

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: Culture and Voice

Case study: Hope at Home

Helen Hodgson, Operations Director

To achieve sustained progress, an organisation's culture needs to be open, fair and inclusive and leaders need to be assured that they understand the experiences of all parts of the workforce and all those who access services.

We spoke to Helen Hodgson, Operations Director at Hope at Home, to learn more about the lessons they've learnt about amplifying the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness.

When did you realise the importance of amplifying the voices of people accessing your services?

Hope at Home was founded 5 ½ years ago to provide safe homes via hosting placements for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking.

We knew when we began that we wanted to include the voice of those who would use our services (guests), but we didn't quite know how to do it. We also really wanted to make sure it wasn't just a tickbox exercise but would be meaningful both for us as an organization and the people we were including. We are still on a journey with this, have made mistakes and still have a way to go.

What were some of your early learnings?

One mistake we made at the beginning was to include guests without recognizing the emotional labour it took for them to be involved. And as the group of people we work with are particularly vulnerable to exploitation having already experienced it, it was important to us ethically as well as practically, not to exploit their stories for our own gain. One guest in particular would always say yes to 'helping' but often did it to please us rather than because she was comfortable about it. Offering payment via consultancy fees or vouchers as well as ensuring we get informed consent from the guest mitigates some of this risk.

How do you capture feedback from people accessing your services?

From the beginning we have undertaken surveys with guests and hosts. At the start these were long and clunky and we have refined these. One of the ways we've refined the guest surveys is by having a paid-for consultation with a guest to reduce the risk of our questions triggering any trauma and make sure they are worded thoughtfully. Instead of asking guests to complete these surveys, we chat with them over the phone

and make it a conversation rather than a formal process. We find we receive more open and honest feedback in this way.

And how do you ensure they're included in strategy and service development?

Last year we commissioned a report from Nottingham Rights Lab around accommodation options for survivors of MSHT and how hosting could be an option. The researchers interviewed many of our previous guests about their hosting experiences. It was completely anonymous and they were free to be as honest as they felt able. All those interviewed were paid for their time via a voucher of their choice. We also made sure we were available before and after the interviews in case there was anything they needed to chat through. The guest's voices came out strongly in the final report and we then used their thoughts and comments to form the basis of our next 3 year strategy.

When developing this strategy, we then held extra consultations with some of the guests which inputted directly into the 2023-2026 strategy and new projects that are currently being developed. Again, guests were paid for this time via vouchers of their choice.

How do you include people with lived experience of homelessness in your recruitment processes?

As the organization began to grow and we recruited more staff members, we paid a previous guest to help us shortlist and be on the interview panel. The expertise and wisdom she brought to this was insightful and useful. We didn't introduce her as a previous guest or a survivor of MSHT, we just introduced her as a 'consultant'. This protected her story.

You mentioned that from the start, you wanted to avoid a tick-box exercise. How do you achieve this in practice?

As part of developing new projects, I have been working with LEAP consultants (Lived Experience Advisory Panel) from the Human Trafficking Foundation. When I asked them about how to avoid being tokenistic in our approach, they said they wanted to know their expertise is having an impact and how it is being implemented. We are at the beginning of our relationship with LEAP and I am looking forward to learning more from them.

One of the new projects we are developing is a 'guest steering group'. This group would potentially feed into the organization at SLT and Board level. I am currently working on how to do this in a psychologically safe way. Again, this is a work in progress.

From a personal perspective, I have always been confused by programmes and projects that make assumptions about what people need without asking them. It feels

very obvious to me that we should be asking people what they need and want rather than just designing programmes we think they need. Learning how to ask those questions in a safe way and then how to include people's wisdom and input into the planning and development at all levels of an organization is the key.

How does this work fit into your wider EDI strategy?

As well as developing the 2023-2026 Strategy, we have also for the first time developed an EDI strategy to sit alongside it. This encompasses all areas of the organization including the Board, staff team, volunteers, guests and supporters. It has detailed, time bound goals for us to achieve in order to progress along our EDI journey.

We are very aware that we still need to include people with lived experience on our Board of Trustees and are working with the Board to prepare the ground for this in order for it to be a safe space. We also need to diversify our staff team and volunteer hosts and this is a work in progress too. We have recently recruited our first host with lived experience of trafficking.