



APRIL 2024

Reclaiming lived experience leadership

Definition, power and opportunities



01	Executive Summary	p 03
02	Introduction	p 04
03	Key Insights	p 05
04	World Cafes	p 06
05	Next Steps	p 07

A special thanks

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Reclaiming Lived Experience Leadership* conference, held on 25th April 2024 in London, brought together 75 staff and volunteers from the UK's refugee and migration sector. Co-organised by Freedom from Torture, Refugee Action, Refugee Council, and Migration Exchange, the event sought to promote more inclusive approaches in the refugee and migration sectors by focusing on three key areas: defining lived experience leadership, identifying and dismantling barriers to power, and enhancing career opportunities.

Throughout a rich afternoon of discussion - one individual even exclaimed, "this is really making me think!" - participants heard from keynote speakers, collaborated in World Cafe workshops, and joined a reflective panel at the end. Participants also networked over a welcome lunch and heard live poetry performed by Loraine Masiya Mponela.

The key insights that emerged highlighted the need for collective action to dismantle barriers and the importance of sharing best practices within the lived experience network. Participants emphasised creating safer spaces for conversations and recognising lived experience as an invaluable knowledge base for organisations. Finally, attendees called out for more accountability within oppressive power structures, where both funders and organisations must do more - through policy changes, positive action and by recognising their own inherent biases - to resource those with lived experience to take on and thrive within positions of power.

The participants recognised that the scale of work to be done is extensive, yet the day was infused with a sense of agency. "People with lived experience are waking up to realise... we have agency and power to change things, to confront the system," commented one panellist, if at the same time recognising that the lived experience movement faces an uphill struggle against inherently discriminatory systems of oppression and white supremacy.

Moreover, participants highlighted the challenge of equitably working towards lived experience leadership with an intersectional lens, in a context where racism, homophobia, ableism and sexism complicate and aggravate systemic injustices.

"There is optimism and solidarity right now", reflected one participant. Indeed, looking forward, the conference promises continued discussion and action around lived experience definition, radical reimagination of recruitment and employment principles, and wider societal change to challenge government laws that restrict access to work and media narratives that tokenize and reduce lived experience to an identity rather than source of expertise.

INTRODUCTION

“The system has been ruled by people looking from the outside in, bringing a wealth of data, information, analysis, but without really asking what change is most needed... Imagine navigating a maze-like labyrinth with changing walls. Now imagine having walked that very path. That is the power of lived experience.”

Angela McLeary, from *One Strong Voice*



INTRODUCTION

WHY HOST A LIVED EXPERIENCE LED CONFERENCE?

The *Reclaiming Lived Experience Leadership* conference was held just days after the Rwanda Bill became law. Indicative of the increasingly hostile environment towards people who are seeking asylum, migrants and refugees which has become commonplace in the UK, the conference organisers believed it more important than ever to come together to build a strong civil society network in solidarity with people on the move.

Each of the organisers also shared a sense that lived experience inclusion was at risk of becoming a tick-box exercise and were motivated to address the fundamental issues of identity, power and lack of opportunities which all form barriers to lived experience leadership.

With more demand on services, increasingly stretched resources and a need for bold thinking that looks to the future, the conference had three key objectives:

1. To foster a safe and dynamic space for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and experiences among participants from diverse backgrounds;
2. To facilitate networking and collaboration among participants, encouraging the formation of partnerships for future projects and initiatives;
3. To identify and address key challenges faced by individuals and organisations through insightful discussions and collaborative problem-solving.

INTRODUCTION

DEEPENING EXPERTISE

For each of the convening organisations, the conference offered an opportunity to deepen areas of expertise in lived experience leadership as well as to learn from the wider sector.

For the Refugee Council, the conference was a chance to explore career development support models for staff and volunteers with lived experience. Building on the ongoing refugee involvement work in line with their own [refugee involvement and strategy plan](#), they aimed to co-produce a career development programme to share learning, receive feedback and inspire other organisations to build on their solutions coming from their comprehensive research.

For Refugee Action, the focus was on better understanding who holds power in organisations and how best to support the removal of barriers to power for people with lived experience. Similarly, the conference was an opportunity to discuss how grassroots-level organisations can contribute on the national stage, and how established organisations can make space for them. This work draws on Refugee Action's own [2023-2030 strategy](#) which centres on lived experience, as well as its [Shifting Power work](#) and insights on power already gathered through its [Insight Hub](#).

For Migration Exchange, going into the conference, the aim was to develop a more nuanced understanding of lived experience leadership in dialogue with others. Complementing ongoing work, including their [People Power and Priorities report](#), [Equity Catalysts Community of Practice](#) and [Shaping the Future leadership initiative](#), the conference offered an opportunity to dive deeper into what lived experience leadership really means.





INTRODUCTION

CONVENING THE CONFERENCE

The Reclaiming Lived Experience Leadership follows on from a Freedom from Torture conference held in 2022, one of the first events to bring lived experience leaders together across the sector. For years, they have taken on the role of facilitating conversations and supporting other organisations to centre lived experience leadership by identifying and then removing barriers to power. To this end, Freedom from Torture approached [Unbound Philanthropy](#) to fund a conference dedicated to better defining and driving forward lived experience leadership. Preparations began months in advance, with weekly meetings convened between senior leaders with lived experience from the four convening organisations.

The collective approach to organisation aimed to ensure that the conference offered a safe and inclusive space to host these challenging conversations. To this end, dedicated funding was made available to support travel costs from across the UK to the event and during the conference, a designated wellbeing room was made available on the day. The event itself aimed to be as participatory as possible, through facilitating World Cafe break-out conversations.

Organising the conference was a learning process in itself. As a co-created event, there were challenges in establishing group norms and behaviours to ensure everyone felt included and respected. Even within this organising team, there were ongoing negotiations around the power dynamics at play brought out through differences in vision, from decision-making to framing of the conference, evident in the lengthy discussions around terms like ‘reclaiming’ and ‘lived experience’ vs. ‘lived expertise’.

Since then, Refugee Action has hosted a follow-up session with 15 conference participants to give a chance to debrief as well as continue developing on some of the key themes. The session highlighted the desire for a longer conference in the future, with more time given to advancing key themes, networking and good practice sharing. They have also launched their [Asylum is a Front Line for Racial Justice](#) report, which further explores how structural racism creates barriers to power and proposes recommendations to the future government and racial justice movements on how best to remove these.

KEY INSIGHTS

“Back in 2005 when I came to the country, I looked around and thought the [refugee] sector was more advanced than other sectors in engaging with refugees and asylum seekers. But I feel since then we’ve been left behind as a sector. Today, the language is heard everywhere as a buzzword and to raise funding... People ‘have’ lived experience in their organisation, but the question is always, on what level?”

Kolbassia Housou, Freedom from Torture

KEY INSIGHTS

DEFINING LIVED EXPERIENCE

The conference presented an opportunity for those with lived experience of forced migration to lead the conversations around what it means. Now, with a stronger-than-ever network, the conversation must continue to deepen definitions further and take concrete actions based on the following 3 insights:

1) CONVENING SAFER SPACES AND CONVERSATIONS

A first critical step to better shared understanding of lived experience is to create safer spaces for conversations. To this end, this conference is part of - but not the end of - an ongoing effort to ensure lived experience is at the heart of a growing movement that seeks to shift power and re-imagine systems, rather than be a by-stander to this process. In tandem, those with privilege must practise active listening and share power.

2) VALUING LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERTISE

There is work to be done to better define and value lived experience not solely as an identity, but as a practice and area of expertise crucial to running an impactful organisation. Rather than seeing it as a tick-box exercise, organisations would do well to cultivate a better balance of lived experience and learned experience within their teams, and avoid valuing the latter over the former.

3) DRIVING SOCIETAL CHANGE

Making progress in defining lived experience must go hand-in-hand with social transformation, catalysed through campaigning on key topics such as the right to work for people seeking asylum. As part of this, changing the media narrative is imperative, to shift from a paradigm where being a refugee or asylum-seeker is understood solely as an identity rather than as an experience.





KEY INSIGHTS

REMOVING BARRIERS TO POWER

The barriers to power for those with lived experience of forced migration are vast, but the first step is to better identify and hold power to account. This spans individuals in power positions, organisations and broader societal structures such as governmental bodies and the public. To effectively challenge the status quo, the conference highlighted how coming together as a national lived experience movement for collective action is invaluable. The following key steps emerged:

1) FUNDING FOR CHANGE

A crucial step to removing barriers to power involves organisations dedicating adequate time and resources to ensure career support is effective and truly inclusive. As part of this, funders must review their mechanisms and risk processes so money gets to community-level organisations, as well as their own recruitment practices to ensure lived experience representation in funding teams.

2) OPENING DOORS

There are simply not enough work experience opportunities and paid jobs for people with lived experience. To address this, recruiters must review processes which pose barriers, such as foreign qualification recognition and stringent language requirements. Well paid and meaningful jobs should be created that end the culture of tokenism. System-wide, we must work to raise awareness of career development barriers among HR teams, recruitment teams, and offer more tailored career development programmes.

3) BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Organisational policies, power gate-keeping, the dominant White-British culture and cultural barriers all pose incredible barriers to people with lived experience securing positions of power. Organisations must reconsider what 'normal ways of working' are, and redistribute power for more equitable decision-making. There should be mandatory training for leaders without lived experience to recognise their power and build better support structures around people rather than forcing them to conform to the existing structure. Those with lived experience must be given direct access to the financial, social and intellectual resources to thrive.

KEY INSIGHTS

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities for improving career opportunities and professional development must be seized to radically change the make-up of organisations in the refugee and migration sector. Key actions include:

1) CREATING A POSITIVE CULTURE

Creating a positive and inclusive culture for staff with lived experience is essential to support mental health, promote active participation and encourage applicants to leadership positions. To this end, the fast-paced, urgent culture of work that doesn't leave enough time for professional reflection and development should be challenged.

2) TACKLING DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES

Positive action against discrimination must become a priority for organisations and trustees to tackle, such as establishing quotas, offering well-salaried jobs, ensuring flexible working, stronger safeguarding and boundary policies, and explaining hidden rules and cultural expectations, so that people with lived experience thrive in their jobs. Organisations should regularly audit themselves to identify structural inequalities and ensure there is accountability when power sharing doesn't happen.

3) OFFERING HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Organisations must better support those with lived experience with confidence building, development opportunities, language support, and access to continuing education and training. Organisations should recognise and proactively manage for complicating life circumstances, such as legal status, accommodation issues, financial barriers, and mental health.



WORLD CAFES

“The heartbeat of the [reclaiming lived experience leadership] concept comes from our ancestors. Those on the hard edges of systems of oppression have always been drivers of positive change. Yet we’re often treated as informers of change [used for] stories, case studies and as subjects of investigations.”

Baljeet Sandhu



WORLD CAFE SESSION #1

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LIVED EXPERIENCE?

Migration Exchange
at Global Dialogue

“To understand lived experience leadership, we have to start by understanding ourselves and how we relate to things that relate around us.” With this guiding thought, each group was led through a series of questions to provoke deep thinking and reflection on our current lived experience understanding, and were provided with a range of frameworks through which to better understand and take action towards a more equitable future that values and includes lived experience.

To begin the session, the facilitator asked each group ‘how well do you understand your lived experience in light of the power structures in which you live?’ as part of an exercise to understand self-reported levels of knowledge and to highlight the subtlety of power dynamics. The facilitator began by giving her own rating of 7 out of a 10. Across 4 sessions, not a single participant rated their knowledge higher than this. The facilitator pointed out that this is likely due to the unspoken power dynamics of participants not wanting to challenge the facilitator (the authority figure in the circle).

In certain groups, the conversation centred on understanding why it is that when marginalised people with lived experience get to leadership positions they are not equitable leaders.

Reflections centred on the lack of understanding that people with lived experience come with their own biases and different levels of power and privilege, and that there is intersectionality of different dimensions of lived experience (ethnicity, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background etc.), each with their own power dynamics at play.

The impact of structural racism and the hierarchical systems of oppression and extractive capitalism which treat people and their lived experience as resources to be exploited and therefore coerce people to ‘play the game’ must also be taken into consideration and mitigated against through both systems awareness and self-awareness. Indeed, within an inequitable system, even with all the self-awareness and good will in the world, a leader's impact will still be limited.

To close the session, the facilitator asked participants what they would change about the system in which they work and live. The answers showcased how the definition of lived experience is the very base of systemic change, with participants keen to promote more understanding of lived experience by facilitating more spaces for conversation, working towards deeper cultures of inquiry within organisations, and coming together to form a lived experience network or union to better represent the entire community.



WORLD CAFE SESSION #2

REMOVING BARRIERS TO POWER



The groups addressed a range of questions such as ‘what are the existing barriers for organisations to embed and empower people with lived experience in decision-making processes?’ and ‘how can we better integrate grassroots, lived-experience-led organisations into national-level strategic sector discussions?’

The discussion began with participants mapping out where power currently sits. These cover specific roles within organisations, as well as wider social groups and structures of privilege. This includes:

- 1. Organisations:** Trustees, CEOs and senior leadership teams, those on permanent contracts and middle management;
- 2. The Sector:** Funders, big charities and NGOs;
- 3. Wider Society:** Home Office, government and councils, the general public, and the system of privilege and white leadership.

The groups identified 5 key barriers to power for people with lived experience. These include lack of career opportunities, challenging life contexts, a lack of holistic support that builds confidence and skills, lack of funding to resource staff positions and wider structural barriers arising from organisational policies and dominant White-British culture.

To remove these barriers, the groups identified a range of actions from fundamental national legislative changes, such as the right to work, to organisational transformation through decision-making structures, policies and culture. Many emphasised the need to provide meaningful opportunities supported with sufficient funding so that training and professional development is available, not only to staff with lived experience but also to (re)train staff without lived experience in how to create safe spaces.



WORLD CAFE SESSION #3

ENHANCING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES



The groups discussed ways to enhance career opportunities on an organisational and systemic level and 5 areas of action were identified by the conference participants, each of which have organisational and systemic dimensions.

1. Challenge the culture of urgency

The fast-paced, urgent culture of work doesn't leave enough time for professional reflection and development. Though often time poor and under-resourced, organisations must prioritise positive and inclusive cultures.

2. Tackle discriminatory practices

Organisations must tackle discriminatory practices around career progression and decision-making through improved accountability.

3. Resource for meaningful change

Organisations must dedicate adequate time and resources to ensure career support is effective and truly inclusive. Systemically, this involved pushing funders to increase funding for career development.

4. Improve recruitment practices

Organisations must embed good practice such as blind recruitment, guaranteed interviews and ring fenced roles for those with lived experience, work on improved qualification recognition frameworks and effective pathways from volunteering to entry-level roles.

5. Set people up for success

Trustees and senior leadership must ensure lived experience employees have opportunities to network, and access to progression development and flexible working conditions.

NEXT STEPS

The *Reclaiming Lived Experience Leadership* conference marked an important moment in the journey towards a more inclusive sector led by lived experience. The insights underscore the urgent need to continue building momentum across the lived experience movement nationally. But we are still at the beginning.

Looking forward, we must convene further conversations to deepen our definitions of lived experience, expand our networks, and find ways to come together in collective action. For meaningful change to occur, funders must actively engage in resourcing this transformation. Adequate funding is not only needed to support the development of lived experience leadership, but to help dismantle systemic barriers.

Importantly, those without lived experience must hold themselves accountable as gatekeepers within a dominant system that is inherently oppressive. It is crucial to recognise and address the power dynamics at play and work collaboratively to create an environment where lived experience is valued and integrated at every level.

Together as a community of funders, charity leaders, staff, volunteers and activists, we must come together to build a more inclusive and just sector. To this end, the *Reclaiming Lived Experience Leadership 2024* conference and this subsequent report aim to catalyse much-needed action and commitment to the lived experience movement.

