

LEAF & Aspire Storytelling Report (short), October 22



Introduction

From January to July 2022, members of the LEAF¹ and Aspire team worked with the Old Fire Station to learn about the Storytelling evaluation approach 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.

The Storytelling methodology and the Lived Experience Advisory Forum share many of the same values. These include listening, working together, and learning from people's lived experience on their own terms, in their own voice and words.

The stories collected as part of this project demonstrate that involving people with lived experience of homelessness in shaping homelessness services benefits the services *and* the people offering advice.

These stories show that participating in LEAF has made people feel valued and heard, and helped them to develop new skills and grow in confidence.

They also show that including people with lived experience ensures that services are responsive to diverse needs, and that decision makers are accountable to the people they are trying to help.

To make this work, as well as including people with lived experience, we also need to change the cultures of organisations. This means embracing lived experience at all levels, and actively removing barriers to participation.

Professionals need to be human and authentic, and to treat people with lived experience as equal partners. In order to achieve this, we need to create a culture where people are prepared to act first, give things a go, and learn.

The LEAF Storytelling evaluation shows that this approach could be useful in LEAF's work with other partners, to amplify the voices of those with lived experience, and meaningfully inform the development and design of services.

Key themes and findings

The stories and discussion showed:

- Seeking advice from people with lived experience of homelessness helped to design better homelessness services.
- Including people with lived experience of homelessness in decision making also had many benefits for those people themselves.

These benefits are outlined below, along with some other important findings.

1. The value of being listened to

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. (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 different people's 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. Drawing on a diverse range of lived experience creates more opportunities for learning. The wider the range of lived experience that 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, 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

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 to be able to hear from people within services in an independent way, and LEAF was best placed to do this. (Story 5)

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. (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 people with experience of those services. It is important that there are effective mechanisms for ongoing feedback and accountability. This means that people should always know what decisions are, and are not, being made based on their advice, and why.

6. Being authentic and human

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 she actually cared, and I kind of felt I could listen, and I was worth more. (Story 4)

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. (Story 6)

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. We returned to the idea of authenticity or 'realness' many 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)

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 just got to the point where it was like, just get on with it. (Story 2)

It's important to act straightaway 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 processes that affect them, even if they do not necessarily feel '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)

Working with people with lived experience helps to reveal 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 differences in power. 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.

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