by Art at the Old Fire Station which complements LEAF's values and goals about influencing change, advocating for people, shifting power, and amplifying the voices of people with direct and lived experience but gave full choice to the person over their story.

Nikki Aitchison, Head of Employment Development Project, Aspire

Introduction

From January to July 2022, members of the LEAF¹ and Aspire team worked in collaboration with the Old Fire Station to learn about the Storytelling methodology and put it into practice. They collected the stories of 8 people involved in different ways in LEAF to help understand people's experiences of LEAF to date and what we could learn from this going forward. On 27 June 2022, we brought together LEAF members, staff and colleagues from a range of local partners to discuss the stories collected and what we can learn from them.

This brief report captures the key insights and learning which emerged from this process.

Section 1: Background & Introduction

Storytelling Evaluation Methodology

The Old Fire Station (OFS) is a centre for creativity which encourages people from all backgrounds to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, creativity, and connecting with others. As part of this work, OFS trains and supports partner organisations to use the Storytelling methodology to evaluate impact and amplify voices.

The Storytelling methodology is based on the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique³. MSC is used in international development circles, and in Asset Based Community Development (strengths-based) work. It involves the collection of stories of significant change from participants and the participatory interpretation of these stories. Unlike conventional approaches to evaluation, MSC does not employ quantitative indicators developed in advance – the storytellers decide what the most significant impact is for them. MSC is particularly effective for measuring change that is intangible or fuzzy – unexpected, emergent, personalised or diverse – as well as understanding how change happens.

The methodology involves the following key stages:

1. **Identifying storytellers** – people who represent a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated.
2. **Collecting stories** – each storyteller meets with a trained OFS story collector. They have a conversation about their experience, what has changed for them through their involvement, how this change came about, and what we can learn from it going forward. Crucially, this is not an interview but a discussion – relaxed, informal and on the teller's terms.
3. **Editing stories** – these conversations are recorded, transcribed and then edited down into 1–2-page stories, which aim to:
 - Faithfully reflect the teller's insights on the impact of the project
 - Accurately keep the teller's 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words
 - Vividly capture the reader's attention.

The stories are then sent to the storytellers for their input and approval before being shared.

4. **Discussion Session** – we hold a facilitated discussion which brings together people with different perspectives and experiences on the project to discuss the stories and the themes and learning emerging from them. These discussions form the basis of an evaluation report.

¹ Lived Experience Advisory Forum

LEAF, Aspire & Storytelling

The Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF) is an independent group run by and for people with lived experience of homelessness. The aim of this group is to ensure that the valuable input of Experts through Experience is included across Oxfordshire within commissioning, service planning, policy change, decision making, and service evaluation. LEAF consults with organisations across the County to embed the voice of people with lived experience in the sector, while offering our members new opportunities, connections, and room for growth.

In January 2022, a group of LEAF members and Aspire staff were trained in using the Storytelling methodology. They then set out to use the methodology to learn about people's experiences of LEAF and what we could learn from this going forward. From February to May, Nikki Aitchison, Antony Buchanan, Jessica Collins and Ross Munro put this training into practice, and collected stories from 8 people involved in different ways in LEAF – staff, LEAF members and partners.

They had conversations with these individuals (the storytellers) about their experience of LEAF, which was guided by 4 key questions:

- What's been your involvement?
- What's changed for you?
- Why was that change important?
- How did it happen?

These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited down into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights while preserving their 'voice'.

Learning about the Storytelling approach

One of the aims of the Storytelling project was for Aspire and LEAF to learn together about the Storytelling approach and how it could be used in practice. The group shared the following reflections on the approach and their experience:

- Story collectors enjoyed the opportunity to listen to people speak about their experience. They were often surprised by how much they learnt through asking open questions – sometimes from people they already knew well.
- Collecting people's stories helped to deepen relationships and build new connections.
- It was powerful hearing the stories edited in a way which captured the voice of the Storyteller.
- For some storytellers it was validating hearing their edited story.
- When it came to the pragmatics of collecting, there were challenges around availability and capacity - both for storytellers and story collectors.
- Going forward, there is lots of potential to use Storytelling to understand the wider needs of both service providers and users to inform the design and development of support services.

Section 2: Learning and Impact

On 27 June 2022, the Old Fire Station hosted a Discussion Session to evaluate learning from the stories collected as part of this project. The discussion was split into three parts.

- Discussion 1: What struck you on first reading the stories?
- Discussion 2: Themes
- Discussion 3: How could Storytelling as an approach be used in future in LEAF's work?

This section aims to capture the key learning which came from these discussions.

In many respects, the learnings are inextricable from the stories and the process from which they emerged. For this reason, we feel that the only way to truly engage with the learning is to read about the methodology through which it came to light and, above all else, read the stories of those involved, told in their own voices and words.

What struck people on reading the stories

- The stories communicated a sense of real pride, as well as a sense of release or relief at sharing experiences. People seemed to surprise and impress themselves in the process of telling their story.
- They were also notable for their sense of 'realness' or 'authenticity', and this was felt to be important for informing our understanding of the issues being discussed.
- The power of lived experience was clear, as well as the need for this to be understood throughout all levels of an organisation offering services.
- It was shown to be important for organisations to have the courage and determination to be inclusive, even if this seemed difficult.
- Listening to people properly is powerfully healing.
- Individual, small-scale experience is key. In the stories, descriptions of specific, human-to-human interactions are very informative, and show that being sensitive and personal is effective. People are not numbers!
- The stories showed that being homeless is not a label that people should be expected to wear for the rest of their lives. At the same time, having experience of homelessness is a source of important knowledge and understanding about how homelessness services should be run.

Key themes and findings

The stories and discussion revealed that seeking advice from people with lived experience of homelessness when designing and delivering homelessness services had far-reaching benefits, both for the quality of services and for those offering advice. Key findings around the considerations and benefits which emerged from these conversations include:

1. The value of being listened to

'I'm 54 and 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' (story 1).

'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'. (story 6).

Making real time to listen to someone in a meaningful way has a profoundly positive impact for that person, building confidence, self-esteem, supporting growth and development, and offering a sense of purpose.

2. Including people with lived experience in policy and practice design makes services more responsive to diverse needs.

'Lived experience should be 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 has actually made you trust somebody, or want to work with somebody – all the insights are so valuable, but they're not always consulted' (story 2)

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 (story 3)

The stories showed that this must not be tokenistic, and that drawing on a diverse range of lived experience improves knowledge sharing and creates more opportunities for learning. The wider the range of lived experience is available, the richer the advice for informing practice.

3. Embracing lived experience at all levels

'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' (story 3)

'It always felt like people with lived experience would be asked their opinion, but it would always be one person' (story 8).

The value of people with lived experience needs to be understood and embraced across an organisation and by every member of a team, not just held by one person or in one area (it is especially important to include people with lived experience at executive or board level).

4. Shifting the culture around how decisions are made

'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.' (story 2)

'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.' (story 5)

In order to meaningfully involve people with lived experience in decision making processes we need to do more than get people around the same table. Organisations need to replace jargon with everyday language, slow down, consider what other cultural changes can improve accessibility, and treat advisors with lived experience as equal partners.

5. Supporting accountability

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.(story 3)

Including people with lived experience ensures that service providers are always in touch with the people that services are actually for, and have to justify decision-making to representatives of that group. At the same time, effective mechanisms for ongoing feedback and accountability are essential for the meaningful inclusion of lived experience (people have to know what decisions are, and are not, being made based on their advice, and why, in order to preserve trust and understanding).

6. Being authentic and human

'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.'(story 1)

Working with people with lived experience demands meaningful, human-to-human approaches rather than impersonal, institutionalised ones. This improves trust and understanding between service providers and the people relying on those services. The stories also illustrate how having lived experience of homelessness can support building relationships with other people who may have faced similar challenges. The impression of authenticity or 'realness' was returned to multiple times during the discussion, as well as the importance of not treating people like numbers.

7. Helping others can help yourself

'I didn't think that helping others would also help me' (story 1)

'It is the homeless, actually, that got me to where I am now' (story 6).

'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 to where I am now a lot sooner' (story 3)

Having an opportunity to use lived experiences of difficulty as a resource for helping others can be very empowering and support personal growth.

8. Act first, learn later

"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.'(story 8)

The stories and discussion showed the value of taking decisive action to include people with lived experience, even if there seem to be barriers to inclusion or concerns about getting things right. 'Don't let perfect be the enemy of good' came up several times in the discussion. The stories also

revealed how including people with lived experience in decision making processes that affect them, even if they do not seem to be 'ready' yet, can radically improve their confidence and therefore make them more ready, more quickly.

9. Breaking down barriers to engagement

'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.' (story 8)

'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.' (story 2)

One of the advantages of working with people with lived experience revealed in the stories is that it can be easier to discover what the barriers are that prevent other people with similar experience accessing services. These can include technology, literacy, feelings of low confidence in new settings, and power differentials. This demonstrates the importance of creating safe, welcoming spaces that are responsive to peoples' needs (this can include not pressuring people to talk about their own lived experiences until they feel ready - i.e., not 'outing' people). It can also mean preparing and supporting staff to hear difficult stories.

Learning around 3 key areas of focus

The second discussion that took place was structured around three of the key focusses of LEAF:

- Ensuring that the expertise of people with lived experience is listened to, and influences how support is designed and delivered
- Creating opportunities to form new connections
- Training and skills development

Ensuring that the expertise of people with lived experience is listened to, and influences how support is designed and delivered

- Having courage to take action to include people with lived experience is important, and acting quickly to do this can have benefits later on, such as building people's confidence.
- Creating a non-judgemental, safe environment is vital where people feel valued and can speak openly.
- Accessibility and accountability are central to the effective inclusion of people with lived experience. This means changing language and culture – moving away from jargon and being adaptable as needed.
- The importance of ongoing feedback – so that lived experience advisors are included throughout the processes of practice development and progress evaluation.

Creating opportunities to form new connections

- It is necessary to create a safe environment for peer workers where people can share their experience on their own terms (i.e., not 'outing' people with lived experience).
- Barriers to forming connections include technology, literacy, time (needing to read lots of material).
- A long-term commitment to including people with lived experience is necessary to build trusting relationship and support networks.
- It's important to consider how to recognise the input of advisors and the value of their time, through expenses or payment, and the complications that this can create for people receiving benefits.
- LEAF being invited to join the conversation around service design was celebrated during the discussion as a huge step forward.
- Timetabling has to be done sensitively to ensure access.

Training and skills development

- Training in general literacy and technology use can support access to service design for lived experience advisors.
- The stories highlighted the importance of investing in staff understanding, as well as volunteer/lived experience advisor development.
- Making use of opportunities to help others can build confidence and skills
- Discussion participants suggested consultations with lived experience advisors to find out what kind of further training might be desirable.
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How could Storytelling as an approach be used in future in LEAF's work?

Ideas for how Storytelling could be used by LEAF in future work included:

- To inform future policy and programmes.
- To support public engagement work – e.g., placing stories in local or national newspapers, or in local printed material such as play programmes or exhibition guides.
- To support public education, as well as communicating how widespread these kinds of struggles can be (even when they are not widely talked about).
- To educate local authorities who may lack an understanding of homelessness.
- To develop communities based on improved mutual understanding.
- Link to World Mental Health Awareness Day and World Homelessness Day (both on 10th Oct).
- To inform new LEAF staff and partners.
- To support the creation of an alliance of organisations/services.

Conclusion

As an approach, Storytelling embodies much of what is at the heart of LEAF – listening, collaborating and amplifying people's lived experience on their own terms, and in their own voice and words. The stories reinforce that involving people with lived experience of homelessness when designing and

delivering homelessness services has far-reaching benefits, both for the quality of services and for those offering advice.

The stories show that participating in LEAF has enabled people to feel valued and heard, develop new skills, and grow in confidence. They show that involving people with lived experience is also imperative to designing services which are responsive to diverse needs, and hold decision makers to account. Enabling this to happen in a meaningful way is about more than bringing people to the table, but about shifting culture – it's about embracing lived experience at all levels of an organisation, actively addressing barriers to inclusion (jargon, pace of decision making and skill development), being human and authentic, and regarding people who bring lived experience as equal partners. In order to do this, we need to foster a culture where we can act first, give things a go, and learn.

Moving forward, the experience of using Storytelling to understand the work of LEAF has shown the potential for this approach to be used in a more integrated way within LEAF's work with partners to amplify the voices of those with lived experience and meaningfully inform the development and design of services.

With thanks to:

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