

# **Involving and recruiting people with lived experience**

Sharing the findings and learning from Homeless Link's Community of Practice series.

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## Contents

Introduction	3
Key Learnings & Reflections	3
Employment & Recruitment	3
Paying People	4
Volunteering	5
Additional Resources	6

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## Introduction

Between November '22 and February '23, Homeless Link facilitated a 4-part Community of Practice (CoP) series on 'involving & recruiting people with lived experience'. The purpose of the series was to delve deeper into how we recruit, involve, offer volunteering opportunities, and respectfully pay people with lived experience. The sessions provided a safe place for organisations across England to reflect, build relationships, share best practice, and ultimately create change. By bringing people together in this way, it has established a new network of peer support, with the group coming together to find solutions to shared challenges.

This briefing outlines the key findings and learning from discussions held across the CoP series. It also provides links to existing toolkits and guidance for further reading and exploration.

## Key Learnings & Reflections

### Employment & Recruitment

Employing people with lived experience can bring a deeper level of empathy, understanding and insight to an organisation. Throughout the CoP series, there were great examples of practice from staff representing organisations where the insights from people with lived experience had been embedded. Weaving co-production<sup>1</sup> and involving people with lived experience is crucial: true co-production and integration leads to far better services.

*"Co-production is not just a word, it's not just a concept, it is a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included, and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them."<sup>2</sup>*

A key reflection throughout the series was that the term, 'lived experience', which is commonly known, and helps to identify someone who has been through or accessed a service, can be labelling. As a group, we agreed that we value people with first-hand experience, but the term 'lived experience' should be considered carefully in relation to employment. Giving an individual choice and ownership over whether/how they choose to disclose their 'lived experience' is important. It was discussed how some organisations may feel the need to recruit for specific 'lived experience' roles. Whilst we felt that this can be a positive way to promote inclusive opportunities, some individuals may not wish to be identified and labelled as someone with 'lived experience'.

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<sup>1</sup> See Homeless Link's Co-production Toolkit: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/co-production-toolkit/>

<sup>2</sup> Inclusive Insight: A Fair Deal Guide 2022. Available at: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/fairness-in-enterprise/>

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*“People should have the choice if they want to disclose their lived experience. If it is disclosed, what will be done with it? Where does the power lie in this dynamic and how can organisations ensure the choice and decision lies with the individual?”*

*We need to see a person with lived experience as a whole person, rather than focusing on their lived experience”. – CoP Participant.*

When discussing recruitment processes and how to make it fairer, we agreed that overall, recruitment processes should be more inclusive, focus on relatable experience and skills, and not specifically target people with ‘lived experience’. We agreed that there needs to be a values-based approach to recruitment which recognises different types of experience and transferrable skills which can be reflected within the application processes and interviews.

Another discussion area regarding employing people with lived experience was around having the right amount of support and skills development in place for people. It was agreed that overall, the whole recruitment process and support provided to employees, should be trauma-informed, and that the support offered should also adapt according to individual needs.

Having CPD (Continuous Professional Development) opportunities in place for staff means that individuals will perform well, as they are more likely to feel supported, safe, and valued. [Aspire Oxford](#) has a great example of how they used [externally available funding](#) to train new employees and upskill existing members of the team, including people with lived experience.

### Paying People

First and foremost, as a group, we decided that we should use the term ‘paying people’, as opposed to ‘remuneration’. Using inclusive language was a talking point in the sessions and there was a shared feeling that using jargon can only exclude, even if it is unintentional.

We established that there was a need to have clarity and guidance on how we pay people with lived experience, where they are contributing to a service, but are not employed by the organisation. We quickly realised that the complexity of the benefits system meant there could be drastic implications for people who received benefits, who were paid for their contributions to a service. Although we’d hoped to develop clear and explicit guidance on paying people following the series, it was agreed that this is difficult to produce, and that changes to the benefits system would be needed to make paying people easier and fairer.

Despite this, we discussed and worked towards a clear definition of what opportunities should be classed as volunteering, and what should be paid employment. It was agreed that if someone is supporting the development of a service, by lending their expertise

and/or experience, but is not volunteering (in a formalised and ongoing role to support delivery), this equates to an opportunity that should be paid. Payment for this recognises the important contribution being made by the individual, and brings equity to their participation alongside that of staff and other professionals. This should be a one-off payment on a consultancy type basis (as long as the payment does not directly impact the individual's specific benefit type<sup>3</sup>). We recognised the importance of liaising with the DWP to consider an individual's unique circumstances before making the payment; for example, to avoid someone being perceived as 'work ready' if they were considered by the DWP to be long-term sick.

### Volunteering

It was agreed that volunteering can be a great steppingstone for people with lived experience, enabling them to gain the skills, experience, training, and knowledge to go on to secure full-time employment. There are great examples from existing services, like Turning Point, who offer accredited peer mentoring programmes for people to use their lived experience to inspire others. Information on this programme can be found [here](#). Additionally, providers like St Mungo's offer good examples of supported and transparent volunteering opportunities, which can be found [here](#).

Many people want to volunteer for a wide range of reasons. It was discussed that gaining new skills, giving back to the community, and preparing to return to work make volunteering an incredibly valuable activity. Organisations should have development and training opportunities for volunteers who contribute their time and effort to support the charity: the relationship should be mutually beneficial.

The Inclusive Insight Fair Deal Guide<sup>4</sup> outlines the benefits of offering voluntary, instead of paid roles:

*"Various circumstances can mean that [people] are not ready to take up employment, including personal challenges and disincentives and barriers within the welfare system that make starting work difficult. Voluntary roles can offer a good opportunity to get a feel for work and the organisation, with a lower level of commitment.*

*Voluntary roles can offer more flexibility than paid work. Voluntary roles should, however, always offer something in return to those engaging in them. This could include training and development opportunities, support from an organisation, or personal budgets."*

As a group, we felt that volunteers should have clear expectations regarding their volunteering agreement so that they understand how their role fits in within the organisation. However, it is important to note that volunteers should not have a

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<sup>3</sup> Judy Scott Consultancy has created guidance on what people can earn before their benefits will be affected: <https://judyscottconsult.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Inclusive Insight: A Fair Deal Guide 2022. Available at: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/fairness-in-enterprise/>

'contract' or carry out employment related activities, as this could infringe on employment law.

*"A volunteering agreement is not compulsory but sets out what you can expect from the organisation you're volunteering for. It does not form a contract between you and the organisation".<sup>5</sup>*

If someone is in a volunteering capacity, they cannot be paid for their time, but should have their expenses covered. Guidance on this can be found on the [Government website](#).

## Additional Resources

- Fulfilling Lives Southeast Partnership has produced a [toolkit](#) about employing people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage.
- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has [resources](#) on managing the employment relationship.
- NCVO (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations) has a range of [materials](#) on involving volunteers.
- The Voluntary Organisations Disability Group and National Care Forum have a useful [volunteer management toolkit](#).
- Revolving Doors Agency and Russell Webster have produced a [guide](#) on how to support people with lived experience in peer volunteering roles.
- Homeless Link has [guidance](#) on managing volunteers in homelessness services.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-manage-your-charitys-volunteers>

## What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## Homeless Link

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# Let's End Homelessness Together

