"IT COMES BEFORE YOUR NAME"

Exploring lived experience roles and stigma in the homelessness sector

SOCIAL RESPONSES TO STIGMA

Groundswell

Out of homelessness

KING'S College LONDON

We'd like to thank everyone who donated their time and knowledge to make this research happen. We're especially grateful to the Social Responses to Stigma Study Advisory Group, and for UKRI for funding us. Most of all though, thank you to everyone who took part in interviews and focus groups; each one of those conversations made this a more enlightening, valuable and enjoyable project.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A recent increase in lived experience voluntary and professional roles across the homelessness sector has benefited individuals, organisations and whole systems. But this feels like an important time to ask some new, perhaps difficult, questions about whether people working in these roles are facing fresh challenges because of how they are perceived by their colleagues and employers. Are they being stigmatised in new ways?

In this peer research study, we asked whether and how championing lived experience can reduce stigmatisation. But we also wanted to know whether a lived experience label can sometimes reinforce or reinvent stigma.

We interviewed 20 people with personal experience of homelessness who were working or volunteering in the homelessness sector. These interviews focused on their experiences of stigmatisation as part of their role.

Our key findings were:

- **Disclosing and discussing lived experience at work has got easier.** In the past, talking about lived experience of homelessness was discouraged in workplaces, leading to a reinforcement of stigmatisation and feelings of shame. More recently though, targeted lived experience recruitment – and an increase in open conversation about its value – has made disclosure easier.
- **People who have been homeless often feel that their professional skills are overlooked.** As people grow into their careers, they can find that their lived experience continues to mark them out while their professional skills go unnoticed. This can present a new barrier to acceptance, integration and progression.
- **A 'glass ceiling' of lived experience can hinder career progression.** Authenticity, or speaking 'from the gut', is seen as a positive attribute for people in lived experience roles, but it can also lead to them being perceived as unprofessional. Many of our participants felt that they needed to try harder than their colleagues to fit into professional moulds.
- **With good progression support, people with lived experience of homelessness can thrive in senior roles.** Overcoming feelings of 'otherness' and pressures to compromise authenticity often depends on support and understanding from employing organisations.
- **People can feel like their lived experience is commodified.** Talking about and valuing lived experience can bring new problems. Organisations can feel pressured into reinforcing stigma by putting staff and volunteers with lived experience on display and presenting them as different. Key to resolving this is ensuring that people have control over their own stories.

This report concludes with recommendations for organisations that support staff and volunteers who have personal experience of homelessness, as well as for organisations that fund or commission them:

- **Staff and volunteers should have choice over disclosing their own experiences.** Take steps to ensure that nobody has to talk about personal experiences unless they feel comfortable and have enough information to make that choice.
- **Promote a culture of lived experience, not individuals.** Workplaces in which lived experience is the norm rather than the exception are welcoming and safer for people who are, or who have been, homeless. We should spotlight the collective strength generated by these workplaces, not the individuals within them.
- **Foster progression in trauma-informed ways.** Ensure that trauma-informed training and practices are in place across organisations and consider how to use them to support people to reach their potential.
- **Focus on strengths, not perceived inabilities.** People who have experienced homelessness are as likely as anyone else to have strengths and skills beyond their lived experience. It benefits everyone to take advantage of them.
- **Recognise the diversity of lived experience.** Experiences of homelessness vary immensely, especially when we consider the many other parts of people's identity – such as ethnicity or gender identity – for which they might also experience stigmatisation. It is essential that we don't forget about this diversity of experience and that we commit to increasing our understanding about it.

TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

Lived experience: In this report, we use the term 'lived experience' interchangeably with 'personal experience'. When used in connection to homelessness, we are referring to first-hand experiences of being homeless. We use the word 'homelessness' in its broadest sense including – but not limited to – rough sleeping, living in supported housing or temporary accommodation, and forms of hidden homelessness such as sofa-surfing.

Learned experience: Knowledge and understanding of homelessness gained through means other than lived experience, such as professional or academic experience. A given individual might have both lived and learned experience of homelessness.`

Coproduction: A way of designing, delivering, improving and commissioning services in which people with lived experience work in collaboration with commissioners, service managers and staff teams. By many definitions, coproduction differs from other forms of engagement by regarding people with lived experience as equal partners.

Client: In this context, clients are people who are currently receiving support from homelessness services.

Stigma: Stigma refers to the humiliating ways that people are marked out as different because of power inequalities. **Stigmatisation** is the social processes through which this happens.

WHY WE DID THIS RESEARCH

The expansion of lived experience

Recent years have seen a rapid growth in roles or processes emphasising lived experience involvement in the homelessness sector. This has happened in several ways. Volunteers and paid staff with personal experience of homelessness have increasingly been recruited by charities and local authorities. Coproduction is becoming far more common, with contributions to service design or commissioning sought from people who have themselves experienced homelessness, often in an unpaid capacity. Peer research, in which people who have experience of the subject being explored are central to carrying out and designing the research, is also becoming more common.

There is a growing consensus that integrating expertise and insights gained through personal experience of homelessness can lead to numerous benefits, not just for individuals but for organisations, the whole sector and wider society. While we firmly believe this to be true, the rapid growth of lived experience recruitment makes this an important time to reflect on current practices and to try to understand what we can do better.

As one of the most established organisations working with lived experience in the homelessness sector – two thirds of Groundswell's staff team and all our volunteers have experienced some form of homelessness – we had pressing reasons to reflect on any challenges with having a workforce with personal experience of homelessness.

Talking about stigma

Groundswell's involvement in the Social Responses to Stigma project provided an opportunity to consider these challenges. *Social Responses to Stigma* is an ongoing study led by King's College London looking at how people impacted by homelessness are treated by healthcare, welfare, housing and legal services. The study aims to better understand the connections between stigma at individual and structural levels, to allow targeting of efforts to challenge stigma at these structural levels.

Stigma has been defined and talked about in many ways, but some have been particularly helpful to us in collecting and analysing our data. Rather than thinking about stigma as something fixed, done by one person or group to another, we've found it useful to think about stigmatisation as a process.

Stigmatisation can happen when some people have more power than others. People with less power can then be labelled, marked out as different, and negatively stereotyped. This stigmatisation can lead to discrimination and, in turn, being further excluded or excluded in new ways. Stigmatisation is a process. It involves us all in one way or another, perhaps at some points stigmatising, at other points stigmatised.

Is lived experience stigmatised?

Collectively, we wanted to understand if and how lived experience roles might be stigmatised. While such roles have undoubtedly helped some people to overcome stigma, experiences for others might not be so straightforward; the same lived experience roles that are hoped to be a positive force for change might also create new challenges and new forms of stigma. It felt important to ask whether, and how, lived experience roles can reduce the effects of stigma. But we also wanted to understand if there are ways in which they reinforce it, or even create new ways of stigmatising people. In order to reduce or mitigate the impact of stigmatisation for people with lived experience of homelessness, we also wanted to know what good practice looks like and what we in the homelessness sector can do to improve.

Conducting this research therefore meant asking ourselves some difficult questions. But, through talking among the research team, as well as to colleagues, volunteers and partner organisations across the sector, we realised that some of these questions were already being asked. This research was an attempt to formalise some of those questions and to continue to consider the answers, no matter how hard they were to hear.

Just by doing this research, and by writing and publishing this report, we may inadvertently be part of this stigmatising process. Described here are peoples' experiences: experiences that might have been difficult to share and traumatic to relive. In trying to explore and summarise them, we've tried our best to be sensitive in how we talk about lived experience, but we risk raising ideas that other people could find challenging, offensive or stigmatising. For example, we've used the term 'lived experience' throughout this report because many people use and value it, but we've also spoken to people who find it misleading or otherwise problematic.

Such challenges may be inevitable, but we see this report as being part of a wider conversation about lived experience, homelessness and stigma. We hope that it sparks further questions and solutions to tackle stigma in the future, across the homelessness sector and beyond.

WHAT WE DID

Peer Research

We used a peer research methodology. Peer research is commonly defined as research co-designed and conducted by people who have personal experience of the issue being investigated. This generally means having experience of living with a specific disadvantage, or belonging to a marginalised community. Taking a peer research approach can be effective in reducing power imbalances that occur between researcher and research participant.

This research was carried out by two Groundswell staff researchers. Both of us have ourselves experienced some form of homelessness but, perhaps more relevantly, we have experience of working in roles in which lived experience of homelessness has been considered important. Since all participants for this research had personal experience of homelessness and were working or volunteering in the homelessness sector, we expected that our own experience would help to build trust and rapport in the interviews.

As researchers, our own relationships with a lived experience label has inevitably affected our own professional identities and will have informed the topics we were interested in asking participants, as well as our interpretations of their responses. For example, our findings include obstacles that inhibited participants' career progression, but we may have overemphasised these findings because of our own career frustrations. Equally, we might have overlooked things we heard that didn't resonate with our own experiences. We tried to be mindful of our own biases and assumptions and to reflect on them throughout the project, but they will certainly have influenced our analysis, perhaps by prioritising and emphasising some findings over others.

The peer research process involved an ongoing dialogue with researchers from King's College London, through the *Social Responses to Stigma* project. That team drew on additional, complimentary experiences of social research and of past work in the homelessness sector. Through discussions between the Groundswell and King's College London teams, we identified this topic of stigmatisation and lived experience roles as a priority. We met regularly so that ideas could be aired and considered from different perspectives.

Who we spoke to

In order to identify initial topics for exploration, we ran a focus group with 10 Groundswell staff members. Some focus group participants, but not all, had lived experience of homelessness. The group explored ideas of personal choice over disclosure, and conflicting priorities when working with funders and partners.

We then carried out interviews with 20 people with personal experience of homelessness who were working or volunteering in the homelessness sector. We aimed to maximise diversity in their roles, seniority, type of organisation and geographical area.

Seven participants worked or volunteered with us at Groundswell; the remaining 13 worked or volunteered at other homelessness organisations across England, or in other roles that focused on homelessness. In total, six were volunteers and the remaining 14 were paid staff members (though many staff members had started their careers as volunteers). Many of the participants we recruited were already known to our team. We recruited others through a snowballing method: participants sometimes introduced us to people they knew who also fitted our inclusion criteria.

Sometimes, interview participants' responses prompted new questions that required us to speak to new people. Roles of the 20 people we spoke to included front-facing staff and volunteers, senior managers and trustees.

Because we wanted to maintain confidentiality as much as possible within such a small research project, and because asking conventional demographic questions can be highly stigmatising, we didn't ask directly for participants' demographic information. However, we strongly suspect that differences in characteristics like ethnicity and sexuality can lead to very different experiences of working and volunteering in the homelessness sector and of stigmatisation in general. We therefore acknowledge that this research doesn't represent all relevant lived experience perspectives.

Early interviews were largely unstructured, as we continued to remain open to new ideas and perspectives. Following a review of this early data, we developed interview guides. Interviews after this point were semi-structured. We continued to review data as we gathered it and emerging themes informed new interview questions, even towards the end of the fieldwork period. Our interview style emphasised transparency about who we were, the reasons for the study, and especially our struggles with exploring the questions. In interviews we presented back emerging findings and analytical ideas to get participants' responses. This meant that, in a sense, participants played a key role in analysing the data.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We found that experiences of stigmatisation for people with lived experience of homelessness in paid and voluntary roles were complex, varied and fluid. These experiences changed throughout people's careers, from starting out volunteering to reaching – or not reaching – senior staff positions and beyond.

Safer workplaces to disclose personal experience

Several participants told us that they had worked in the sector for several years. During that time they felt that lived experience had become more prized in the sector and beyond. Evidence for this was that paid and voluntary practices such as peer research and peer support have become more commonplace, even desirable. Some participants had previously felt ashamed of their past, or undervalued because of it, and had been unwilling to talk about it. But the increased profile of lived experience had had a positive impact.

> *"Yeah, of myself and of the whole concept of lived experience: I thought it was something to be ashamed of and I thought it was something that we had to hide, and it wasn't something that we could talk about. But it entirely changed my perception. I've come to realise how valuable it is. In my current role now, I think my lived experience helps me to connect with the volunteers and the other staff members with lived experience and it helps to smooth the conversations. And it helps to build trust, I think."*

In the past, this sense of shame had been fed through active discouragement from disclosing personal experiences. Revealing a history of homelessness was, and occasionally still is, seen as problematic or even unsafe in many workplaces. Some participants had avoided telling colleagues, while others described early-career memories of managers explicitly deterring them from telling clients about their pasts. Disclosing such information might have led to judgement from other staff or to being otherwise disadvantaged. Consequently, shame experienced when they were homeless had felt present and vivid.

> *"I had a job in supported housing and I didn't disclose at all that I'd had lived experience of homelessness there … I don't think I disclosed because I kind of felt a sense of shame. I wasn't as confident as I am now as a person, I was a lot younger, and I kind of just wanted to get on with it. I didn't want to kind of, you know, have that associated with me. I just kind of wanted to get on with my life."*

Commonly, this shame in disclosing personal history was experienced as a fear of being seen as different or marked out as a vulnerable person. Underlying this was a perceived message that lived experience was not useful enough to be worth the risk of revealing it.

But things were thought to be improving. This was largely because lived experience is valued more now that "the respect has gone up a little bit more". Lived experience has begun to be sought out. While previously the sector may have inadvertently helped to reinforce the stigmatisation that people had encountered when homeless, more positive attitudes have meant that this is no longer so likely. Participants who started out in the last few years tended to report having felt accepted and appreciated rather than shamed or discriminated against.

> *"I felt like I was seen to have so much value. It never felt like – I just never felt the stigma once I started volunteering. I'd seen – I was able to see, like, my experiences as valuable because they were being used in a positive way in terms of being able to support the people."*

Participants could see for themselves that their personal experiences had positive effects on supporting people who were currently homeless, but they also received validation from elsewhere. Some felt that their unique insights were prized by managers and other colleagues.

> *"[My manager] would come to me and go, 'well, what do you think?', because he knew that I had that experience and I've been in that situation, so he kind of leaned on me more for that perspective, which I kind of valued, actually."*

Being asked to share personal stories, often in public, was another way in which the value of participants' lived experience had been relayed. By no means did all participants agree that this was a positive practice, and this will be explored below, but, in the short term at least, it could create feelings of great pride.

> *"I was asked to go on stage and I told my story and, you know, it was wonderful because I hid it for so many years. That's why it took me so long: I was ashamed of my past, because … I was made to feel ashamed because of all the services I came across trying to get support. So I hid my past for 25 years and I just plodded along and nobody knew what experience I had in the background, so the minute I let it out was the best day of my life."*

Employees who have been homeless are no longer asked to hide their past but are often encouraged to share it. This has been augmented by a recent sector-wide drive to actively recruit people with personal experience of homelessness. Practices such as including lived experience in job advertisements and person specifications has helped some participants to feel less stigmatised.

A result of this targeted recruitment is the growth of workplaces in which a greater number of staff and volunteers have experienced homelessness. This could mean that participants were less likely to feel that they stood out, and more likely to feel comfortable with discussing and utilising their own experience of homelessness.

> *"I am fortunate that I'm working with people – we've all experienced homelessness and we all know destitution and all that sort – but I don't know how I would react if, say, if I were working for a company where I was the only homeless person and I just happened to mention it."*

When lived experience permeates an entire organisation, it can bring about a workplace culture shift. If there's space to openly discuss lived experience, any stigma attached to having been homeless can be lessened.

> *"I think what's being done to stop people feeling stigmatised is open conversations and not having that taboo – feeling like you can't talk about it."*

> *"I'm not feeling like there's much stigma, if any at all, within [my organisation], because of the people I work with, because we all share the same values, we all share the same beliefs, we're all on the same wavelength, we're all on the same page and these – it's just a culture: the culture's different."*

Being seen as professional: the glass ceiling of lived experience

While the acceptance and mainstreaming of lived experience roles in workplaces may have helped to remove barriers to integration and equality, many of our participants still perceived workplace divisions between people with and without experience of homelessness. The word 'professional' came up a lot. Homelessness was often seen as contrasting to professionalism and, for some, acquiring a lived experience label meant having to work harder to prove professional worth.

Participants were concerned that revealing any experience of homelessness to employers and colleagues had fed unjust assumptions of a lack of professional experience or competency – sometimes even basic IT skills.

> *"I'm very paranoid about always like – people think I'm dumb, or people think I'm a bit thick. And … my experience makes me think that you're just looking at me as like, 'alright, you've got the job because you've got lived experience' … And I'm like, 'look, I've probably got more relevant qualifications and experience than you. Yes, I was unemployed and homeless but I had a whole like two careers before I did that,' and … it's just like, 'oh right, you're lived experience.'"*

This participant was one of several who suspected that their education and professional experience had been ignored or overlooked by other professionals who had been unable to see past their experience of homelessness. This was part of a wider pattern in which colleagues who "probably mean well" made assumptions about capability, and inadvertently acted or spoke in ways participants found condescending. But knowing how – or whether – participants should address this had been challenging, often because they had benefited short-term from being treated differently. One participant told a story about being let off for inappropriate office behaviour after her boss found out about her past. His casual dismissal – "oh, you've got lived experience … that makes sense" – had ensured that she avoided immediate consequences, but the experience exposed a "definite difference between me and him" that made her feel "talked down to".

Some participants, however, acknowledged that being treated differently was sometimes necessary. Different levels and types of support might be needed for people who have been homeless, but accepting that support could often lead to feeling like others had lowered their expectations. As one volunteer put it:

> *"I do expect to be treated different. I'm very aware that, like, I'm a lived experience person involved in all of this and, you know what, I know I stick out, like, because I've gone through a lot and I maybe do need a little bit of the padded gloves … I think having the support is good, but at the same time, when do you loosen the reins and not treat us like these damaged people?"*

We found that the balance shifted considerably throughout people's careers. Participants who had worked in the sector for a long time could start to feel patronised. When they had built up more learned experience than lived experience, being taken less seriously than colleagues, or being seen as unprofessional, was more likely to feel like stigmatisation.

> *"Even when I've been to meetings and they've asked me for my input, I've always felt like, yeah, they took a bit of my input, but they've not really listened to it because I'm not experienced and I'm not professional enough for them to take that on board. And they'd rather listen to someone who was more professional, so I've always felt like that, to be perfectly honest with you, and this is what I've always been fighting, you know, fighting. Yeah, and I think nearly every single person I've talked to with lived experiences in the work environment feels exactly the same."*

With several participants, we further explored what professionalism means. Most talked about language and ways of presenting themselves. They felt that there were ways of speaking that came more naturally to other professionals – especially those with extensive academic or professional experience – than to themselves. This meant that they were always at risk of being exposed and marked out as different, sometimes even after years of working in the sector. This could make people feel inadequate, frustrated or out of place.

> *"I haven't worked in this field for a long time, so I don't know all the jargon and all the acronyms. I'm not academic – I don't talk academically – I just talk from the gut basically and sometimes I find it hard to articulate how I actually think or feel and so that's a challenge."*

This idea of people with lived experience talking "from the gut" came up several times. When working in front-facing roles, participants had felt that a more intuitive, authentic, direct way of communicating had been valued because it had helped to facilitate interactions with clients, but this way of speaking might not translate well to office environments or senior roles. 'Lived experience' attributes prized by employers – being able to communicate fluidly as 'peers' with people experiencing homelessness – were therefore the same attributes that hindered career progression.

In several interviews, both with participants who had made significant progress in their careers and those who had not, we discussed the concept of a "glass ceiling", in which lived experience becomes a barrier at a certain point in a hierarchy.

> *"I would say that [lived experience] definitely becomes less palatable as you become more senior or as you're seeking more senior roles, and I think that there's some connection there with the idea that people in positions of leadership are supposed to be, you know, these consummate kind of professionals. And actually there's still a sense that your lived experience is kind of in opposition to that in a way, that what you're bringing as lived experience is that, kind of, the passion and the feelings, and that somehow feelings shouldn't be connected to professional work, which I would refute personally but definitely is what happens, I think, in the sector."*

Some participants told us that they had been able to overcome these barriers by learning how to alter their ways of speaking to align with employers and colleagues. In at least one case, this meant being tutored to do so by a manager. Deciding whether to learn to be more professional often represented a stark choice between career progression and authenticity.

> *"If you try and get someone to join the leadership, you're asking that person to kind of forego a lot of the things that they are, probably to compromise a few things on the way there and feel a bit sad about, you know."*

Some participants had chosen to make these compromises, while others had sacrificed career success in favour of maintaining authentic relationships with lived experience colleagues, volunteers, clients and, crucially, themselves. Occasionally though, this dilemma could be resolved through a combination of overcoming self-doubt and the support and faith of managers.

> *"I think I've been really lucky in terms of the organisations I've worked for and the people that I've worked with because I've had nothing but encouragement, and it's other people initially saying, 'you should do that; you'd be excellent for that; why don't you put your name forward?'; doing it, and probably interviewing really badly, but people giving you a chance and then growing in. So there were very few moments in my career where I felt comfortable in the job that I'm doing. I usually feel like I've got imposter syndrome and whether that's because I kind of push myself or whether that's also something to do with my internalised – I wouldn't really label it as shame anymore, I'd just say my internalised feeling of otherness. So, yeah, it's mainly through encouragement at those kind of more middle management levels that pushed me to go for them."*

A few participants who had worked in the sector long-term had learned to alter how they communicated and presented themselves and had begun to exercise more choice over when – and if – they revealed their past. How skilfully and selectively they did this could make a significant difference to how they were perceived.

> *"I do talk about my lived experience a bit, and I certainly talk about my life, I guess, in my work, which I think somehow maybe sets me apart from other people but not always in a good way, or not necessarily in a good way for me. But I definitely still feel nervous about saying it in some spaces. There are some spaces where it feels useful and other places where it feels like it might be detrimental to people's engagement with what I'm saying."*

Ongoing nervousness at talking about lived experience is a reminder that managing how we communicate and present ourselves can be hard. Some people might not want to do it, or even be able to, which might mean bigger disadvantages and challenges.

Commodification and the true value of lived experience

Having control over disclosing lived experience was key across the spectrum of participants we spoke to. Something that came up repeatedly in our interviews was the idea of having agency over lived experience narratives and personal stories. This could make a huge difference to how comfortable people felt in their roles and with the identity of being a lived experience employee. But this was another area in which many participants believed there had been significant improvements in the sector over the last few years. Several had felt that they – or their colleagues with lived experience – were far less likely to be "rolled out" or "put on display" to share personal stories about their homelessness than they were in the past. A staff member at one organisation told us that individuals with lived experience had been singled out in the past to tell their personal stories of homelessness publicly but that the organisation had listened to feedback and ended this practice. This change had helped people with lived experience feel less stigmatised as it had prevented them from feeling picked out as different or coerced into disclosing personal information.

Despite recent changes though, some feelings of being put on display persist. People with lived experience can feel like they're mined for their past experiences and pressured to disclose them via agendas that are outside of their control or understanding. Some people we spoke to said that they'd been called on unexpectedly to tell personal stories while attending events and meetings in an unrelated professional capacity.

> *"Because of this thing where people think – because they know – that you've got lived experience, they can call on you to retell your story at any given moment without any notice. It's like they want you in a meeting because of your job and then then they'll go, 'but you've got lived experience; tell us about that'. And I actually had that in a [university] meeting where I was invited because of my knowledge of something else, and then it was like, 'but you've been homeless and have mental health; tell us about that.' And I was like, but, but, but, but that's not why I'm here. I don't mind talking about it if you tell me that's why you want me in the room, but if you call me in for something else, why do you think that you've got access to this horrible crap that I've lived through?"*

People described not feeling in control over when they told their own stories:

> *"I've never felt like I can say no when somebody has called upon my story because it's like, all of a sudden, all the faces in the room look at you and by then it's kind of like, well, everybody now knows I've got lived experience. What the hell. I didn't necessarily want them to know I've got lived experience, but when you're called upon, it's very transparent that, you know, these experiences have happened to you, so you may as well just get the story and I'll make a kind of like – just decide how to talk about it. But yeah, it comes before your name it feels like sometimes."*

Volunteers, and people in the early stages of their professional careers, were often happy to be open about their background, and were sometimes grateful for the opportunity to share their stories, but this might not last indefinitely, or even be consistent. For those who felt that their professional experience had superseded their personal experience of homelessness, a lived experience label could feel like a burden. Becoming known to external organisations for having lived experience, or having 'peer' in a job title, could make that label feel inescapable, leading some participants to fear that they would never be seen as just another professional.

With several participants, we explored why lived experience had become so highly valued in recent years. While participants generally agreed that unique, valuable contributions are made by staff and volunteers with lived experience, it was with a degree of scepticism about the real reasons people with lived experience were so frequently asked to share their history or their opinions. This could eventually lead to feeling jaded.

> *"Why is our experience so prized? You know, it's like I know what that felt like; I don't know why you find it so valuable. But, I mean, this is just – I don't know – how I look at it sometimes. I think I don't know why. We just seem to be like kind of, yes, put on a pedestal sometimes and kind of like, 'can you come talk about your story?' And I think sometimes it gets a bit tiring."*

> *"I have to, you know, put forward my views, you know, put forward my label all the time, and they always want someone there. It's like a hot topic at the moment, isn't it? And I don't always want to have to share it, and eventually I'll get to a point where I don't."*

For participants with more professional experience in the sector, such feelings of being stuck with a lived experience label centred around a perception that lived experience was being treated as a commodity, or "a resource". Commissioners, funders and academic institutions were perceived as creating a demand across the homelessness sector, and this "fetishisation of lived experience" could put pressure on organisations and individuals to deliver it. While the net effect of this increase in value may be positive, it could also be problematic. People in senior roles, for instance, might find themselves responsible for generating income through lived experience. This could make them feel like they were selling colleagues' personal history, sometimes without the capacity and resources to provide them with adequate support or information. Participants had stood against this.

> *"They wanted people with lived experience to speak and it's like, I don't know, next week or something stupid like that, and we were like, 'no, no, just can't be done,' like I'm not getting on the phone to somebody and explaining a big project like that and trying to do it within a week and meet with them to make sure they feel alright."*

This appetite for lived experience stories, insights and expertise also raised questions over who gets to decide what lived experience should look like and who is represented by it. Some participants were concerned about organisations being pressured to ensure that lived experience is visible and distinctive. This could create a need to downplay the nuance and breadth of homelessness experiences in favour of entrenching stereotypes, which in turn could reinforce stigma and exclude those whose experiences were different.

> *"I've never been asked to participate in something as someone with lived experience, ever, but they will make reference to it when I'm in a space. But because they want someone who looks like they have lived experience and sounds like they have lived experience … I think you end up in this really gross kind of hierarchy of oppression, where only people whose experience of homelessness has included rough sleeping is perceived as the correct lived experience, whereas, of course, there's loads of forms of homelessness that are equally harmful where the person may not have slept on the streets. And so, for me, there's a real kind of – we're in this place where we love lived experience, but we still haven't got comfortable enough with it that we don't need to sort of wave a flag when it's in the room."*

LIVED EXPERIENCE AND POWER

Taken together, these findings point to a disconnect between how we, as a sector, talk about valuing lived experience and how people with lived experience can feel like they really are valued.

For a long time, people who have been homeless have worked and volunteered in the homelessness sector. What has changed, as lived experience has become more mainstream, is that talking openly and unashamedly in workplaces about having been homeless has felt easier.

But these findings suggest that there's still a way to go until people with lived experience have access to the same opportunities as their colleagues. Partly, this is because the very popularity of lived experience risks placing more value on people's pasts than on the skills and knowledge that they currently contribute.

When lived experience is seen as precious and valuable, organisations that have recruited and nurtured people who have been homeless may be under pressure to promote their lived experience credentials. It can be difficult to do this without singling out individuals. This in turn may lead to people feeling marked out as different and therefore treated in a different way. This is almost certainly unintentional, but we can nevertheless read it as a form of stigmatisation.

In order to prevent stigmatisation, we might need to think about who gets to set the value, or the price, of lived experience; who decides how, when and why people with lived experience are involved in decision-making? Who decides which lived experiences are represented and which aren't? Who ensures that people who have been homeless continue to be seen as being less professional unless they change how they act and behave? Ultimately, this is about power.

Our intention for this research was to ask people about their personal experiences of working and volunteering in the homelessness sector, but some interviews turned towards discussions on how stigmatisation comes about and how it might affect others across the sector. The idea of power came up a lot: who holds it, how it creates and reinforces the stigmatisation of people with lived experience, and how it might be won back.

As we discussed the idea of lived experience as a commodity, some participants reflected further on the powerlessness of people with lived experience within that system. Participatory activities are often promoted as redressing power imbalances, but people with lived experience have very little power if they're only invited to participate in predefined ways. Bringing about genuine equality for people with lived experience would require decision-makers to actively give up power. This is especially the case for volunteers who are involved in coproduction projects.

> *"It's about the system and the power structures. If they want to do coproduction and the lived experience work, they've got to stop inviting the hopes of power to join in in little windows of opportunity. And they've got to deconstruct a little bit and come this way a bit. They've got to reverse the flow a little bit. It's a gravitational pull toward power a lot of the time … You know, it's like, 'can you get someone to come to this consultation? Can you get someone? We really, really want to hear your voice as long as it's within this structure at this time and it finishes at this time. Barring that, you don't have a voice, we don't want to know.'"*

Another participant continued this line of thinking by suggesting that seeking lived experience input via discrete channels can reinforce power imbalances. By creating a separate route for engagement and a separate means of involvement in decision-making, lived experience roles actually maintain the idea that lived experience roles are less powerful. Emphasising the distinctiveness of lived experience, even in a way that feels positive, therefore runs the risk of worsening stigma.

> *"I query the way that coproduction, and some of those other terms we might use to describe the way we bring lived experience into developing new things, is actually kind of a way of shoring up the lack of power that people with lived experience have, because it keeps you in always this coproduction space, and it always keeps coproduction kind of separate from the proper policy development. It's sort of like, well, we develop it with these professionals, and then we do some coproduction and actually, to me, that is really flawed."*

A message that came out of some of the interviews with participants who have extensive experience of the sector was that if we want to address these power imbalances we need to stop thinking about the "idea of the normal and the other". But not othering people with lived experience isn't the same as treating them the same as everyone else. One participant suggested thinking about lived experience the same way we think about protected characteristics such as race, gender and disability. Assumptions would not be made about what people with lived experience are capable of, but additional support would nevertheless be mandatory.

> *"If you kind of look at a different protected characteristic … employers have a responsibility to level the playing field and make reasonable adaptions for people to be able to be included and be involved, and I think the same is true for people that have stigma because of their lived experience … I've seen people with lived experience pushed into roles that they're not ready for … and that has set people up to fail miserably and is more damaging than there being no support at all, I think. But then I've also seen it work really well. I've also seen people really limiting, putting limiting beliefs, projecting them onto people because they've got lived experience. So, it's kind of both sides of the coin, really. So I think for me, the only way to really tackle it is to give it the kind of gravity it deserves and treat it as a recognised kind of protected characteristic."*

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEW QUESTIONS

The following recommendations are based on our research findings and through discussion with colleagues and partners in and outside of Groundswell. We've separated them into recommendations for two audiences:

- Organisations that recruit staff and volunteers with lived experience of homelessness
- Funders and commissioners of organisations that employ staff and volunteers with lived experience

However, if we're thinking about stigma socially, and not just at an individual level, then these are recommendations for everyone, including individual staff members. Effectively tackling stigma means addressing it together.

While this research focused exclusively on people working in the homelessness sector, many of our recommendations are likely to apply anywhere that lived experience is championed. The extent of this will vary considerably from sector to sector but, if you do work or volunteer in another sector, we hope you find this useful.

We support the inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness whenever possible, but this inclusion needs to be meaningful and considered. If these recommended steps seem too resource-heavy, or impossible for any other reason, ask whether you are involving people with lived experience for the right reasons.

Our recommendations aren't intended to be the last word on this subject, and you might disagree with some or all of them. What's important though is that people with lived experience of homelessness continue to be involved in the conversation as it continues.

We recommend that:

Staff and volunteers should have choice over disclosing their own experiences.

Homelessness, for most people affected by it, is a temporary experience. As such, lived experience of homelessness may not be an identity that staff and volunteers want to hold onto, especially as experiences of homelessness are so often traumatic. In many roles, it may never be appropriate or relevant for staff or volunteers to disclose anything about their personal lives, but there are likely to be times when talking about personal experience has profound benefits: building rapport with clients or research participants, for example. Nevertheless, the more we focus on individuals' stories, the less we can focus on the social, political and economic drivers of homelessness. Personal stories of homelessness aren't just problematic for people who tell them; they also risk reinforcing blame towards individuals in general.

For employing organisations:

- Be certain that using stories, images or experiences of the people you work with is the best – or only – way to achieve a positive outcome for your organisation.
- Avoid singling out individuals to relay personal stories. Make requests across your team asking for volunteers.
- People with lived experience should never be pressured into saying anything they're not comfortable with, and should have complete control over what they reveal about themselves. Keep in mind that the people you work with might feel indebted and unable to say no.
- Collect and present any information people need before asking them to agree to be featured, or to present in person. This could include:
  - The format through which their stories will be shared;
  - Exactly what images or narratives will be used and whether they will get a final say on these;
  - How long it will be accessible (if it's online, this means explaining that it may be out of their control: images, video and text can be downloaded and saved from the web).
- For individuals who do want to disclose or share their personal experiences, consider support such as aftercare or tailored supervision. This could be planned together beforehand.
- Things change for people over time. Continue to check and agree parameters. Not hearing from a person doesn't mean they continue to consent.

For commissioners and funders:

- Consider potential impacts on individuals before requesting the disclosure of personal experiences. Avoid making requests unless you have a clear purpose or rationale.

Promote a culture of lived experience, not individuals.

Workplaces that accommodate many people with personal experience of homelessness can engender a positive and supportive culture, normalising lived experience and stimulating the sort of conversations that lead to continued improvements in practice. Celebrate them. Sometimes a specific project might benefit from the specialised expertise of individuals with lived experience of homelessness but, more commonly, the collective knowledge and insight gathered from a team that includes people who have been homeless is what we should be promoting to partners, clients and stakeholders.

For employing organisations:

- Think about how to reframe the advantages gained from lived experience expertise as organisational, sector-wide and societal, rather than individual. This might come into play when choosing wording for funding applications or website material, for example. An important way to ensure this is possible and meaningful is to work out how to integrate lived experience across as many teams as possible within your organisation, rather than just a single lived experience team. This will help to make your workplace a safe one for people to talk about their experiences.
- Consider seeking feedback from individuals with lived experience to help shape how your culture can be enriched. For this process to meaningful, it must permeate everything, not just occasions that call for specific lived experience knowledge.

For commissioners and funders:

- Ask yourself whether knowledge about individual project staff backgrounds is necessary or relevant when commissioning organisations to manage projects. Evidence that an organisation or a team has the collective expertise gained from lived experience should, in most cases, be enough, and can be achieved with anonymised data.

Foster progression in trauma-informed ways.

Some of our participants acknowledged that people who have been homeless might need additional support at work, given their past experiences. Learning how to be trauma-informed can be an important way to do this, but such support needs to be person-centred, not merely responding to generalisations about what homelessness is. We need to acknowledge that anyone working in the homelessness sector may have experienced trauma or might need other tailored support to allow them to succeed.

For employing organisations:

- Use training and ongoing conversations to make your organisation as trauma-informed as possible. Understanding how best to be trauma-informed can be confusing and challenging but setting it as a priority can be an important first step. Training on subjects such as cultural competence and unconscious bias will also help with this, especially for people without personal experience of homelessness.

- This needs to go alongside opportunities for staff and volunteer progression that includes serious consideration of how to ensure equal opportunities for people with lived experience. This also means ensuring that those staff are properly remunerated for their work.

- Consider what might inhibit career progression. As people progress through their careers, things may change. Some people may be proud of their past and choose to continue talking about it. For others, the relevance of their lived experience may decrease. Think about the possible impact of adding labels to job or voluntary role titles. Including words such as 'peer', for instance, might unnecessarily draw attention to a past of homelessness or unfairly imply an absence of professional skills.

- Develop holistic, person-centred plans to ensure the wellbeing of each staff member, designed in dialogue and based on self-reported needs. Make sure you have the time, skills and experience in your team to conduct meaningful and supportive line management.

- Challenge your assumptions about professionalism. If you value lived experience, but your lived experienced staff act or speak in ways that don't seem professional enough, ask yourself who's in the best position to change that.

For commissioners and funders:

- Organisations need to provide adequate support and progression opportunities for staff and volunteers who have been homeless or have had other traumatic experiences. Factoring in resources for things like progression support and reflective practice sessions might increase overall costs but will improve the quality of the work and hugely benefit staff long-term. If organisations feel pressured to promise lived experience input without factoring in these costs, they may end up doing more harm than good.

- Hold organisations to account. Ask for evidence that they are responsible and supportive when working with people with lived experience.

Focus on strengths, not perceived inabilities.

We often focus on how people are damaged and traumatised by homelessness but this can mean that we lose sight of their strengths. These strengths may or may not come from their experience of homelessness. People may well be experts by experience, and they may want to utilise that expertise, but they are also likely to have other strengths and skills. Be led by the person, not their past.

For employing organisations:

- Learn to be asset-based. It's rarely helpful to consider anyone's professional skills as being entirely defined by their experiences of homelessness; they are just as likely as anyone else to have a breadth of skills and abilities.
- People who have been homeless may need additional support to help draw out these skills. Give volunteers and staff the opportunity to tell you what skills they want to use and to develop.

For commissioners and funders:

- Think more about the strengths that people who have been homeless might actually bring to a project or a process than on any positive publicity gained through giving lived experience a voice. Identifying your own gaps in expertise – and considering whether and how people with lived experience can fill those gaps – is key to this.

Recognise the diversity of lived experience

Experiences of homelessness are not universal; one person's lived experience will be very different to another's. This is especially the case for those who are already stigmatised for other reasons, such as their gender identity, ethnicity, sexuality or disability. The scope of this research didn't allow us to explore these ideas in any depth but we firmly believe that they deserve much more consideration. Be reflective about how various forms of intersecting identities might shape the experiences of people impacted by homelessness, and make sure this understanding informs how you build your work team and think about lived experience.

For employing organisations:

- Avoid the trap of thinking that staff and volunteers with lived experience represent all first-hand perspectives of homelessness. Instead, look for meaningful and sensitive ways to bring in the views and abilities of people who are excluded in other ways.

For commissioners and funders:

- There's plenty more to learn about the stigmatisation of homelessness lived experience. If your organisation can, consider funding research and development projects that explore how the stigmatisation discussed in this report might intersect with stigma encountered by other marginalised groups.

ABOUT THE SOCIAL RESPONSES TO STIGMA PROJECT

This report on stigma and lived experience roles in the homelessness sector is part of the Social Responses to Stigma project.

The project is tackling the stigma that can be attached to homelessness. Through research with people across south London we want to understand how stigma is experienced and how stigma is created, mediated or overcome in the social systems that people engage with. The research will be used to develop new responses to stigma that take action in these social systems.

This project is supported by a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship [grant number MR/T040688/1].

The project is led by a team within King's College London partnering with Groundswell, the Lambeth Service Users Council and Museum of Homelessness. The project is grateful for the energy and ideas of people across south London who have contributed to the study.

Website: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/social-responses-to-stigma

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King's College London Ethical Approval Reference number: HR/DP-22/23-35098

SOCIAL RESPONSES TO STIGMA

Groundswell

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