



CYMORTH  
GWIRFODDOLI  
GORLLEWIN  
MORGANNWG



WEST  
GLAMORGAN  
VOLUNTEERING  
SUPPORT

# Volunteers with Lived Experience

A good practice guide



A shared resource for  
developing knowledge





# Contents

Introduction.....	<b>3</b>
Benefits of Involving People with Lived Experience.....	<b>4</b>
Challenges.....	<b>6</b>
Top Tips in Planning for, Recruiting and Supporting Volunteers with Lived Experience.....	<b>8</b>

Please contact your local County Voluntary Council (CVC) about involving volunteers. Specialist staff are on hand to help ensure you are taking the right steps.



## Swansea

✉ [scvs@scvs.org.uk](mailto:scvs@scvs.org.uk)

☎ 01792 544000



## Neath Port Talbot

✉ [info@nptcvs.org.uk](mailto:info@nptcvs.org.uk)

☎ 01639 631246



# Introduction

There is a growing ambition among third and public sector organisations to engage individuals with lived experience. Some will gather insights through consultations, engagement sessions, or participation opportunities. Others will develop opportunities for volunteers to share their lived experience, including the co-production of services. This is not a new concept for the third sector, which has been incorporating volunteers with lived experiences for numerous years in many roles such as storytellers, peer mentors and advisory boards.

In the [Welsh Government Volunteering Policy \(2015\)](#), volunteering is defined as activity which:

- is undertaken freely, by choice
- is undertaken to be of public/ community benefit
- is not undertaken for financial gain.

Lived experience volunteers have direct personal experience of a particular issue or challenge and choose to reflect upon that experience to help others facing a similar circumstance.

There is a growing number of people wanting the opportunity to share power and lead changes using their experience through volunteering. Across Wales, [Regional Partnership Boards](#) are involving individuals with lived experience to help shape health and social care services.

With support and volunteering expertise from the two local County Voluntary Council's (Neath Port Talbot CVS and Swansea CVS), the [West Glamorgan Regional Partnership](#) sought a greater understanding around the support needs and recruitment considerations of volunteers with lived experience. In October 2023, members of the two local volunteer manager forums came together to specifically discuss the benefits and challenges of involving volunteers with lived experience. The session attracted 22 practitioners from third and public sectors, representing diverse areas of volunteering such as homelessness and housing, mental health, poverty, substance use, specific health conditions, carers and users of health and social care services. St Giles Trust attended, at the time of the meeting they were undertaking a [research project around lived experience](#) hoping to shape volunteer manager support resources.

This guide is based on the discussion and the lessons learned from those who involve volunteers with lived experience, sharing their top tips around planning for volunteers and developing safe, meaningful, and inclusive roles.





# Benefits of Involving People with Lived Experience

The advantages of incorporating lived experience into public services are numerous. By integrating viewpoints of those who have directly faced challenges, service providers can create more responsive and efficient services that are fit for purpose. This approach has the potential to yield improved outcomes for service users, and by recognising the role of community in providing support, foster stronger and more resilient communities.

## 1. Benefit to the Volunteer

Volunteering helps people to explore their passions and aspirations. It presents an opportunity to rebuild lives whilst developing further skills and knowledge. It serves as a route to channel experiences positively by connecting with others to make positive change. Lived experience volunteers can contribute to the creation of a high-quality future workforce, by offering their experience so staff develop their practice to improve services, and by developing their own career pathway.

Actively listening to lived experiences can foster trust between service providers and service users. When people perceive that experiences are acknowledged and appreciated, they are more inclined to participate in services and believe they are receiving meaningful support. Creating opportunities for individuals with lived experience to express their voices diminishes stigma and reveals authenticity. Amplifying those voices can foster a more inclusive and equitable outcome.

“It’s great knowing we can give back and help others like us.”

“I enjoy the social aspect and making new friends.”



## 2. Benefit to Other Service Users

“Nobody can understand better than someone who has been through it themselves.”

Peer mentoring or support is a powerful type of lived experience volunteering within a variety of services. Volunteers who have “real understanding” may break down barriers with those who are cautious of “professionals”. Individuals with lived experience may use more straightforward language and represent the community. Volunteers are driven by different motivations to staff and can be genuinely motivated by the cause. Having personally lived through experiences, they express empathy rather than sympathy. This kind of understanding can’t be acquired in a classroom setting; lived experience operates on a different level compared to other forms of education.

“Having a peer mentor helped me to improve my self-esteem and gave me reassurance by answering questions so that I was able to make informed decisions.”

“It made me realise that I’m not alone.”

## 3. Benefit to Organisations/Services

Lived experience volunteering provides a useful perspective on services. This knowledge can pinpoint service gaps identifying areas where services may be deficient or where enhancements could be implemented. This helps service providers better understand the needs and to develop effective solutions. Collaboration between staff and volunteers with lived experience enhances professional understanding, improves awareness of the user experience and the emotions associated with service use. Volunteering with real-life experiences can make services better. Co-production is about valuing people and getting them involved in planning and improving services. [Learn more about the volunteer’s perspective about coproduction here.](#) Everyday tasks in organisations, like including people with real-life experiences in recruiting new staff, are important to make sure the future workforce cares about the values important to service users.

## 4. Economic Benefit

Services that are co-produced can be more effective and efficient, delivering what is needed. It is essential to understand what is effective and what isn’t, particularly when facing budget constraints. Volunteers offering hope and assistance can be part of prevention or early intervention responses negating the need for more expensive services in the future. Volunteers contribute significantly to Wales’ economy, but their impact goes beyond monetary value. They bring additional benefits like enhanced skills, fostering social connections, and reinforcing community cohesion.



# Challenges

While involving volunteers with lived experience is immensely beneficial, it also comes with its own set of challenges including;

## 1. Emotional Impact:

Volunteers with lived experience may be dealing with personal issues. It is crucial to provide adequate support and resources to help them manage any emotional challenges that may arise or be triggered during their volunteering.

## 2. Boundaries, Confidentiality and Safeguarding:

Volunteers with lived experience may be dealing with personal issues. It's essential to offer sufficient support and resources to assist them in handling any emotional difficulties that might emerge or be triggered while they are volunteering.

## 3. Training and Support:

Volunteers with lived experience may require a training needs assessment and ongoing support (e.g. understanding meeting structures, I.T.) to effectively contribute. Ensuring that they have the necessary skills and knowledge can be a logistical challenge for organisations.

## 4. Diversity of Experiences:

Lived experiences vary widely, and not all volunteers share the same perspectives or backgrounds. Managing diversity within the group of volunteers can be challenging, requiring sensitivity to individual differences and experiences. Without support and training, those with lived experience could think the way it happened to them is the only way something can happen.

## 5. Potential for Triggering:

Discussions related to lived experiences may trigger emotional responses for volunteers or those they are assisting. Organisations need to be prepared to provide appropriate support for these situations and to minimise the risk.

## 6. Sustainability:

Sustaining involvement of volunteers with lived experience may be challenging due to personal commitments, changes in circumstances, or burnout. Organisations should develop their recruitment strategy to address this and embed best practice volunteer acknowledgment and appreciation, being mindful never to financially reward.



## 7. Power Dynamics:

Maintaining good relationships between volunteers, staff and those they support is essential. Volunteers may feel disempowered if their input is not valued, they are not supported well, without meaningful involvement or if positive change cannot be seen.

## 8. Stigma and Discrimination:

People with lived experience may face stigma or discrimination from others, including within the organisation or the community. Listening to volunteers' experiences and standing with them to address these challenges is crucial.

## 9. Communication Challenges:

Effective communication between volunteers, staff, and service users is essential. Differences in communication styles or challenges in expressing experiences may create barriers that need to be addressed.

## 10. Resources Constraints:

Organisations may face limitations in terms of time, finances, or personnel to effectively support volunteers with lived experience. Without the correct resourcing, volunteering becomes less meaningful and not as safe. If resources cannot be found, volunteering may need to be reframed or paused and the powerful benefits highlighted are lost.

## 11. Links with Professionals:

Some professionals don't immediately recognise the value of volunteering or understand the needs of volunteers. Regularly highlighting positive outcomes and information about the benefits of volunteering boosts understanding and builds relationships.

Addressing these challenges requires thoughtful planning, ongoing communication, and a commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for volunteers with lived experience.





# Top Tips in Planning for, Recruiting and Supporting Volunteers with Lived Experience

## Plan

Allocate appropriate amounts of time for planning and bringing together staff, volunteers and service users to offer different perspectives. Agree why you want to involve volunteers and how you will value them.

## Be Clear About Your Resources

Consider how much funding and staff capacity is needed when considering lived experience volunteering roles.

## Safeguard Your Organisation and Volunteers

Organise insurance, health and safety and risk assessments. Policies and procedures need to be well developed. Your local County Voluntary Council can help.

## Be Clear About the Role

Develop clear role descriptions explaining the activities, opportunities, expectations, and inherent risks. Roles need to be considered, appropriate and not tokenistic, if you hope people can share their lived experiences. Volunteers should be informed about the role, empowering their choice to be involved. This approach can maximise understanding and maintain a sense of control.

## Consider Recruitment and Selection

Be transparent about the role and the assessment of suitability. The application process should be proportionate for the role and where possible offer a variety of approaches to remove barriers to volunteers getting involved. Not all people with lived experience will be right for your volunteer role so consider how you will approach this.

## Diversify Your Volunteer Base

Look to recruit a range of people, giving opportunities to those who have not contributed before. Ensure you are clear if volunteer voices are representing themselves or a wider community.







## Individualise the Support You Offer

Blanket approaches do not work. Get to know your volunteers and understand what support they need. Make reasonable adjustments. Be trauma informed.

Develop agreed support to draw upon for volunteers which could include formal and informal supervision, mindfulness, wellbeing activities, or counselling. You could offer a buddy system in addition to volunteer manager support.

## Develop Effective Induction Training

Having the right training in place for volunteers is crucial. Don't assume someone with lived experience can undertake the role purely because they have lived experience. Explain your organisational structure, process, expectation and support. Check for volunteers understanding.

## Debrief is So Important

Volunteer managers need to ensure enough time for suitable debrief to ensure the volunteer is not upset or retriggered and can go about their day.

## Do Not to Overload

Be mindful how, and how often, volunteers are sharing stories and how many hours preparation, training, volunteering, debrief, associated activity and supervision they are undertaking. Do not ask the same volunteers to keep contributing. Find out how volunteers are, take account of personal commitments, build in opportunities for volunteering breaks.

## Give Your Time

Allocate an appropriate level of time for quality recorded volunteer supervision. Listen and be led by volunteer needs.

“It's not scary you just need the right things in place!”





If you are looking to involve volunteers with lived experience, contact your local County Voluntary Council who can help you to plan for volunteer involvement and provide development support such as guidance around policies and procedures.



### Contact Details for Swansea Council for Voluntary Service

Swansea Council for Voluntary Service  
7 Walter Road  
Swansea  
SA1 5NF

- ☎ 01792 544000
- ✉ [scvs@scvs.org.uk](mailto:scvs@scvs.org.uk)
- 🌐 [www.scvs.org.uk](http://www.scvs.org.uk)



### Contact Details for Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Service

Neath Port Talbot Council  
for Voluntary Service  
Tŷ Margaret Thorne  
17-19 Alfred Street  
Neath  
SA11 1EF

- ☎ 01639 631246
- ✉ [info@nptcvs.org.uk](mailto:info@nptcvs.org.uk)
- 🌐 [www.nptcvs.wales](http://www.nptcvs.wales)

**West Glamorgan Volunteering Support** is a multi-agency project creating shared resources to develop the knowledge, management and coordination of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations across the Swansea and Neath Port Talbot areas.

**The project partners are:**

Neath Port Talbot Council, Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Service, Swansea Bay University Health Board, Swansea Council, Swansea Council for Voluntary Service and West Glamorgan Regional Team.

**For more information visit:  
[www.westglamorgan.org.uk/wgvs](http://www.westglamorgan.org.uk/wgvs)**