

# How can we strengthen the voice of people with lived experience in campaigns for social change?

Report by On Road Media, Revolving Doors and Women for Refugee Women

## Background

With the backing of **Trust for London**, the three charities, **On Road Media**, **Revolving Doors** and **Women for Refugee Women**, were brought together to plan and deliver an event to showcase their work with people with lived experience. The event ‘How can we strengthen the voice of people with lived experience in campaigns for social change?’ was designed for funders, voluntary sector professionals, campaigners, and activists interested in learning ways to support their service users or beneficiaries in the co-design or co-delivery of work in their field.

The event was designed and led on the day by a team of facilitators with lived experience of inequality and poverty. It took place between 9.30am - 1.30pm on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2018 at Resource for London in North London.

In this report, we share our learning from the process that emerged including the nature of our collaboration, and the challenges and opportunities that arose. We also touch on outcomes from the event, what participants found to be most useful, and what we might do differently next time.

## What brought Trust for London to the issue

Trust for London is an independent charitable foundation funding work which tackles poverty and inequality in the capital.

“We have long recognised that people with the least power are most often those living in poverty, disenfranchised from society, with a feeling of hopelessness about their ability to change anything in their lives or society.

“We were also aware that there is often a tendency (often well meant) for organisations to speak for and on behalf of people who have direct experience of poverty and inequality rather than empowering and supporting them to speak out about their own direct, experience of inequality. We believe that to bring about positive and long-lasting social change, people with lived experience should be at the heart of campaigning and influencing work. However, this shift in the balance of power is challenging, and has a range of risks as well as benefits.

“We wanted to explore further how best we could help this to be achieved and felt that a first step would be to highlight organisations that were doing this well with a view to sharing the learning and promoting promising practice.”

## Aims

The overall aim of the initiative was to take a look at the process of handing over and sharing 'power' with groups and individuals with lived experience, to gain an understanding of the methods of 3 organisations working on very different issues who have already begun to work successfully in this way.

The Trust's aims for the event were to:

- “Draw on the experience of (and hear from) organisations who have developed successful models of engagement;
- Encourage organisations and funders to identify best practice in helping to strengthen the voice of people directly affected by poverty and inequality so they can bring about more effective social change;
- Identify effective ways to ensure that people are supported to share their stories safely, in the context of collective action;
- Adapt a (self) exploratory and questioning approach for the event.”

The aims of the 3 charities that led the event were to showcase our work, learn through practise of ways to disseminate learning around working with people with lived experience, and to give our facilitators the opportunity to design and deliver an event from scratch.

## About the organisations

### **On Road Media**

On Road Media collaborates with media across the UK on accurate and fair portrayals of communities that are vulnerable to misrepresentation, preventing social issues that stem from exclusion and prejudice. They co-design and deliver work in equitable partnership with people with lived experience, paying them for their time, supporting them to know their boundaries, and developing their skills in activism and media engagement.

This award-winning charity encourages better understanding through improved media representation of trans and non-binary people, people with experiences of poverty, young people with irregular immigration status, Roma people, and through their Angles project, people with personal experience and/or who work in the sector of sexual violence and domestic abuse.

### **Revolving Doors**

Revolving Doors is a national charity that has been working for the last 25 years to change systems and improve services for people facing multiple disadvantage and stuck in the revolving door of crisis and crime. They bring independent research, service evaluation, policy and lived experience together to support effective solutions for the 'revolving doors' group.

### **Women for Refugee Women**

Women for Refugee Women (WRW) is a charity that supports refugee women and works towards a fairer asylum process in the UK. They work to empower women with personal experience of the asylum process to speak out about their own experiences to the media, to policy-makers and at public events. They provide pathways for refugee women to build their skills, become advocates for change and participate in the wider community. They involve refugee women in every aspect of their work, from being board members to being involved in research, media work and informing members of Parliament.

## The planning process

*“Sharing the stage, I usually speak on my own or organise events on my own. On reflection it was awesome being a part of a team.”*

At the first meeting the three charities had a clear vision that we wanted the event to be led by people with lived experience, including the planning and design of the workshops. We wanted people with lived experience to define the shape of the event. We saw this as a great opportunity to lead by example and allow attendees to experience what an event that is truly led by people with lived experiences feels like.

The staff at Trust for London were admirably candid about how this approach was challenging for them, but they realised early on that if they “were serious about empowering people with lived experience to be in the lead, we would need to hand over ‘power and control’ of this event by working alongside them.” They said: “This felt slightly uncomfortable to start with, as we were unsure whether our aims for the event would be aligned to what others wanted, and we didn’t know the people involved, but we knew deep down this was the right thing to do.”

Practically, this meant that the funders were supportive of the group of facilitators with lived experience to a) plan the event together b) tailor the workshops and c) host and lead the event. On Road Media became the event co-ordinators and the Trust’s intermediary with the other two organisations.

We knew that the 12 facilitators (4 from each charity) would need specific training to take this project on and it was agreed that Trust for London would support the delivery of a Facilitator Training Course delivered by On Road Media and the Action Learning Centre. This 1-day training gave the group the opportunity to develop facilitation skills and the support to design their workshops for the event. This enabled them to take the lead with confidence and curate their event, with support from the 3 charities. This training was a vital step in the process and one we would always recommend for future events, with the addition of follow-up support from the facilitation trainers closer to the event.

## Learning by experience

During the planning meetings we decided the event should focus on an immersive learning experience, where participants learn not only from the content of the workshop but the experience of being in a room where those who are facilitating are people with lived experiences. This enabled attendees to think about how they might begin to make changes to in their own ways of working.

This focus on an experiential event was discussed and agreed during the planning because it was felt to be more valuable and resonant with the overall aim of the initiative. Our event would set a new standard for the sector moving beyond “share your story” and “lived experience case studies” towards highlighting the leadership skills, professionalism and value of people with lived experience, showcasing and strengthening those voices within a collaborative and empowering social change partnership.

Trust for London said: “The funder or organisation is not always the ‘expert’ or ‘knows best’. We wanted delegates to recognise that although handing over total ‘control’ may not be ideal, the process of sharing control/power, resources, experience and skills as an equal partner is more rewarding and effective.”

# What happened on the day

## Attendees

Over 120 people signed up to attend the event and we had a waiting list as there was a cap of 30 people per workshop. 86 people took part on the day, of which 69 of them were from the voluntary sector. We had a diverse turn-out from organisations across the poverty and women's sectors, including Solace Women's Aid, Gingerbread, ATD Fourth World, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and regional councils. Representatives from Migrants' Rights Network, Prison Reform Trust, HEAR Equality and Human Rights Network, and Gendered Intelligence also came. Funders included UnLtd., Comic Relief and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and communications specialists at the FrameWorks Institute and IMiX also participated.

## A panel with a difference

*"It was brilliant that the panel was so representative. Thanks for holding an excellent event."*

An opening discussion with On Road Media hosts Silke Grygier and Tanaka Mhishi was chaired by Trust for London Trustee and The Guardian journalist, Sonia Sodha. They set the tone for the event by asking that delegates be encouraged to adopt an exploratory and questioning approach, rather than to expect a "how to" set of guidelines for strengthening voices of lived experience in campaigning.

## Workshops

Each charity ran their own workshop, which ran twice during the morning, and were led by 4 trained facilitators from each organisation. After the workshops took place, the whole group of facilitators sat on a panel to share learning from each of the workshops. As part of the panel, WRW facilitators performed the poem they co-created with participants in their workshop which was very moving and well-received.

During the panel Q+A, delegates asked mainly about the nature of support the facilitators received and how they go about developing resilience, both within their workplaces and when engaging with the public, the media and policy makers. At the end, facilitators invited delegates to share one thing they were going to do to put some of this learning into practice. Some of these included:

- Invite organisations like Revolving Doors to carry out their workshops in-house and to train staff on how to support people with lived experience
- Be more proactive within their whole organisation in including the voices of their service users - participants felt that this approach needs to be involved in everything they do, from communications to project delivery
- Allow people to know that they are allowed to be angry and support them to feel those emotions
- Give people a platform and invite them to share their story
- Fund more days like this

## **WORKSHOP 1: Revolving Doors: 'Beyond the Story: What is 'good' and 'bad' practice in involving people with lived experience in campaign work?'**

Facilitators showed a short video clip of a documentary which portrayed someone with lived experience. They then asked delegates to reflect on the clip, and discuss the positive and negative involvement the media can have.

Delegates then looked at a case study of someone with lived experience who was asked to share something with the media, which later led to their relapse. They were asked how this

could be prevented and to look at solutions to support people with lived experience before, during and after a campaign or interaction with the media. After showing the video and discussing the case study, delegates were visibly moved, and keen to find solutions to this.

*“I learned so much...I’ve gained a lot of confidence”*

*“We were all nervous, we were all out of our comfort zone, but I loved it when the plan came together”*

The workshops were well attended in a relatively small room which created challenges for the facilitators with which they coped admirably. This was not an easy first session to facilitate and they did well to keep the session on time.

*“It was really good to see the lightbulb go off, they could see things they hadn’t seen before, you could see the impact we were having”*

*“It was heart-warming to see people walk away with more appreciation of the value lived experience can bring”*

The session was effective in achieving its learning objectives. The subject matter meant that the session could have been longer. However, the participants left with an understanding that; people with lived experience need to shape their involvement and not just comply with the needs of the organisation or media partner, if not managed properly even well-intentioned involvement can be damaging for the individual, good involvement takes time which can cause tension with the timescales of the organisation/partners and the importance of having a clear support process (before→during→after). People left with a better appreciation of the risks and the need for a more considerate well thought out approach.

The training was effective. It enabled the facilitators to design and own the session. We had a turnover of people involved at the start (two people gained employment) so we ran our own facilitation course which has given us a larger pool of facilitators – this has had a positive impact across our wider work.

*“People wanted us to deliver the session with their team, we could tailor it for their needs”*

It was a subject that the participants had an interest in but needed support to develop their own good practice. We believe there is a need for the session to be delivered more widely and in a longer format. We are developing a toolkit from the notes taken on the day to be best used as a handout to support further learning from future sessions.

## **WORKSHOP 2: Women for Refugee Women: ‘Making Space For Us’**

Facilitators, Abi, Etracy, Olivia, Salomy and Sophie attended facilitators training. Salomy said, *“I enjoyed learning new skills especially designing and structuring a workshop at the facilitators training.”* They went on to design a workshop titled ‘Making Space For Us’, which explored how individuals in organisations can work in a meaningful way to empower people with lived experience to effect real social change. *“The workshop was designed to be inclusive,”* said Etracy.

On the day of the conference, the facilitators led participants through a series of games and exercises to enable engaged discussion around the topic that fed into the creation of a group poem. The following is an extract from the final poem they created:

*“Making space is empowering a voice without limitations,  
Making space is not using people and putting words in their mouths,  
Making space is the beginning.”*

Sophia felt she was facilitating the workshop, *“Not just as a refugee woman, but an empowered woman.”* WRW used warm-up games and creative methods to break through participants’ resistance to working in a new and more inclusive way. They said: “The games helped to relax

participants and involve everyone equally prior to the discussion. Exploring new ways of working means letting go of control over what will happen and trusting in the process.”

Fewer people came to their workshops than other organisations, perhaps because the description of the workshop was brief and participants may have felt nervous about participating in a creative workshop. However, feedback was excellent. One woman said *“Women for Refugee Women session was wonderful. I was nervous at first but they put me at ease. I would like to run a similar session in my organisation.”*

Feedback from the day showed how useful and informative participants found their workshop. One participant said, *“The WRW workshop was very informative and well structured,”* and another said, *“It was incredible. Thank you for this. I feel very blessed.”*

### **WORKSHOP 3: On Road Media: ‘Leaders with lived experience and the media’**

*“On Road allowed me to feel comfortable in telling my story. I can get support from On Road, through strengthening my story and figuring out what I am and am not comfortable in saying.”*

This workshop was led by facilitators from our Angles and All About Trans projects with about 20 participants each time. It looked at how personal and professional roles can impact how we work together to influence positive social change. Facilitators shared learning on how to find common ground with journalists, how to build allies in the media and what kind of support activists with lived experience of the issues need, to do this work safely and well.

From the beginning, the facilitators created a comfortable atmosphere by establishing ground rules, making delegates feel at ease. Participants were then invited to play the role of a journalist and an interviewee with lived experience of an issue and to discuss whatever came up during that process. The purpose was to look at how our various personal and professional roles can impact how we work and make decisions.

A key point about power dynamics came up during the roleplay. Many delegates agreed that the reporter is usually the one in control and able to lead the interviewee to disclose information that they want for the report. Some delegates shared a fear that the conversation could be too comfortable or friendly, and this could lead interviewees with personal experience to disclose personal information that they would later regret. Delegates discussed how the media sometimes feels aggressive and combative, and the group chatted about ways to control an interview and engage with the media safely leading to positive outcomes for all involved.

Participants left with an understanding of the value of ongoing support when engaging with the media including sufficient preparation, boundary setting, feeling in control, providing journalists with resources and information about the issue, peer support and self-care afterwards. They felt that there wasn’t enough time to dive deeply into the discussions and practical exercises though. Participants asked for more information on how to engage the media, and would have liked practical tips and handouts on how to influence, network and build relationships with journalists effectively. More time to reflect on how to carry out this influencing work would have been more effective.

## **Our learning**

*“This whole process has put me on another level.”* Olivia from WRW.

Overall the process, from the perspective of the 3 charities, was a success. WRW said: “It’s shown what is possible when organisations centre the voices of people with lived experience in their work.” Revolving Doors felt that: “Organisations ‘letting go’ and enabling people with lived experience to own and lead the process was effective and led to the energy and creativity at the event. This required [from the organisers] open mindedness, trust in the process and belief in people with lived experience.”

In the sector, we can see that many voluntary sector organisations have traditionally seen people they support and work with as “beneficiaries” or “clients”, rather than colleagues or partners, and can therefore find the process of collaboration or handing over control to be difficult and uncomfortable, especially at first. We are all keen to share our experiences with the sector in creative ways, and we see this pilot event as an excellent starting point. A lot of useful learning came from the event, including the following feedback from voluntary sector attendees:

- Needed more time to have in depth discussions, reflect, process and take notes
- Wanted to attend all three workshops (not just two)
- Loved that people with lived experience represented
- Wanted more concrete common principles or examples of good practice
- Thought the day was too media-focussed and it would have been great to cover other forms of engagement - e.g. direct lobbying and designing campaigns
- Wanted more information on media engagement
- Thought it was important and more days like this should happen
- Needed more concise practical tools, methods, handouts and resources.

The 3 charities have identified four key learning points from the whole process. We needed:

### **1. More collaboration between the facilitators**

We felt that we could have created more opportunities for the facilitators to collaborate more across the 3 charities, and not just within their own group. All of them needed more space to build interpersonal connections, share experiences and practice before the event. Facilitators experienced a last-minute confidence crisis, however we overcame this challenge by listening to each other’s needs and doing extra preparation with the facilitators outside of the project scope. We also discovered that two workshops ended up being quite similar and focused on media engagement, so in future organisations need to work more closely and communicate together on workshop curation and delivery.

#### **Next time:**

- More practice, preparation and social sessions with the facilitators
- Having a curator with lived experience communicating and co-designing the workshops across the organisations to create more cohesion

### **2. Clearer communication**

The collaboration with the three organisations worked well – we all brought something different. However, we had our challenges. WRW said: “learning to work together and learning to accept the apprehensions that arose about whether it was going to work” was challenging. Project managers and facilitators changed throughout the process, so team attendance at planning meetings varied and was inconsistent. Communication was challenging during this time. Each organisation submitted separate budgets at the outset because we all work differently. With there being separate costs, we needed to have a discussion in person about financial support to reach an agreement for the overall budget requested from the Trust, and so this process took longer than anticipated.

#### **Next time:**

- Trust for London and the 3 charities should have clear partnership agreements and transparency regarding resources from the beginning
- Clarity over who the organisations and funder were relying on to be lead co-ordinators with responsibility from the beginning

### **3. Resources and time**

WRW said: “To develop the potential of people with lived experience time and resources are needed.” The Trust said: “the amount of time and resources needed to effectively support and empower the groups and individuals was greater than initially expected.” Each organisation put more time into supporting their facilitators, offering training and planning the event, than originally budgeted for. The Trust said: “To be truly committed to work of this nature, it requires significant investment in terms of time and funding, and may be in excess of what is originally expected. Organisational ‘buy-in’ therefore is crucial at a senior management and Trustee level given the significant cost and in organisational culture and priorities.”

**Next time:**

- The facilitators need more planning, preparation and practice time. For example, an additional run-through rehearsal before the event would have been beneficial for confidence-building, workshop preparation and combating nerves.

#### **4. A longer event**

There was consensus among attendees, facilitators and organisers that this should be a longer event, spanning over a full day at least.

**Next time:**

- Expanding the event to a full day event with more time in each workshop and for final reflection. Perhaps a full day event could consist of workshops in the morning, followed by an afternoon for reflection and learning including resources where relevant, talks from project staff and people with lived experience focussed more on the delivery of the work and the challenges and opportunities this poses.

## **Conclusion**

*“For this event I felt very supported through people holding the planning process, which allowed us to be involved and to shape the event without having to ‘do everything by ourselves’. Going forward this feels like exactly what I need - strong allies who are encouraging us and share their knowledge and skills.”*

Following this project, there is now a group of people with lived experience who have been trained and are more confident in running workshops and events to help organisations develop their own practice. We would like to build on this experience and promote learning within the voluntary sector and with funders.

We have proposed that our organisations continue to collaborate and help the sector to strengthen the voices of lived experience in their organisations to campaign for social change effectively. We could do this by organising similar future events, a series of workshops based on the templates developed, with support from Trust for London and other funders, curated and led by people with lived experience of inequality and poverty.

Trust for London says: “Everyone has a ‘lived experience’ and individuals or staff may have a role but also have their own stories and journeys that can contribute to the overall process and outcome.”

We would encourage all organisations in our sector to create a space for both their employees and the people they support to think about new ways of supporting collaboration and co-creation towards positive social change. We’re very proud of what we’ve achieved with this collaboration and the legacy of this achievement will stay with our facilitators. We look forward to continuing the work.

Thank you.