

Co-Production – employing lived experience

Inspiring Change Manchester

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GROW Trainees at Inspiring Change Manchester

Inspiring Change Manchester is part of the Big Lottery Fund's initiative Fulfilling Lives: supporting people with multiple needs. From the outset, co-production has been at the heart and soul of how we operate. A few years ago, the word co-production may have got mentioned, or services and organisations may have put some 'service user representation' on panels or may have sent surveys – perhaps they asked for feedback. Yes, that's a start, but true co-production only comes from embedding lived experience (in our case people who have faced homelessness and other multiple needs such as mental health, addiction and involvement in the criminal justice system) into how we function. One of the ways we have been doing this is to employ people who have this lived experience through a strand of our programme GROW – Getting Real Opportunities of Work.

GROW isn't a completely unique concept to us. Organisations such as St Mungo's in London also have a similar programme – their Apprenticeship Scheme – which our model draws from. At Inspiring Change Manchester, we have co-produced and developed the fundamentals of our GROW trainee programme over the last four years and we continue to do so – branching out into areas of research and evaluation of ICM and embedding the model into Shelter services nationally.

Co-producing the application and shortlisting process

Recruitment of people with lived experience of multiple and complex needs requires an approach that has the involvement of people with lived experience from the beginning. This means right from identifying roles that would benefit from a GROW trainee position, advertising, how to apply, shortlisting and through to interview & appointment – we must have the input from people who are experts by their own experiences. We ensure people who use/have used our services help to write the job descriptions and the advertisements.

Following the application process, our shortlisting panel includes people who have lived experience of multiple needs. This helps us to make sure we are shortlisting the right people. Our interview process is accessible and inclusive, and we focus on the attributes of the individual – we're not expecting people to be work ready in the traditional sense, but we do look for drive and determination to make a difference to the lives of other people with multiple needs, a strong willingness to learn and, crucially, a desire to help change the systems of support or services currently available (more on that later).

Encouraging applications

We go out to services who will be engaging with people with multiple needs to let them know of the opportunities. We hold application support sessions at accessible locations such as libraries where people can ask questions and get help to apply. We make sure the application process is straightforward, and people who are thinking of applying have someone they can talk to – including people who have been or are currently GROW trainees. If someone has applied and wasn't successful we also make sure that feedback is available to them.

Supporting GROW trainees

The support given to GROW trainees during their employment is key to their success. This is not just in terms of their workplace development and future employability – equally important is their holistic wellbeing. Like anyone going through a major change in their lives, entering the world of work and being surrounded by situations that may have been recent triggers to their own histories, GROW trainees do need additional support. In our organisation we have separate Placement/Workplace Supervisors who focus on the day to day aspects of roles and help to develop their professional experience, in addition to this the GROW Development

Officer covers line management and provides overall support and guidance in an open and accessible environment. We have regular 1-1s, access to reflective practice and encourage GROWs to talk and give feedback whenever they want to.

Personal Budgets

Another key element of our GROW traineeships is that each GROW trainee gets a Personal Development Budget of £1500. This gives them additional scope to shape their traineeship in a way that works for themselves. This can be used in many creative and innovative ways. Some have chosen to use this for items such as laptops to help with future job searches or applications, others have pooled it together for some bespoke external training – we've even had one Grow Trainee who used her personal budget to attend a Vanguard Cities Homelessness Conference in Chicago as part of her placement at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. Additionally, some have used their budget for other ways to enhance their wellbeing such as counselling sessions. This flexible approach has meant we can tailor our GROW trainee programme placing the individual at the heart of their development.

Challenges and Opportunities

There have however been challenges. We've had to look at HR processes, get buy-in from areas of our organisation and others that may not traditionally had much input from those with lived experience, even changing how we look at approving expenses regarding the personal budgets has meant we've had to change how we view and value things. Being flexible and a willingness to try out new ideas, led by those on the programme has made this possible – and now we can evidence this has made those challenges a fair bit easier.

I've covered a lot about what the GROW traineeships can do for the individuals on the programme, however it's important to note that the benefits to Inspiring Change Manchester, Shelter and the wider sector that come from having GROW trainees working with us are enormous. The insight that they bring from their own personal backgrounds and experiences mean that we can learn from them and change how we engage with people living with multiple needs. Giving GROW trainees a way to drive systems change and shape our processes from the inside makes us stronger and more credible to those we set out to help. Grow trainees regularly move onto employment throughout the sector which means their impact can be felt far and wide – and long may that continue!

Further information: <https://inspiringchangemanchester.shelter.org.uk/>