

Valuing Lived Experience:

Summary Report

Are you ready to commit to the work of co-production?

Our health and care system does not meet the needs of those it exists to serve, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. Inequalities are worsening and issues such as the inverse care law, racism and paternalism are complex and systemic.

We know that real and lasting change comes from the depth of understanding and fresh ideas which emerge from high quality relationships. They provide the conditions for co-production, for a way of working in which power is shared and all forms of knowledge are valued. This is what leads to the shift in mental models which influence practice, begin to reshape structures, and ultimately change outcomes.

Voices for Improvement offers a foundation for those relationships. It demonstrates how meaningful collaboration between those experiencing poor outcomes, and those who hold the power to tackle them, can be supported and facilitated. It starts small, with two people forming a relationship, but, as the experience of National Voices has shown, has the potential to lead to wider changes in practice and policy. The strength of the project is that it has already done this work for itself – Rachel and Keymn’s co-leadership, embedded within the organisation, embodies what is possible when diversity is valued, resourced, and invested in.

The commitment required for this approach to work is substantial, but it is also not complicated. It’s about building on people’s strengths, a willingness to be flexible and embrace new ways of working, and the recognition that we need to learn together to create real and lasting change. It’s the bravest step we can take right now.

Through Voices for Improvement, National Voices has committed to the work of co-production. This is our journey – we hope Voices for Improvement can set you on yours.

Charlotte Augst
Chief Executive, National Voices

Courage calls to courage everywhere and its voice cannot be denied.

Millicent Fawcett, suffragist

Voices for Improvement

Voices for Improvement is National Voices' flagship project to support and embed meaningful collaboration between those with lived experience and decision-makers, in the service of health and care improvement.

National Voices is the leading coalition of health and social care charities in England, with more than 190 members covering a diverse range of health conditions and communities. They work together to strengthen the voice of patients, service users, carers, their families and the voluntary organisations that work for them.

Originally funded by The Health Foundation's Q Community, Voices for Improvement includes a programme to support Lived Experience Partners to provide coaching and mentoring to those in senior positions in health and care. Drawing on the principles of co-production, the coaching allows clients to gain deeper understanding of lived experience perspectives and promotes the confidence to try new approaches in their own work. The one-to-one peer relationship provides the conditions to enable change.

Voices for Improvement is itself co-led by two National Voices staff members: Rachel Matthews, Head of Experience, and Keymn Whervin, Lived Experience Manager. Rachel is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach and brings experience of working in health and research roles from a professional perspective, whilst Keymn was originally a lived experience member of Voices for Improvement advisory group and brings years of experience as a carer.

For more information about Voices for Improvement, [visit National Voices' website](#).



What is needed to support meaningful partnership between lived and learned experience?

National Voices' journey is indicative of what happens when organisations shift their mindset and approach to learn from and work alongside those they exist to support. This starts at an individual level; listening to, learning from, and valuing the lived experience perspective allows traditional power relationships to be reset and enables the real possibility of change.

Steps on the journey

Commit to the work of co-production

Co-production has become a buzzword across health and care, but there has been considerably less attention to what it really takes to make co-production work. Developing shared aims and values and starting small, with attention to context, provides the foundation. However, this also requires flexibility, living with uncertainty and accepting that routes or destinations may shift and change along the way. The health and care system is not set up to facilitate this way of working. But this is what is necessary to move practice beyond tokenism, short-termism and to truly begin to tackle the complex issues underlying structural inequalities.

Take a strengths-based approach

Central to co-production is recognising people's strengths and building on what works. The first pilot programme for coaching and mentoring made it abundantly clear that our Lived Experience Partners already had, and used, many of the skills required to be effective coaches. What they did not necessarily have were tools, language or confidence to operate in this way. The training is now explicitly framed to acknowledge this, presenting the coaching and mentoring model as a structure to underpin the value the Lived Experience Partners already bring to health and care spaces. It also conveys legitimacy on their lived experience in the eyes of a system which still prizes 'professionalised' knowledge over experiential knowledge – and evidence as to why Voices for Improvement is needed in the first place.

Coaching and support from
our co-leadership team



What's the real challenge here?

What is needed to support meaningful partnership between lived and learned experience?

Develop relationships with purpose and accountability

Productive relationships are those which achieve outcomes. They require the dismantling of hierarchies and removal of labels and identities which can get in the way of forming person-to-person connections. In Voices for Improvement, the coaching relationship is an enabler – it creates the conditions to open up new possibilities and ways of working. Importantly, this relationship is also focused on action and accountability, facilitating conversations which scaffold the uncertainty of co-production with a shared sense of purpose, moving forward what matters. This enables difference, disagreement and even conflict to be welcomed as potential for growth.

Build a diverse community

Since its inception, Voices for Improvement has been co-created with a diverse and growing community, drawn from lived and learned experience across the health and care sector. Diversity doesn't just happen – it requires conscious effort and consideration around whose voices are heard and whose are missing, as well as what they might need to be able to participate. The delivery of the coaching and mentoring model is also predicated on a community approach, – acknowledging and attempting to address the isolation of being a changemaker within a hostile system. Individual relationships act as a catalyst at the core of this work, but cannot create change in isolation

Invest in sustainability

Both the Health Foundation Q Community team and National Voices accepted and supported the long timescales and resourcing costs necessary to grow and co-produce with a diverse community. However, that funding was time-limited and the work which sits behind authentic co-production is substantial, often invisible and rarely properly resourced. Developing a financially sustainable model – the coaching and mentoring offer – has therefore been a priority for Voices for Improvement from the start. Without an ongoing funding stream, the projects like this will never be able to expand and embed co-production beyond a small minority of people and organisations.

Learn alongside each other

A commitment to ongoing learning and improvement underpins co-production; people need the confidence to 'try and see', with the understanding that failure or missteps will ultimately lead to better outcomes. Again, this requires intention, creating spaces for shared reflection and cultivating a culture of honesty and challenge. A learning partnership with [Co-Production Collective](#) at UCL provided this support with an iterative and flexible approach responding to the needs of the project. Inviting a wide range of voices into the process is necessary to mitigate the risk of the project developing in a bubble, so two lived experience co-learning partners were also part of this work.



Learning with Voices for Improvement

This summary and the full report bring together learning amassed by Co-Production Collective, Learning Partner during Voices for Improvement's pilot phase, from August 2021 to March 2022.

It builds on the learning shared at the Valuing Lived Experience webinar – the full recording and content shared at this event can be accessed [via the National Voices website](#).

A written report can never do justice to a project which is fundamentally about people and relationships. This therefore represents only a snapshot of the accumulation of two years' work and the strength of community behind Voices for Improvement. The power of Voices for Improvement, as with co-production more generally, is in what is felt, experienced and shared. We invite you to watch the [Valuing Lived Experience webinar](#) to get a sense of this for yourself.

Learn with our Lived Experience Partners

We can help you work through your challenge

We can share our experience



Acknowledgements

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Report author

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NHS Leader

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Voices for Improvement Advisory Group

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Lived Experience Partners

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Partnership Group

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Team commitment

And to the National Voices Team and trustees for stepping forward and creating space for Lived Experience in our vision and mission.



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