

Taking voice seriously- The value of voice.

This Briefing Paper is APLE Collective's shared knowledge reflecting our commitment to taking lived experience voices seriously

Addressing poverty with lived experience means valuing the power of voice, listening, taking action and making change together. Taking Voice Seriously is key to addressing epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007). Taking Voice Seriously builds on the work of APLE Collective, which has demonstrated the participatory imperative behind lived experience activism (Goldstraw et al, 2021).

Lived expertise holds strong benefits for the social sector and for experts by experience. Sandhu (2017:17) lists over fifteen benefits for the voluntary and community sector of listening to lived expertise within change making. These benefits are focussed around strengthening community credibility, community connection and demonstrating organisational values. There are wider benefits to the community, which include benefits for community cohesion, building of equality and dignity for all and a raising of community consciousness (Sandhu, 2017).

Value for experts by experience sit around the sense of dignity built by holding equality of voice as well as practical improvements to mental and physical health through inclusion within the community. Newton (2022) lists the benefits to the individual with lived experience as a route to finding meaning and purpose within our experiences, increases in self-esteem, an increased sense of belonging and an appreciation of other as well as increased skills, knowledge and opportunities.

The values behind lived experience work are central to the ethics of practice. Newton (2022) lists these as honesty, reciprocity, accountability, respect, acceptance, authenticity, diversity, non-judgement, capacity building, creativity, accepting, mutual, strengths based, person-centred, trusting.

For a full literature review of the research around the value of voice see our website. www.aplecollective.com

Who are the APLE collective?

APLE is a national collective of individuals and organisations with lived experience of poverty.

Our aim is to create a sustainable, grassroots network across the UK to raise awareness of poverty, challenge the stigma surrounding it and contribute to its eradication. As a network, we promote the voices of those with lived experience of poverty and we work collaboratively with others to influence change.

Our partners include the Good Things Foundation, Ada Lovelace Institute, Trussell Trust, APPG on Poverty, APPG on Data Poverty and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Key Considerations when Addressing Poverty with Lived Experience

There are key considerations when seeking to take voice seriously and address poverty with lived experience. Ladders (Arnstein, 1969) and wheels (Pickering et al, 2017) of participation exist to map the levels of voice, from involvement to power sharing, but as Sandhu notes 'sharing power with experts is rare' (2017:7). Below are the key areas to consider and address when seeking to take voice seriously and address poverty with lived experience.

Power. Having the power to make change is key; short timescales for involvement, having minimum capacity to change decisions or when decisions are already made prior to your contributions, implies involvement in the decision making process is tokenistic. Tick-box engagement is unethical. Power imbalances can stretch beyond the initial phase of involvement. Not getting feedback on what you have contributed during a listening exercise feels extractive and feedback and involvement throughout a listening process should be considered in the co-creation stage.

Accessibility. Accessibility is vital; venues and online environments need to be welcoming and accessible to everyone to allow equality of participation. When involving people with lived experience it is vital to address digital exclusion by providing devices, data and sending hard copies of documents for review. Addressing digital exclusion is vital as APLE Collective have spent several years campaigning on the Digital Divide.

Co-Creation. Co-creation is vital; active listening needs to form an integral part of the co-design approach from the start to the finish of the work. Creating spaces where people feel welcome and comfortable ensures the voices of lived experiences to feel welcome and comfortable sharing and speaking. It is vital that in-depth listening occurs to safeguard contributions to the debate and informs positive outcomes. Our [Briefing Paper on the Digital Divide](#) can be found on our website.

Listening is key. Asking the right questions is important and recognising the impact the questions might have on you is key. When you haven't co-designed the questions then the questions can be top heavy with acronyms and academic jargon.

Time. Everyone's time is valuable, the assumption is often that communities will give their time for free and yet everyone's time is valuable.

Person-Centred Support. Continuity in supportive staff is important. The person that knows that it's important to meet you outside the venue or knows that you need a hard copy or easy read document makes you feel welcome. Making assumptions that people are 'not ready to come to the table yet' is a further form of labelling. Working with people who have lived experience should involve creating spaces where people feel comfortable at the table.

Reflections on how to listen to voices of lived experience.

These principles for action are set within the values and ethics of lived experience led change making. The principles were co-created in a participatory APLE Collective workshop.

Meaningful listening is vital, everyone's journey is different, and empathy is key. There is never a single reason for poverty, for example disability might not be the only reason for a person's experience of poverty. We are not just people living in poverty; we are lived experience activists, artists, nurses, practitioners, mums, dads, sons, and daughters. Our voices are just as important as anyone else's. Better outcomes can come when there is a collective agreement, we are stronger together.

The terms of engagement for listening to the voices of lived experience need negotiating with those that are asking us to share our voices. We need to be involved throughout the board / steering group / involvement process. Relationships need to come first and then actions second; relationships need to need to be established. Lived experience activists need to be prepared to leave meetings and to constructively challenge meetings. We need to stand our ground, we are the experts in our own experiences.

It is key that those asking us to share our voices understand that living in poverty is complex and different for each person. Be aware that some activities can be triggering and it's important to be empathetic and learn how some people take more time to feel comfortable from sharing their experiences. Be aware of the sacrifice emotionally that the person is making in opening up their experiences. Because someone is attending a meeting as a lived experience expert they have not necessarily agreed to share their entire life history.

Those coordinating lived experience voices need to engender an environment where people are not scared to make mistakes and create a learning environment. Trust, friendships and partnerships take time, and we need to be patient. It's important to recognise that this time is vital as the skills and knowledge brought by lived experience always offers the best solutions Taking a step back is important, allowing people and groups to develop in their own way, rather than expecting lived experience voices to follow a specific path.

Change takes time and it takes a range of expertise; lived and learned experience. Its important to build relationships and to be self-aware of yourself and your own perspective. There are not always quick fixes, politics takes time to change.

Principles for Action

These four principles for action summarise the expertise gathered by APLE Collective activists throughout our many collective years of experience.

It is vital to **acknowledge the skills and expertise within the lived experience community**. We are more than a story, lived experience is an expertise that can inform debate and lead to positive change.

Involving lived experience voices in your work **needs to have real world outcomes that are accountable**. We need to ensure that people are invited to participate because you want them to be there. Ensure all people know what their part brings to the meeting.

Person Centred Practice is key. Addressing Poverty with Lived Experience has to be people centred and based on relationships of mutual respect. It's important to be flexible, one size doesn't fit all people and people want to be involved in a variety of ways. Let people know that they are valued and the actions that are linked to their input. Share thank you's and ensure that travel and other expenses are paid up front.

Inclusion of all voices is essential. Addressing Poverty with Lived Experience needs to ensure equality of representation, and involves a commitment to inclusivity. Consider the accessibility of the venue, time of the session and accessibility for all and avoid jargon.

Taking Voice Seriously – APLE Collective

This briefing paper is the first publication of many which establishes APLE Collective as experts in addressing poverty with lived experience. APLE Collective will continue to share our knowledge and expertise on our website and via social media. If you would like us to offer advice / consultancy to your organisation in relation to your participation and voice approach then contact us directly contact@aplecollective.com



References

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