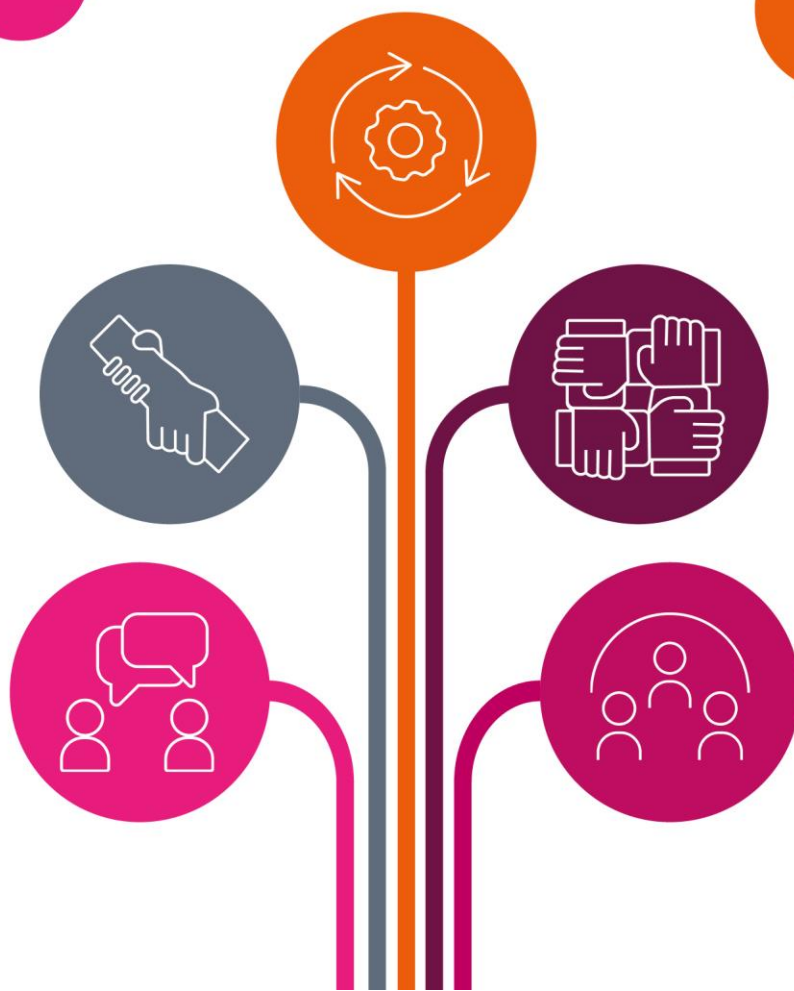


A qualitative study of lived experience support work with adults facing multiple disadvantage: Executive summary

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This report summarises findings from a 20-month research study which aimed to explore how lived experience interventions with adults facing multiple disadvantage work to effect change. It is one of the first UK studies of its kind.

The research was funded by BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants (2023 round) and received ethical approval from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee. It took place between September 2023 and May 2025.

Findings relating to the mechanisms through which peer support contributes to change have previously been reported¹. The research report provides a broader account of the study findings, including organisational understanding and implementation, recruitment processes and practices, disclosure, support structures, workforce experiences and associated risks.

1. What is ‘lived experience’?

In this report, ‘lived experience’ refers to somebody who has lived through an adverse social and/or health issue(s), such as homelessness, mental ill-health, and/or addiction, and has experience as a user of health, welfare, and/or social care services. They are often considered ‘peers’ who, by virtue of sharing a common experience, possess a unique knowledge, understanding and capacity to advise and support others.

In the last decade, ‘lived experience’ has become the knowledge base for voluntary and salaried case-holding roles within care and support services for people facing multiple disadvantage and is considered a ‘best practice’ principle.

2. The research

Despite a consensus within the policy and practice community of the benefits of moving people with lived experience into the workforce, there is great diversity in the ways in which lived experience support is defined and delivered, and robust evaluative evidence of the impact is scarce. To fill this knowledge gap, our research **sought to:**

- Understand the effects of lived experience interventions on both workers and service users.
- Explain what it is about lived experience knowledge that can stimulate positive change.
- Examine how support grounded in lived experience knowledge compares to and is best applied alongside ‘professional’ expertise.
- Advance academic and practice knowledge about the successful integration of lived experience in the workforce.

The research comprised semi-structured interviews and one focus group with 50 participants in total, including lived experience practitioners, service users, service managers/co-ordinators and professional care and support workers across seven case study organisations in England.

¹ Parr (2026), the therapeutic value of peer support for multiply disadvantaged adults: A theory of change, The British Journal of Social Work, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcag056>

3. What we found

Defining lived experience support work

Lived experience can be thought of as being on a spectrum, in the sense that we all inevitably have some form of lived experience. For lived experience support roles, however, some lived experiences are more pertinent than others.

When thinking through understandings of lived experience in recruitment, organisations gave consideration to *which* categories of experience were relevant to their scope of work; the *depth* of exposure to those experiences; the *length* of time since they occurred; and *who* they affected (giving value to direct and/or indirect lived experience). Questions remain, however, around the specificity of lived experience, and how close two experiences need to be for one person to understand what the other has been through.

No one organisation involved in the research was fully composed of staff members with direct, relevant lived experience. Managers and senior staff made it clear that employees with mainly learned experience were equally valued and strived for a balance of staff with and without relevant lived experience.

Although lived experience knowledge was deeply valued, it was not – on its own – seen as a panacea. One organisation framed lived experience as ‘an extra tool in your toolbox’.

Lived experience workers were supported in several ways by their organisations around disclosure of lived experience. Choice was central to organisational policies. Support workers were encouraged to think about the effects on both themselves and their clients when disclosing.

How support workers negotiated guidance and put disclosure into practice varied, with some preferring to be as honest and open as possible and others taking a more bounded and selective approach, although this was by no means mutually exclusive and most practice fell somewhere in the middle.

Embedding lived experience knowledge

A range of ‘good practice’ approaches to the recruitment of people with lived experience were spotlighted. This included giving careful consideration to the wording of job descriptions, providing a choice of application submission options (e.g., SMS text, phone, WhatsApp messaging), (pre)application workshops, decentring previous work experience and qualifications, and including people with lived experience on recruitment panels.

Identifying people with the ‘right’ skills, attributes and motivation for undertaking lived experience support work was considered paramount. Participants were clear that having lived experience was not sufficient in and of itself to render somebody suitable for lived experience support work. Considered just as important was the ability to demonstrate empathy and compassion, a non-judgemental attitude, professionalism and a willingness to learn.

Organisations integrated lived experience into their service model in different ways. Staffing structures usually included both paid and volunteer positions, some of which were ringfenced to people with lived experience.

Lived experience workers, paid and volunteers, were often employed specifically to support service user engagement and in the early stages of a service user's support journey, sometimes co-working alongside a more experienced support worker.

It was not uncommon for staff to have followed a planned career trajectory within an organisation – moving from being a service user, to volunteer, to trainee, to paid member of staff. Being a 'peer' worker was referred to in several interviews as being a 'stepping stone'.

Multiple sources of support and supervision were reported by participants employed in lived experience support roles. This included mandatory line management supervision as well as case review meetings, coaching sessions, weekly check-ins, and access to clinical supervision, often provided by an external counsellor or psychologist. Most participants reported feeling well supported in their work.

The impact of lived experience support work

All participants agreed that experiential expertise is important for effecting positive outcomes for service users. While there was an appreciation that learned experience is of equal value, participants felt that lived experience offers something different.

The research indicated that lived experience knowledge does not generate better outcomes for users *directly*. Rather, lived experience supports the creation of a 'good' relationship between a worker and service user, which provides the foundation for change - *the relationship is the vehicle through which service users achieve better engagement and, in turn, outcomes*.

Authentic Relational Moments (ARMs) (Békés & Hoffman, 2020) is a psychotherapeutic concept that we have used to help disentangle the complex causal relationship between lived experience support, associated notions of credibility, trust, relatability (etc) and positive service user outcomes. We have employed this terminology to help us understand *how* and *why* the utilisation of lived experience knowledge works as a distinct social practice.

ARMs refer to interactions, events, or instances in inter-subjective relationships that work to produce an especially strong, deep and genuine connection. They comprise three main mechanisms: **'authenticity'**, **'understanding'**, and **'witnessing'** and occur readily with the disclosure of shared lived experiences. Interactions may contain all elements of ARMs interlaced together. The concept allows us to articulate the theory of change that underpins peer support whereby 'lived experience' is understood *not* as a change mechanism in and of itself but a *resource* that works *through* a set of interconnected social mechanisms. This is exemplified in the following diagram:





Building trust through authenticity

‘Authenticity’ refers to instances during which a worker honestly and openly expresses feelings, in ways that foster a more genuine connection with service users.

Participants talked of ‘the moment’ when an act of authenticity shifted their perception of the relationship with a peer worker, which meant that the relationship and the possibilities it provided, felt different to support they had experienced previously. When workers revealed their authentic selves – sharing personal experiences and showing vulnerability – service users became more open, though cautiously, to accepting the help being offered.

‘Authenticity’ did not involve a one-way disclosure of lived experience but facilitated reciprocity. The connection sparked by personal disclosure created an environment where service users felt less guarded and more willing to share their own experiences. Support workers observed that using their own lived experience accelerated engagement, with one participant describing it as a form of ‘shorthand’ or a ‘shortcut to trust’. This authenticity helped cultivate trust and a sense of solidarity, making the shared space feel safe for service user disclosure.

Creating understanding through shared experience

‘Understanding’ involves a sense of being ‘in sync’ within a shared intersubjective space, where service users feel deeply understood and this understanding is communicated in a way that is meaningful.

Peers demonstrated a unique ability to grasp the subjective experiences and emotional worlds of service users with notable clarity. This closely aligns with the concept of empathy – a term often cited in both our research and the broader literature – defined as the capacity to understand another’s point of view.

Understanding held particular significance in support work with people who use substances, where deception was often cited as a common dynamic in relationships, accompanied by feelings of shame. In this context, ‘understanding’ functioned as a mechanism that allowed peer workers to address the harmful consequences of addiction openly, without conveying judgment.

Feeling heard and being witnessed

'Witnessing' occurs when practitioners engage deeply with a service user's experience, as though they had shared in or observed it themselves. This serves to acknowledge and validate difficult emotional events.

Witnessing holds particular significance in the context of the stigma and judgment faced by adults with experiences of substance use, homelessness, and/or involvement with the criminal justice system.

Service users drew comparisons between the approach of peer workers and that of other professionals. Peer workers, through their shared lived experiences, appeared more capable of 'turning towards' and genuinely 'witnessing' the stories and experiences of those they supported.

Participants described peer workers as being able to engage deeply with the painful and distressing experiences of service users – past and present – without treating them as 'other', reacting with discomfort, or requiring detailed explanations of traumatic events.

The rewards and risks of lived experience support work

Perhaps the most common reward spoken of by participants was a sense of being able to 'give back' or 'put things right' by supporting people going through similar challenges as they had experienced themselves in the past.

Being employed as a lived experience worker – and being part of a culture that valued them – also brought with it a great sense of pride, empowerment and achievement for workers, as well as a sense of relief that they could finally be open about their experiences.

Whether or not employing staff with lived experience brought any additional challenges or risks for employers was itself debated. It is important to note, as one participant stated, that all staff – with or without lived experience – are individuals with unique skills, personalities, experiences and needs, and each will excel more in different aspects of the role than in others. Staff will need support with certain tasks regardless of having lived experience.

Lived experience workers are inevitably close to the communities they support. This experiential proximity offers numerous benefits in a support relationship but can also lead to boundary issues, overcommitment and burnout if not managed correctly.

Over-disclosure was seen as a risk both for lived experience support workers and potentially, the support relationships themselves. In terms of the latter, sharing too many details about their own stories – when not relevant – risked centring the support worker's recovery at the expense of the client, or 'trading war stories' and hindering progress.

It should be acknowledged that no matter how long the recovery time, sharing an – often deeply traumatic – experience from the past can reopen wounds. Without adequate support systems and a safe environment – and sometimes even with those – it can lead to an individual feeling vulnerable, isolated, and potentially stigmatised.

As the level of pay for lived experience workers was considered to be low commensurate with risk, so too was it felt that, societally, the lived experience role was not as valued as it should be. Lived experience support workers often encountered a lack of engagement and, sometimes, resistance from external agencies.