

# ADVANCING POLICY AND PRACTICE THROUGH AUTHENTIC LIVED EXPERIENCE INVOLVEMENT

In the 2025 '[Voices That Matter](#)' pack, we explored why Lived Experience Expertise matters and what meaningful engagement looks like. This follow up pack, written in close collaboration with [VILLAGE Lived Experience Network](#), builds on that foundation by examining how lived experience can be authentically and equitably embedded into the work of practitioners and policymakers to support meaningful, sustainable and safe outcomes. It explores the structures, behaviours and organisational conditions required to make good engagement sustainable and standard in daily practice.

## WHAT?

### *What are Lived Experience Experts (LEEs)?*

Lived Experience Experts (LEEs) are key knowledge holders, with expertise gained through direct and personal experiences of a specific issue or system. The authentic involvement of LEEs supports more inclusive decision-making and contributes to more equitable systems and outcomes.

The term LEEs is used following meaningful consultation with the individuals whose lived experiences directly inform and shape our work. This reflects our commitment to using language that is preferred by and respectful of the people we partner with.

Lived Experience Expertise is as an essential form of knowledge, and we value LEEs as equal partners in our work. By embedding lived experience alongside professional and academic expertise, we support more inclusive decision-making and contribute to more equitable systems and outcomes.

By providing conditions that ensures engagement is equitable and safe we can move from tokenism to authentic and sustainable ways of working.

## WHY?

### *Why does an authentic partnership matter?*

Lived Experience Expertise is increasingly recognised as an essential source of knowledge in research, policy and practice.

As organisations move beyond asking whether to involve LEEs, and instead ascertain HOW to authentically partner with LEEs, it is critical that engagement is grounded in equity, safety and shared decision-making.

Lived experience engagement requires a mindset shift, from viewing people as storytellers to recognising them as experts whose knowledge can shape decisions, challenge systems and drive more equitable outcomes. Embedding Lived Experience Expertise strengthens the relevance, quality and impact of policy, research and practice while ensuring decisions are informed by those most affected.



Photo: Vitaly Gariev on Unsplash

## EQUITY

We view a critical component of equity as centering the expertise of people whose voices have historically been excluded or underrepresented in decision-making. Operationalising equity goes beyond representation, it requires organisations to actively address barriers, share power and create genuine opportunities for Lived Experience Expertise to influence decisions, implementation and outcomes. Lived Experience Expertise is a vital source of evidence that strengthens research, policy and practice, while helping safeguard against unintended harm and the perpetuation of inequitable systems.



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## HOW?

### *A case study for implementation*

In 2024, VILLAGE (Valued Individuals Living and Learning About Growing Equity) was established. Sitting at the heart of [SEMPRE](#) (Strengthening imPLEmentation Practice and Research with Equity), this group brings Lived Experience Expertise into research, policy and practice to help bridge the research-to-practice gap and improve equitable access to health, social care and education services for children, adults and families.

The SEMPRE honeycomb, pictured right, illustrates how authentic partnerships between researchers and LEEs can be embedded across the research lifecycle. Rather than engaging LEEs at a single point in time, VILLAGE partners with researchers from the earliest stages of grant development through to study design, evidence generation, interpretation, dissemination and implementation.

This approach ensures Lived Experience Expertise meaningfully shapes research priorities, processes and outcomes.



## Further reading:

[VILLAGE Report](#) – Practical guidance on embedding Lived Experience Expertise to advance equity in research and implementation.

[Scoping Review \(2026\)](#) – Evidence for embedding Lived Experience Expertise to strengthen equitable implementation.

Every organisation is somewhere on the journey from consultation to authentic partnership. Wherever you are, VILLAGE can help you take the next step. Whether you're just beginning or looking to strengthen existing partnerships, we're here to support meaningful collaboration with Lived Experience Experts.

Get in touch to explore what this could look like for your team: [VILLAGE-Network@monash.edu](mailto:VILLAGE-Network@monash.edu)

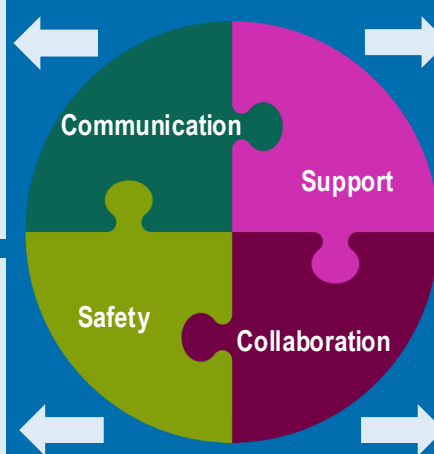
## NOW WHAT? Recommendations for policy and practice professionals

Open, transparent communication builds trust and strong partnerships. Clearly outlining expectations, roles, timelines and decision-making processes helps everyone contribute with confidence. Closing the feedback loop is equally important; sharing how lived experience influenced decisions demonstrates that contributions were valued and had impact. Communication is also about transparency when ideas cannot be implemented, helping maintain trust even when decisions differ.

**CONSIDER:** Have we communicated not only what we are asking, but also what changed because of lived experience input?

Psychological safety creates the conditions for authentic participation. LEEs should feel respected, valued and comfortable sharing different perspectives without fear of judgement or having to revisit personal experiences unnecessarily. Safe environments acknowledge that expertise extends beyond personal storytelling and recognises the emotional labour that can accompany this work. This may include offering breaks, providing clear expectations, recognising emotional labour, and ensuring people can contribute in ways that feel safe and meaningful.

**CONSIDER:** Have we created an environment where people feel safe to contribute honestly, challenge ideas and be heard?



The outcome of meaningful engagement is the created value for both organisations and Lived Experience Experts through mutual learning, respect and shared decision making. Meaningful engagement requires ongoing relational and practical support, not just participation. This includes appropriate remuneration, flexibility, accessible meeting formats, opportunities to debrief, and recognising the expertise that LEEs bring. Supporting people well enables authentic, sustainable partnerships and strengthens outcomes for everyone involved.

**CONSIDER:** What practical and relational supports have we put in place to enable meaningful participation, rather than simply expecting it?

Authentic collaboration means being open to changing the direction of a project due to LEE insights and input, not simply seeking validation for decisions already made. LEEs should be involved early enough to help shape ideas, priorities and outcomes; not simply invited to respond once the direction has already been decided. Genuine collaboration recognises lived experience as expertise, alongside research and professional knowledge.

**CONSIDER:** At what point did we invite Lived Experience Experts into this work?



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