

We discussed the prevalence of deficit based services within the sector, the need for services to be strengths based and the skills that people experiencing homelessness have that are often dismissed. We also discussed how the skills of people with lived experience of homelessness make people exceptional workers within the sector, though barriers exist to their recruitment and progression.

The following provides a summary of our discussion.

Deficit-based services

The experience of deficit-based services

Within the UK, the service response to ending homelessness predominantly works in a deficit way. The culture can be driven by 'fixing,' people, with many negative assumptions made about people and their capacity to make decisions about their lives. This is in part driven by commissioning targets, which feed through into assessments and monitoring forms.

*"It's always doing stuff to you." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*"They think you're incapable of doing absolutely anything." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*"I was a strong willed person, but I was made to feel like I had no choice over how my life should be." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*"It was like these people owned you." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*"You're voice was worthless." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*"You feel owned by the state. Like because they've given you benefits they own you." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*"You get to choose what flavour shit you have." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*"I think it is deficit based. If you look at when someone is having an assessment, look at what that assessment consists of. It's all about substance misuse, your mental health, your physical health, it almost directs you there. It's not about your interests, your hobbies. I can't recall ever seeing what previous employment history you have, when someone is doing a housing assessment and putting a support plan with that, it goes down that [negative] road. It is negative, and people pick up on that. Let's talk about your past, let's talk about your offending. Some of these things services need to be aware of it, but let's have some positive conversations as well." **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Our skills

Working in a deficit-based way has the effect of disempowering people; reducing our confidence and self-esteem. Alternatively, services should focus on the skills that people have, and work with these to empower people to meet their aspirations. This requires greater reflective thinking and understanding within services of the range of skills that people have. Organisations such as Street Buddies adopt this approach, working with people at their pace to achieve the outcomes they aspire too. Other organisations, however, can actively work against these skills, treating them as hostile or confrontational.

*“It’s important for self-esteem. It’s important for confidence.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“When we look at a shoplifter, we look at them based on that behaviour. But we don’t look at the communication, marketing, knowing what it is and what it wants, your planning, your strategizing in case things go wrong. All skills, but we don’t recognise.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“We’ve all got lived experience and I think my lived experience, you know, has obviously, you look back and it was fairly negative for me as an experience, but the skill set and what I’ve developed has probably, well, it made me the man that I am today. And that’s in a positive way. It’s made me who I am. Obviously, I come in here and I’m frustrated, but I think [] will say, I do have a few hats, I can go into other meetings and act a bit differently, and I think that all comes from that, having to adjust and adapt to my environment. And although, even though I do look back on it negatively, it’s helped me, it’s helped me long term.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Resilient, good problem solvers, empathic, determined, understanding, good communicating skills.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“At [SERVICE1] it’s fairly OK, actually, they realised I knew things, I’m a talker and can think of logical arguments, and I edited their magazine. But at [SERVICE2], I became a rep, and I suggested doing a newsletter. All of a sudden they said, ‘You can’t do that! ... I presented an argument and they’ve been doing it for five years now.’” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“There’s a tendency for people to have a much stronger sense of right and wrong.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I was a bit entrepreneurial, back in the day, using stuff that I shouldn’t use and dealing stuff I shouldn’t have been dealing. But, I think myself and our community are good at spotting opportunities, whatever that opportunity is, whether it’s sell something or get something or whether it’s actually to spot opportunities to create change as well, so being able to recognise stuff. And also being creative in our thinking around work and business, absolutely.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Some of these strengths are seen as problems to services; too empathetic, too straight talking sometimes, and that kind of thing services don’t appreciate at best and sometimes are quite resistant too.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Employing people with lived experience of homelessness

A culture-shift will be required within services to adopt an aspirational, strengths based approach. The Panel strongly advocate for increased work to be done to employ people with lived experience of homelessness throughout their organisations.

Key skills for ending homelessness

Members of the Panel identified a range of skills that people with lived experience of disadvantage often have which are crucial to working effectively to end homelessness.

*“I can go out on the street, I can just get down to rough sleepers levels, put cardboard down, and talk to them for an hour, two hours. Maintain that relationship for years if necessary, to help get them to trust me so they can ask me to get them into accommodation. They can pick up if someone’s fake, and doesn’t know what they’re doing... It’s a genuine relationship, instead of being, ‘Oh, poor me, I want this, I want that,’ it’s a genuine working relationship, that can lead to getting them off the street, if they choose.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Somebody that’s got lived experience working, they can build up pretty quickly a rapport up, and trust, as well, so you can support somebody. I suppose it’s that relationship. Someone who recognises from your past, they can see where you are now and I think that can reflect on them, wanting to be in the same kind of place you are now, wanting that support, knowing what support you’ve been through, and wanting your guidance.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Gift of the gab. You’ve got to have the gift of the gab I think. Quick solutions, you’ve got to be good at finding quick solutions. And knowing, having the knowledge to make decisions with them, on their terms. That’s a big things, it’s all about them.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Very good at problem solving and not overcomplicating things. And that’s what I always felt worked well for me.... A lot of the service users would want to continue to work with me, it wasn’t because I told the best jokes or I was the best looking, even though that was true, it was because they felt that I was very honest with them, in regards to being realistic, but also I didn’t overcomplicate things. They could come to me and things would get done without fobbing them off. For a lot of clients, there is a window of opportunity, and it’s not 8 hours, they want something, and they want it done as quick as possible, and I think that’s a skill in itself.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Barriers to employment

Currently, the very skills that make people effective workers can be actively discouraged by services, creating an in-effective way of working which facilitates distrust between services and people accessing them. More work needs to be done to emphasise the value and importance of these skills if a service wants to work effectivity to end homelessness.

*“We have a lot of empathy. There is a lot of situations depending on your organisation where they don’t value your empathy with your clients. So we have a psychiatrist here, says my team have too much empathy for our client group. I think it’s so important that we respect people and we treat them with the care that we want to be treated. And he says, ‘No, it’s too much, you need to have boundaries.’ We do have boundaries, he just doesn’t recognise our boundaries. He thinks we’re wishy-washy. And we’re not. We care for people. We care what people think. Good or bad. If they’re shouting and criticising we take it on board. Because we need to recognise where we are as individuals and how we impact on other people.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“One of the things that we have all come from, regardless of where we’ve started from, we’ve lived an experience that’s taught us that we’re not prepared to put up with something, and this is why we’ve turned it around and we fight for our clients. However we look at it we’ve come from a disadvantage in some way and we know what it is to go into a service and go, ‘That was rubbish, that was pointless,’ And you say to yourself ‘In a different life I could do better,’ and we do that now, so we have learnt from a negative experience and put it into a positive. And this is what we throw out to our clients. And we are up against a system that doesn’t like the way we work. We are up against a system that says ‘When you come through that door you better behave. If you dare raise your voice you’re out that door.’ With me, screaming is fine, as long as you don’t hit me!” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I wouldn’t say they recognise people’s strengths. They look at academia in these services, and they rely on that heavily. Because someone has a formal education [they think] they’re perspective on life or someone’s treatment plan is the right way of doing it.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

“It’s really, really difficult for services now to be independent because of the way they’re funded. So they have to conform and they have to employ certain people that can speak that language who they deem have come from an academic background. So it excludes a lot of us that are street wise, who are people conscious, who are from the ground upwards. It excludes us from a certain level. We can get to a senior, but we will never manage a service. And that’s the shame of how it’s turned out. Because I think we have far more to offer than some of the people who have gone to university. Because we are real, we feel, and we will do our utmost, it is not just a 9-5 job. It is a badge of honour, we wear it all the time.

You can't take it away from us. It will probably say that on our gravestone, 'Care for people all their life,' and that's fine by me, I accept that, it keeps me functioning." **Member of National Advisory Panel**

Progression

To support culture change within services, more work needs to be done to ensure people with lived experience are actively supported to senior roles and can thrive within them.

"To me, it seems to be there is a glass ceiling for people with lived experience. I can think of only a few people that have got to upper management. Most people are kept on the ground floor, they're not taken as seriously, they're not seen as useful or management potential." **Member of National Advisory Panel**

"I've gone to strategic meetings where there's external partners. And it really did knock my confidence. I'm new in the role, went there, and there were people, I'm a frontline worker, I've got lived experience, I feel like I'm pretty good at what I do. I literally came out of that meeting feeling that no one appreciated my view point. There were people in there, there were directors, very influential people in [], who just dismissed me... I remember coming out of there literally questioning whether I was in the right role. I genuinely thought, 'Why have I even tried this?' All that effort to get myself into a position where I think I would be heard, and it was like, "What do you know, what do you know?" It was disheartening." **Member of National Advisory Panel**

"All of a sudden, I've been promoted, I'm in a management position now. The same people [who said positive things] act completely differently towards me. I'm not expecting a pat on the back, but it's almost a concerted effort to dismiss my views... It almost feels like some people are threatened." **Member of National Advisory Panel**

"There's imposter syndrome... It doesn't help when you go into meetings, and you feel like a token gesture, a tick box." **Member of National Advisory Panel**

About Expert Link

Expert Link is a peer led organisation championing the voice of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages, including homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse, offending and domestic violence and abuse. We advocate for a world where people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages are treated as equal partners in decisions made about their lives.