

Listening to lived experience voices, including birth parents

Information sheet for boards

This information sheet is prepared for boards of organisations working with birth parents and families. Boards play a vital role in ensuring lived experience voices are appropriately influencing strategic direction and best practice, driving change and continuous service improvement.

Elevate stakeholder voices, including those of lived experience

People have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, including having input into design, development, and review of services they engage with, as well as programs, projects and services that intersect with their experiences.

Lived experience (also known as lived expertise) is expertise gained from having a specific life experience. This 'context expertise' contrasts with academic or professional 'content expertise'. People with lived experience have developed skills, knowledge and expertise due to their 'life experience'.

It is best practice to use person-centred language when working with people with lived experience (such as "person or people with lived experience", "individual with lived experience", "people accessing x service", "people experiencing homelessness"). This approach is aimed at respecting people's dignity and their unique strengths and qualities. People with lived experience may also choose to use different terms to describe their experience/knowledge of an issue depending on the context. It is good practice to use a person's preferred terminology (for example: care experienced person, care leaver, or state ward may all be terms that someone with an experience of out-of-home care may use to describe themselves).

Listening to lived experience voices is an essential element of inclusion and participation, and can be critical to an organisation's success. Deeply listening and collaborating with people with lived experience is the most effective way for us to understand how to best meet people's needs. This ultimately leads to better outcomes for communities, for individuals, and for organisations, and is an essential step to breaking down stigma and discrimination that people with lived experience often face.

Develop a strategic, top-down approach

Establishing this as a core organisational value from the top down supports a consistent, all-of-organisation approach to the inclusion of lived experience voices in policies and everyday practice.

- Ask the question: "Who's voice are we not hearing?"¹
- Facilitate a shared appreciation of the value of lived experience across the board and senior leadership by championing lived experience expertise and influence.
- Your organisation may decide that an appropriate strategy is to allocate a portion of required board skills to expertise of lived experience.

¹ <https://www.bayes.city.ac.uk/faculties-and-research/centres/cce/reports-guides-and-research/lived-experience-on-nonprofit-boards>

- Alternative contact points may be more useful and fit-for-purpose to inform governance, for example, through the formation of advisory groups, consultations with a specific focus on lived experience issues, or establishing peer workers or advocates as part of your organisational structure.
- Explore the board's expectations of how, when and why the organisation engages with people with lived experience, and assess how this aligns with organisational practice.
- Review board decision-making processes to assess influence from stakeholder perspectives, including those of lived experience or service use².
- When inducting new board members, use this opportunity to share the values of lived experience inclusion and participation, and support ongoing professional development that can reinforce this value.

Consider how your organisation can incorporate the inclusion of lived experience voices as part of your core work, for example in governing documents and corporate strategy, organisational values and mission statements.

Improve visibility of inclusive practice, and quality and safety

If your service works with or represents the voices of families or birth parents, it is good practice to have inbuilt opportunities for their inclusion in your governance and quality improvement processes. Not only can this lead to better outcomes through improved design and delivery of services, it also provides the community with important indicators of quality and safety within your organisation.

Some ideas for increasing the visibility of, and accountability to, these values as a board include³:

- Reoccurring calendar opportunities for lived experience input and engagement.
- Standing agenda item in board meetings to discuss issues and opportunities of engagement.
- Invitations to speak and present at board meetings to increase lived experience insights.
- Board reports that acknowledge impact on service users.
- Communication about board decisions that impact services users.
- Corporate reports that demonstrate how lived experience voices and priorities are included in strategic decision-making.
- Engagement opportunities that promote direct contact between board members and people with lived experience.
- Developing management controls to mitigate risk to people with lived experience being included in processes.
- Data collection and metrics that demonstrate lived experience impact are part of operational or strategic performance reports.
- Creating structures for people with lived experience to participate, influence strategy and decision-making.
- Developing complaint/feedback processes that are tracked and analysed to identify issues and opportunities.

² <http://www.companydirectors.com.au/-/media/cd2/resources/advocacy/policy/pdf/2021/stakeholder-guide/dt-stakeholder-elevating-stakeholder-voices-to-the-board-a4-5pp.ashx>

³ Drawn from research by https://www.theenergycharter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Customer-Voice-Board-Level-Resource_FINAL.pdf

Be transparent with people with lived experience who become involved in your governance or quality improvement processes. Take every opportunity to ensure their inclusion is meaningful and not a token exercise. Consider sharing with your lived experience experts*:

- What is lived experience to this organisation?
- Why is it important to our board to include lived experience voices?
- How will our board make use of lived experience insights and how will we know if we are succeeding?

* Drawn from research by <https://www.bayes.city.ac.uk/faculties-and-research/centres/cce/reports-guides-and-research/lived-experience-on-nonprofit-boards>

Promote diversity and representation in decision-making

Diversity is important for strategy development. Boards often seek a rich composition of skills and experience to understand their service users and the environment they operate in, and to shape strategic direction. The inclusion of lived experience voices on boards can not only represent best practice in diversity, equity and inclusion, but it can also help to promote innovative ideas and solutions to complex tasks. People with lived experience have expertise in their lives and in service use that can:

- Contribute to richer discussions and support an expanded understanding of ‘success,’
- Contribute to evidence-based decision making,
- Challenge organisations to move beyond homogenous group culture and insights,
- Challenge organisations to deeply listen to diverse viewpoints and possibilities,
- Challenge organisations to resist the tendency to naturally converge on viewpoints over time.

Organisations using this approach should be mindful of some of the barriers that can restrict inclusion of lived experience voices, for example:

- Processes that are deeply hierarchical or reinforce power imbalances (such as those present in the service provider/service user dynamic),
- Conversation that is dominated by the loudest voice or that censors certain ideas,
- Resistance to understanding blind spots,
- Unconscious bias about the value of lived experience voices.

Not all people will understand the term “lived experience” or see themselves as having expertise to contribute to processes that seek to include their voice. Help birth parents (and others with lived experience) to see the value of their lived expertise and clarify how their voice will be listened to and included by your service.

Utilise opportunities for learning and growth

The inclusion of lived experience voices at a board level, in governance and service improvement is an opportunity for both the organisation and the expert of lived experience. Involving lived experience voices contributes to the empowerment and agency of people who have often been excluded from processes that directly impact on their lives. Boards can play a role in fostering self-determination,

leadership skills and developing a knowledge exchange that is meaningful and mutually beneficial⁴. Through these established processes, organisations are better able to:

- identify and respond to issues as they arise,
- anticipate future service user needs,
- make informed policy developments and improvements to service type and quality.

⁴ <https://leabsv.org/>