

Co-Production – working together to improve homelessness services

Mentoring lived experience to full participation

Wayne Nicholls, Expert Link

Produced by

The Innovation and Good Practice Team and Expert Link

With thanks to

Expert Link's Network and all of the people with lived experience who informed this section

Published

April 2018

Mentoring lived experience to full participation

Introduction

Professionals sometimes expect people who use services to attend meetings or participate without any real preparation. If this doesn't go as planned, they can they write off the possibilities of involving people further in service design or delivery. Many people need support and mentoring to enable them to reach their potential and contribute fully.

My background

I came from a background of my own lived experience. There were certain key professionals along the way who saw things in me that I didn't see in myself at that time. I started working in the community at age 16 or 17 when a youth worker asked me to come in and talk to younger children who were looking up to me and the life I was living at that time. Even though I was still involved, I enjoyed working with the younger people at the youth club talking to them, helping them with their homework. When I was 19, I ended up with a 6 year sentence for gang related violence. I did anger management courses within the Young Offenders Institute (YOI) – the trainers there recognised that I was doing well and encouraged me. When I turned 21, I requested to be moved to an adult prison in London to be with my friends. The prison officers saw my potential and instead put me into an open prison nearby. I was invited by the tutors to come back to the YOI to help with the anger management courses. I then became part of a schools outreach programme from the prison where I would tell my story alongside a prison officer. I realised I can have an impact on other peoples' lives. It gave me confidence to speak in front of crowds and about my own experiences. It gave me a sense of direction. Those people believed in me, encouraged me and helped me develop so I saw the value of mentoring first hand.

When I came out of prison I started volunteering at a Youth Offending Team in North London and from there I started working with young people who were close to being excluded from school. I have since worked in a number of mentoring and supportive roles including for Youth Advocate Programme UK, the Buck Project and Fulfilling Lives. At Fulfilling Lives we were mentoring people with the specific aim of participating in service design, change and improvement. I now work at Expert Link developing our networks of lived experience across the country.

What I have learned about mentoring lived experience

These are the things that I have learned from my experiences – others will have different ideas and experiences that they will bring to this. It's important we all continue to learn from one another.

Building relationships and being real. You have to spend some time together and get to know the person. Create an environment where you can have open discussions. If you come from a background of lived experience you can share that with someone which sets the scene for the people that you are working with to share theirs. It helps you to then have the discussion with them about how they can use their lived experience for service change. That doesn't mean professionals can't build good relationships but they have to do things in a different way – they have to show empathy and understanding. Plus there are ways of letting people know you understand experience without sharing your own personal journey.

Sharing your own story has to be in context. It has to be solution focused – you don't just share your experience for the sake of it – only if there is a reason. It can be helpful to show that my personal experiences were training for who I am now.

Homeless Link

It can take time to build relationships, especially if people have been let down by support workers in the past. They may need you to prove that you are reliable and genuinely interested.

Communicate clearly with people in a language they understand and be open about what you are offering. If you want people to take part, explain what it is that you are hoping they will be involved in and what you are working towards. Be clear about how you can work with them to reach those goals.

Identify people's skills and strengths. People can lack confidence and if you can point out their skills and strengths it can help them to believe in themselves and develop. Often people's life experiences will have given them transferable skills. You can then help them to identify these and develop further.

Put the needs of the person you are working with first. Help them to get to a place when they can get involved if they want to. First and foremost you are mentoring them to get to a place when they are ok. If that means setting aside your objective then so be it. Others may be able to fill in that role in the meantime.

Invite the right person to the right meeting. Is that person ready for that information? You should know where they are at and what they can take on board. Give the person options so that they can choose how to get involved and what level. That doesn't mean we can't stretch someone or encourage them to reach out beyond what they may think or feel. It's potential again – encouraging, uplifting, and giving positive confirmation.

If you're not sure people are ready, have meetings prior to the main one as an introduction and an opportunity to get used to the format. Help people to be engaged and litmus test the meeting. This will also give you the chance to learn whether people are ready and how they may need to develop in order to participate in different ways.

Make sure people are prepared for the meeting or event – look together at the agenda, the minutes and anything else that is important. You might even go through what each part of the meeting will be about and how they fit into each of those parts. People need to understand why they are there. They may listen and learn the first time or participate fully depending on the person.

You may also need to attend the meeting with that person the first few times or make sure there is someone there that they know and feel comfortable with.

You should also help people to learn and develop any new language they may need to use in different environments. Is there jargon or phrases used in the sector that they need to learn in order to understand fully? If you use that language, then they can gradually get used to hearing it and then speaking it.

Introduce people to a community of others who are working towards the same thing so that they aren't isolated. Connecting people with others is essential – if there isn't anything nearby, they may need to tap in to national communities and other groups.

Mentoring is also a two way thing – you learn from that person as much as they learn from you. They're helping you to be a better worker – you both learn and grow. Making that clear can help to reduce the power imbalance. It helps to create the environment for them to find their own power within that.



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless or live with multiple and complex support needs. We work to improve services and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

Let's end homelessness together

Homeless Link
Minories House, 2-5 Minories
London EC3N 1BJ

020 7840 4430

www.homeless.org.uk

Twitter: @Homelesslink

Facebook: www.facebook.com/homelesslink

© Homeless Link 2017. All rights reserved.
Homeless Link is a charity no. 1089173 and
a company no. 04313826.