



Lived Experience Leadership

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*Rebooting the DNA of
Leadership*

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Disclaimer

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About Clore Social Leadership

Clore Social Leadership is a leading organisation in the United Kingdom that develops leaders with a social purpose so that they can transform their communities, organisations and the world around them. CLS helps make social change happen by supporting and investing in people and enabling them to become leaders with the resilience, self-awareness and capabilities to tackle the social challenges of the 21st century.

About the Knowledge Equity Initiative, Tsai Center for Innovative Thinking at Yale

The Knowledge Equity Initiative (KEI), is a ground-breaking research, education, and practice initiative established by Tsai CITY's Innovator in Residence, Baljeet Sandhu, to explore how we can meaningfully and equitably value the knowledge gathered through lived, and learned, experience to lead social change, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Tsai CITY aims to inspire and support students from diverse backgrounds and disciplines to seek innovative ways to address real-world problems. Launched in 2017, CITY serves students from across Yale University through programs, funding, and mentorship.

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“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

— Martin Luther King Jr.

LEx-ICON

Shaped by the insights, perspectives and views of 30 social leaders using their lived experiences to lead positive change in society, this report explores and develops the growing concept of Lived Experience Leadership.

Leaders, change-makers and innovators working across the social sector in the United Kingdom (including, charity, voluntary and not-for-profit; philanthropy, government, social enterprise, and business), kindly shared their personal and professional leadership journeys, successes and challenges as Lived Experience Leaders (LEx Leaders) and explored the current landscape of leadership learning, development and support for LEx leaders currently operating across the social sector and communities in the UK.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| LEx | <i>Lived Experience</i> |
| LEx Leaders | <i>Lived Experience Leaders</i> |
| LEx Leadership | <i>Lived Experience Leadership</i> |
| PWLEx | <i>People With Lived Experience</i> |
| Non-LEx Leader | <i>Leader without Lived Experience</i> |

DEFINITIONS

Community/ Communities

Used interchangeably. A group of individuals who share a common attribute, be it the part of the social sector they inhabit (for example, funders, social entrepreneurs, mental health), their membership of a particular social group or groups, or their shared experience of situations or issues.

Lived Experience

Direct, first-hand experience, past or present, of a social issue(s) and/or injustice(s)

Lived Expertise

Knowledge, perspectives, insights, and understanding gathered through lived experience.

Lived Experience Leader

Change-makers, innovators and leaders who have activated their lived expertise to inform, shape and lead their social purpose work (often in combination with their learned and practice experience) to directly benefit the communities they share those experiences with.

Service-User

An individual who uses the services of a social purpose organisation. In the global context ‘consumer’ may also be used.

Social Purpose Work

Individuals, communities or social purpose organisations working for the wider good of civic society e.g. tackle social inequality, social and/or environmental injustices; or providing services/solutions to address local and/or wider social needs.

Social Sector and Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs)

Social purpose organisations inhabit the social sector. The social sector is a broad term used to describe a set of values and structures and includes organisations working for the wider good of civic society. The social sector includes individuals, funders, donors, investors, charities, not-for-profits, organisations, social enterprises, the voluntary or third sector, those parts of the public sector that have a primarily social purpose, and enterprises or businesses that trade like any other business but do so for the public good.

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“We’re in a time where it’s a world of division; building walls and barriers and the continued oppression and marginalisation of people and their views. As a sector focusing on social good isn’t it our role, our obligation – regardless of what government is in power – to unite and bring together all members of society to create opportunities that sustain and strengthen us all.”

— Interviewee¹

We’re living in a divided world. Divided by backgrounds, experiences, cultures, behaviours and world views. Rising inequalities threaten our society and a sense of hopelessness pervades social sector discussions about the future. At the same time, optimism for the future is flourishing across communities directly impacted by social inequities and a call for connected wisdom and visions of shared leadership is emerging.

Every day across the UK and beyond, people with direct, first-hand experience of social issues—or **‘lived experience’**²—are taking up change-making and leadership roles to address the unique needs, challenges and injustices their communities face. These leaders are affirming and building upon the remarkable work of many community and grassroots leaders and activists who came before them.

Today, in recognition and respect of the varying and complex journeys, trajectories and models of leadership that have emerged in these evolving communities, the notion of Lived Experience Leadership is developed and explored in this report. This report shines a light through the prism of this new leadership framework by drawing on findings from 30 in-depth interviews and surveys completed by Lived Experience Leaders (LEx leaders). It maps, identifies, and explores the complex landscape, reach and presence of Lived Experience Leadership flourishing across UK society.

However, this report also illuminates significant structural, systemic and cultural barriers that hinder, block or inadequately support LEx leaders capacity to thrive. Although, the work of the social sector has

achieved significant victories in giving agency to people with lived experience (PWLEx) in society, recognition, celebration and investment in LEx leaders has been long neglected. LEx leaders have limited visibility and little access to opportunity, resource and support to shape or lead population and systems-level change. Instead, technical expertise and learned knowledge continue to dominate social sector thinking, behaviour and activities. Many LEx leaders feel isolated and disenfranchised, forced to operate outside of existing support structures designed by this dominant culture – feeling side-lined, even rejected, as modern-day social leaders in the social sector.

This report is a call for action. There is a growing need for social purpose organisations to ‘nourish’, repair, reintegrate, and reboot the leadership DNA of the social sector. To invest in targeted, sophisticated and bespoke leadership and development support to help this community of leaders grow, **‘feel welcome’**, and reconnect with wider social sector operations.

Diversity and inclusion; social mobility; and addressing power and privilege in our offices have long been topics of discussion in the social sector. But it’s no longer simply a moral imperative for the social sector to listen and act – this report highlights the economic and social imperatives to do so. Supporting the leadership development of LEx leaders will not only build wider community cohesion and strengthen our social good **‘ecosystem’**, it will ultimately transform the work of the social sector by generating new social interventions to benefit civil society in a divided, fast-paced, ever-evolving world.

¹ Quotes that appear at the top of each section are from LEx leaders interviewed for this report.

² Words and phrases that appear in this format represent direct terminology from LEx leaders interviewed for this report.

“The human spirit of giving, hope and love is alive and kicking across the UK... We don't need to develop new ways of doing this – we need to identify, celebrate and learn from leadership flourishing within our communities.”

— Interviewee

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background

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Following the publication of the 2017 report ‘**The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change**’³ there has been growing interest in developing the leadership of PWLEx. Unpacking the concept of ‘**Lived Experience**’; its value to all social purpose work; and identifying the significant barriers and challenges PWLEx faced in accessing change-making opportunities, the report illuminated the need for leadership and organisational development in the social sector to help PWLEx thrive as social leaders.

Committed to developing social leaders in the UK, Clore Social Leadership (CSL) commissioned this report to understand the developing notion of ‘**Lived Experience Leadership**’, the profiles of LEx leaders currently operating in the social sector and help determine, if any, gaps in leadership learning and development (L&D).

³ *The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change: The Need for Leadership and Organisational development in the Social Sector*, Baljeet Sandhu 2017, available at www.thelivedexperience.org

Research Methodology

The report is based on two main sources:

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The bulk of the findings are based on lessons derived from in-depth interviews with fifteen social sector leaders who self-identify as LEx leaders. All but two of the interviews were conducted in-person or by phone. Two interviewees submitted their responses by writing (email). A full list of interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.

SURVEY RESPONSES

The second main source of data is derived from data collected from surveys completed by fifteen participants of the year-long '**leaders with lived experience**' project led by UnLtd, a leading provider of support to social entrepreneurs in and around the UK, between 2017 and 2018⁴. All fifteen participants completed the surveys following conclusion of the project. A full list of respondent questions can be found in Appendix 2.

Interviewee and respondent profiles

Interviewees and respondents represent a diverse array of lived experiences and learned perspectives from sub-sectors such as criminal and youth justice; prison reform; youth education and empowerment; multiple and complex needs; disability; mental health; women's rights; refugee and migrants; housing and infrastructure services, care leavers, LGBTQ rights and gender identity.

Breakdown of social issue/justice area(s) the interviewees and respondents cover in their work:

- » Mental health (including eating disorders, self-harm, suicide)
- » Disability/learning difficulties
- » Long term health condition/illness
- » Criminal justice system and prison reform
- » Migrant and refugee rights
- » Care system/care leavers
- » Homelessness/social and/or assisted housing
- » Substance misuse, addiction and rehabilitation
- » Unemployment/debt/poverty
- » Gang affiliation
- » Career
- » Domestic violence and abuse
- » Multiple and complex needs
- » Sexual violence, FGM
- » Forced/child marriage
- » War and trauma

⁴ A cohort based project in partnership with The Social Innovation Partnership (TSIP), based in Birmingham and Bristol with 15 participants in each cohort.

- » Race equality
- » Class equality
- » Gender equality
- » LGBTQ rights/gender identity
- » Reproductive justice

On average, each participant identified with at least 3 social issue/justice areas with which they have direct, first-hand experience.

Key Findings

Drawing lessons from the wealth of insights, perspectives and views from interviewees and respondents, the following key findings emerged:

Definitions matter

This is a complex field. PWLEx and LEx leaders populate the entire social sector in different forms and modalities. Without appreciating and embracing the breadth, depth, and historical nature of this field, the sector will continue to pursue ineffective initiatives to meet the distinct leadership and development needs of early stage, aspiring, emerging, experienced and senior LEx leaders. At present, the sector is confused and initiatives are not adequately meeting the needs of all LEx leaders, especially emerging and experienced LEx leaders. A clear framework that centers LEx leadership is needed to support sector-wide L&D initiatives and interventions, and is explored further in this report.

Unique leadership strengths and challenges

Some elements of the sector continue to pay lip-service to the value of LEx leadership, evidenced by the growth of initiatives seeking to 'give voice' to LEx leaders, without fully understanding the unique leadership strengths, competencies and skills that LEx leaders bring to the social sector. The lack of research, data and evidence in this field contributes to ongoing systemic, structural and cultural barriers that LEx leaders face in the sector. The report begins to explore the value and benefit of LEx leadership to wider sector operations, communities those operations purport to serve, and civil society. Failure to recognise these benefits, hinders progression of LEx leaders in the sector, and stifles collaboration and innovation necessary to create population and systems-level change needed to address pressing and emerging social problems in modern society.

Social Sector systems change is necessary

Developing L&D initiatives and interventions alone will not address the systemic, structural and cultural barriers LEx leaders currently face in the social sector. Current operating conditions in the sector are 'unhealthy', 'harmful' and creating a 'damaging disconnect' between social leaders with and without LEx, the communities they serve, and civil society. There is a pressing need to address the fitness of the social sector system to meet the needs of LEx leaders and address the leadership inequity and social and economic injustices many currently face. By addressing these barriers, progressive interventions, collaborations and innovations can be deployed to help LEx leaders thrive so that they can effectively address evolving social issues and injustices their communities face.

Multi-layered approaches to L&D provision

These are needed to address the L&D needs of LEx leaders at different levels of their leadership trajectory. LEx leaders have L&D needs like any other social leader, but also require tailored approaches to support their development due to their unique backgrounds as LEx leaders and the personal and professional challenges they may have faced. All LEx leaders will benefit greatly from L&D provision that center both lived and learned experiences in design; take a networked approach; address wellbeing and help support communication and systems thinking and practice. Sector leads and funders must involve social leaders with the lived and learned expertise to meet the unique needs that these approaches necessitate.

Early stage and aspiring LEx leaders require a hands-on approach to their development through bespoke L&D interventions and experiential learning, support and/or mentorship opportunities.

Emerging and experienced LEx leaders require targeted and collective L&D opportunities such as fellowships and residencies that combine skills development; coaching; mentoring and action-based approaches to development.

Senior LEx leaders are keen to 'give back' and support the development of emerging and experienced LEx leaders, while benefitting from mentorship from senior leaders with technical expertise across the sector (including the private sector and government).

“We need a flourishing people and planet but this can’t be achieved if we continue to value one type of leader to make this happen.”

— Interviewee

CHAPTER 2

Understanding ‘Lived Experience Leadership’

Definitions Matter

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The concept of a Lived Experience Leader is new. When introduced to the concept, nearly all interviewees commented on this new, **‘powerful’** theory of Lived Experience Leadership that they thought was long missing from leadership discourse and **‘necessary’** to support the authentic development of leaders in underserved communities.

‘There’s been lots of hurdles preventing social sector efforts from reaching and supporting the leadership of communities...and I think one has been our overreliance on participation and involvement models to engage communities.’⁵

‘One major challenge, is the lack of framework to understand the work of leaders with lived experience working across the social sector. By understanding our distinct and unique approaches to our leadership will help progress the field for our aspiring leaders.’

5 Text that appears in this format are direct excerpts from interviews with LEx leaders.

A new definition and framework of leadership that captured the unique profile, strengths, competencies and stages of LEx leadership was necessary to help support communities transitioning from traditional modes of engagement, involvement and participation towards a method that centered the **'strength'**, **'value'** and **'focus'** of LEx leadership.

'It's incredible. [Lived Experience Leadership] helped me own and describe my leadership approach, what I bring to the table. My whole unique self and leadership style, skills and expertise...I love it.'

'We are doing a disservice to everyone if we continue to fail to learn from the valuable human experiences that inform the way we work and lead change in our own lives and our communities.'

'We're all living – we all share in this human experience – but how often are we truly understanding these experiences, which embody our own leadership, which can be powerful and transformational.'

Most importantly, a definition for **'Lived Experience Leadership'** was crucial to help inform and **'transform'** the wider work of the social sector.

'It is important to define what leadership means, in any given context. Within the lived experience fields there are many great leaders with lived experience delivering first class work on the ground to affect change for their beneficiaries. Why are these leaders not able [to] take that work further and deliver real systems change for a local system, a countywide system, a national system?'

'To an outsider, our experiences may seem overwhelming, chaotic, scary and painful. They can be. But when the chips are down, countless people will rise to the occasion to lead change, moving tragedy to triumph, challenge to courage...survival and resilience...remarkable leadership – and the sector needs to start understanding [Lived Experience Leadership] for its own sake.'

Concepts such as **'lived experience'** and **'leadership'** have a multitude of meanings for different people. For this work to inform social purpose work, it was crucial to first clarify the definitions being used so **'we can all be on the same page'**.

Terms often used to describe those who are using their lived experience to effect change include service-user, end-user, and expert by experience. Not all of these terms, however, reflect the ways in which these practitioners are **'leaders of change'** or **'social leaders'** in their communities. To fully appreciate the landscape of LEx leadership, its value, benefits, challenges and the L&D needs of LEx leaders, **'definitions matter'**, and the terms we use to describe leadership should reflect the breadth and depth of LEx leaders' influence.

'Language can divide and confuse and I don't think everyone in the social sector will understand what we all mean by lived experience leadership...we need to help them understand.'

Several interviewees also raised concerns over the growing **'misuse'** of the term **'lived experience'** in the sector over recent years. It was therefore also very important to be clear about the definition of **'lived experience'** to avoid **'watering down'** the meaning that has been long used by communities working across the sector, especially in the community engagement, user-involvement and co-production fields

'Over the last couple of years the terms picked up speed in other sectors and it's being used in ways that we don't mean...we have to be careful not to untangle all the work that's been done before.'

What is Lived Experience?

Some of the interviewees reflected on the term **'lived experience'**, which has long been used in social justice movements to describe the direct, first-hand experiences of people from marginalised communities.

'Personal knowledge gained through direct, first-hand experience of a social issue or injustice.'

Although widely used in social purpose work, there is no universal cross-sector understanding of what people mean by the term **'lived experience'**. Everyone has lived, and everyone has experiences. But not everyone working in the social sector has direct, first-hand experience of the social issue, injustice or inequality they are tackling in their social purpose work.

'All of us have lived experience. But the experiences that we're talking about here are those rooted in community and driven by the injustice and disadvantage we've experienced directly and personally.'

Although, couched in past tense, for many, lived experience is also very much alive and **'living'**—and a process integrated into their current leadership and decision-making.

'I have a disability, I haven't survived it, I live with it every day and use my experiences to try and help improve the lives others with shared experiences.'

'It's not about 'turning your life around' or glorifying anyone - it's about integrating all your experiences into the now.'

'Leaders with lived experience have often moved through cycles of resistance, resilience and survival... there's little interest in celebrating and translating this to understand successful leadership in modern society.'

Lived experience is unique and complex. It can be intersectional, meaning that individuals can experience multiple layers of **'disadvantaged experiences and injustices'**. This intersectional quality of lived experience was reflected in the nature, breadth and depth of lived experiences unique to all interviewees and respondents.

'Our lives aren't siloed. I have numerous lived experiences I live with every day.'

'We can't forget that inequality and injustice will be experienced differently, with some groups more affected than others.'

'The battleground that is my life I don't think anyone can appreciate. Having the police stop me is common place...debt and poverty is common place...fear, anxiety and living with the past in my life.'

How people express and embrace their lived experiences also differs from person to person.

'We may use terms like 'lived realities' or 'centering our community' which focuses on our communities with lived experience.'

What Is Not Lived Experience?

For the purpose of this field, interviewees explored the ‘**misuse**’ or misunderstanding of lived experience and how it was being used by some professionals in the sector.

‘More recently I’ve heard people say things like ‘my lived experience of that project’...they may be coming from a place of connection, but we need to be careful that this term isn’t misused as a broad brush term for everything and anything.’

For interviewees, living or working in close proximity to those with direct, first-hand experience of social issues, injustices or inequalities was not lived experience. Lived experience is experienced personally and directly.

‘It’s worrying to hear people in the sector use the term to justify their own practice...working in proximity to marginalised young people as a youth worker doesn’t give you their lived experience.’

People with Lived Experience (PWLEx)

Having lived experience alone does not make you a LEx leader. For the purposes of this report, interviewees felt it was important to distinguish between people wishing to inform services using their lived experience (PWLEx), and people who were actively seeking to use their lived experience as a jumping off point for creating and leading change in their communities.

Seven of the interviewees, with extensive expertise in developing and designing initiatives to give agency to PWLEx in social sector operations, explored the numerous ‘**civic engagement**’ models that have been developed and deployed by the social sector to bring the ‘**voices**’ of PWLEx to inform the work of the social sector

‘There’s been lots of work across different fields...but they’ve predominately focused on engagement, participation and user-involvement initiatives.’

‘There’s lot of frameworks used to promote the value of lived experience through various community engagement efforts; organizing and advocacy development; service-user involvement; co-production initiatives and the list goes on...but consistently, a lot of them focus on community involvement, which is very different from leadership.’

However, for some interviewees the over emphasis on service-user involvement has had the unintended consequence of veiling LEx leadership, resulting in the neglect of initiatives to strengthen their leadership. Interviewees who have been actively involved in these initiatives noted:

‘I’m convinced that what’s gotten us this far will not deliver us to where we need to be to put lived experience leaders at the heart of our operations.’

‘The work we’ve done is important...it’s been challenging and overwhelming and its helped create significant change in the sector...this exploration of lived experience leadership development is the step change we need to take the work to another level.’

The lack of common agreement and language across the sector to describe PWLEx, and LEx leaders can make the job of those who champion LEx leadership difficult, create confusion and ‘unevenness’, and, at times, friction.

‘We all have lived experience....most of us have direct experience of National Health Services...but there is a unique proportion of change-makers and leaders who have long been ignored.’

‘They kept referring to ‘patient engagement’ or ‘user involvement’ – for me lived experience leadership has an identity of its own, and it’s important and would it be great if those organisations could see it and focus on that way of thinking as well.’

‘It’s like someone giving feedback to a local tax office on poor customer service – that doesn’t make you a social leader. So why would we expect someone who is merely feeding in their experiences of charity or voluntary services to jump into a position of leadership?’

For practitioners and decision-makers across the social sector, there are many terms that help capture the involvement of PWLEx such as ‘**user-involvement**’; ‘**community engagement**’; service-user; ‘**consumer-involvement**’; ‘**patient engagement**’ but for several of the interviewees it was important to distinguish this from leadership.

‘We have people getting involved in things everywhere in society, in their local communities...and there is no single center of gravity and nor should there be...but this is very different from lived experience leadership and it’s this confusion that often poses the biggest challenge to this field.’

But many interviewees were optimistic that this exploration would help unravel some understandable confusion and provide an opportunity for the social sector to look with fresh eyes on what is not happening in the sector, what is already happening and what can be done to build and develop existing efforts to help move PWLEx into leadership roles.

On further exploration, three of the interviewees noted that PWLEx who inform the initiatives created or otherwise shaped by social purpose organisations can be LEx leaders, but if they are merely informing this work e.g. consulting on a service or initiatives, they are not necessarily LEx leaders. They were considered ‘**change-makers**’ and ‘**experts by experience**’.

‘We’re all change-makers – whether you are an informant or participant – it’s not leadership.’

‘If you show up, vote, say a few words in your community about who to vote for – that doesn’t make you a politician.’

‘People and communities with lived experience showing up, sharing their experience, it’s important work...and many of these experts by experience are doing incredible work to inform the sectors work...speaking at conferences and participating in lived experience panels...[is] all very important work, but it doesn’t make you a leader.’

Self-determination and choice were critical factors to consider in this exploration. Many PWLEx and experts by experience who engage and participate in involvement initiatives do not necessarily wish to be LEx leaders, nor consider themselves to be LEx leaders.

In some cases, PWLEx do not even consider themselves change-makers, and it was important that the sector did not ‘**impose**’, ‘**brand**’ or ‘**label**’ people as such, especially for its own purposes and agendas, because it could place undue pressure on PWLEx; was the right of any individual to determine their own personal role

in their lives and their communities; and shadowed the leadership of those who did wish to progress their leadership.

‘There are people and communities who have used some of those trials and tribulations for their own personal strength, [to] help inform their own personal journey of success [and those of] their friends, neighbours and community – but that does not make them a lived experience leader.’

‘Having lived experience alone doesn’t make you a good leader. Many people with lived experience I know are not necessarily great leaders. It’s okay to say that...but we also can’t continue to deny access to those that are...’

‘People may want to come in and out of activities...volunteer, be part of research– and they have the right to come in and out like any other volunteer or participant – but we can’t brand them as leaders if that’s not what they want...what we’re talking about here is individuals who want to actively work in the sector as leaders of change.’

Transition And Self-Determination

Eight of the interviewees helpfully explored their experiences of developing and working with service-user; user-involvement and co-production initiatives to highlight their own observations of PWLEx **‘transitions’** from change-maker to leader. By centering lived experience in social sector work, **‘early stage leaders’** emerge with aspirations to do more for their communities.

‘There is great work being done by a variety of leaders to empower those beneficiaries coming through their systems, to become effective communicators with lived experience.’

‘In the field [of co-production] there are lots of people who have moved from simply being a service-user to advocating on the behalf of their communities as well as themselves...having a seat at the table to co-produce services alongside practitioners and decision-makers.’

‘The first step is to translate lived experience into value and to then translate it into change... It’s allowing them to say it’s not about ‘me.’[...] This work is much bigger than myself.’

But not everyone involved in these initiatives are **‘leading with’** or **‘on behalf’** of their communities.

‘One of the things we found very quickly was the lots of people would turn up, but what a lot of them cared about [was] what’s happening to them, in their lives, and it takes a bit of a leap to train them to a point where they can step away from themselves and view their issues as part of a larger community...and look to create change for others outside of themselves.’

‘How you perceive change is as important as how you go about making change...if the change benefits your personal level great, but you have to be thinking of others not just yourself.’

When PWLEx are at point of transition, they enact a dynamic shift that brings together choice, self-determination and aspiration to serve their communities. But to become a LEx leader, PWLEx needed to shift further towards becoming **‘activators of change’** – be it a service or support provider, creator, convener, innovator, designer. This was an emphasis on **‘doing’** their own work, rather than on simply **‘informing’** the work of others.

'You have to step away, integrate your lived experiences with your other experiences to become a creator of change.'

'It's when you move away from being a beneficiary to help, create, support others outside of yourself.'

'When I see a community member involved in a project who then initiates a new idea or wants support to create, or design something to support or benefit their community not just themselves.'

'Some people aren't ready, some people can actually hide behind their lived experiences – 'the world's not ready for me yet; it doesn't understand me; what I've been through' – they're on their own personal journey.'

“We need to raise [the sector’s] understanding and expectations of communities and value the leadership that flourishes there.”

— Interviewee

CHAPTER 3

Mapping the LEx Leadership Landscape

Who are Lived Experience Leaders (LEx Leaders)?

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There was a pressing need to frame and contextualise the concept of lived experience leadership to benefit the work of social purpose organisations, which decouples civic engagement, involvement and participation from leadership. This would help those motivated to support people-led initiatives, make the necessary interventions and investments to support and develop LEx leaders. It also allowed this unique community of leaders speak with one collective, powerful voice across sectors.

‘This is the collective story we need... it has the power to create sustainable change in the leadership inequity our communities face. It won’t happen overnight... But once the sector understands where to support efforts I’m sure things will start to change. They have to.’

‘It’s hard to understand who lived experience leaders are and what type of support they need...with this framework I believe people will seize opportunities to make targeted efforts to support [lived experience] leaders.’

Interviewees explored in-depth the meaning and role of LEx leadership in their own lives, the lives of the LEx leaders they had mentored and those flourishing in their communities. This work ultimately informed the design of the following framework for Lived Experience Leadership.

For interviewees, there were three major qualifications as a LEx leader. A LEx leader is someone who has:

- » Lived experience: direct, first-hand experience of social issues and/or injustices; and has...
- » Activated the knowledge, perspectives, insights, and understanding gathered through their lived experience (lived expertise) to inform, shape and lead their social purpose work (often in combination with their learned and practice experience) to...
- » Directly benefit the communities they share those experiences with.

Activating lived experience and lived expertise

Like many other social leaders, LEx Leaders want to make a positive difference in their communities or wider society. But what makes them unique is that they are using valuable knowledge, perspectives, insights and understanding that they have gathered from their lived experience to inform their social purpose work, often alongside their learned and practice experience. These individuals have '**activated**' their lived experience for change. Many of the interviewees recognised this activation as '**lived expertise**'.

'Someone who can activate their lived experience to inspire positive change for others. They have an awareness of self and their leadership to create that change.'

'I think what sets someone apart from being someone with lived experience and a lived experience leader is the ability to step outside of yourself. Not just be fixated with what affects you and your life. It's about what affects the system that then affects all lives.'

'Someone who has social experience of a social injustice and activates it for change – using their lived expertise.'

'A lived experience leader embodies positive social change and turns a negative into a positive. They transform toxicity into healing.'

Many reflected on the power their insights and knowledge have brought to their work. Having a deeper understanding of your lived experience, its value and that which allows you to move beyond '**yourself**' and towards knowledge to inform the wider good can be powerful.

'It's about being involved in shaping the future of things around us.'

'Not everybody's experience is the same, but at the same time it's really, really valuable and it completely gives you a different perspective than somebody who's just read books about it or spoken to people who've had those experiences...just completely different.'

'Understanding the value of my lived experience gave me confidence, reduced my vulnerability and the knowledge that there will be more exciting work in the future.'

Comparing lived and learned experience

Respondents and interviewees unanimously agreed that '**lived expertise**' does not trump learned experience. The two must work side by side. This was one of the biggest challenges that many LEx leaders faced: because they lacked the opportunity to develop learned experience, it was difficult for them to bring together lived expertise and learned experience.

‘[LEx leaders] are able to integrate their lived experiences with their learned experiences into their leadership.’

‘Lived experience alone is never enough. The two go hand in hand. We need learned and technical skills to maximise it for good...’

‘Of course lived experience cannot act alone. Learned experience is vital. But it can be learnt, whereas lived experience cannot...the point is, currently [LEx Leaders] have little or no access to opportunities to help them learn.’

Directly benefitting communities

Ten of the interviewees highlighted the importance of connecting LEx leaders’ work with the communities they **‘share those experiences with’**. This facet of the framework distinguished the role of LEx leaders from other social leaders. Some interviewees accepted that leaders will move on in leadership roles, but the authenticity, **‘beauty’** and **‘empowering nature’** of the LEx leader lies in the commitment to **‘giving back’** to the communities they share experiences with. The success of those communities can be the measure of that work.

‘It’s sexy to use the term [LEx leadership] now that funding is available...lived experience leaders are leaders who are activating their lived and learned experiences together to benefit the communities that they share those experiences with...otherwise they’re like any other leader in the sector.’

‘The magic of this form of leadership is the connection between the lived and learned, coalescing to create powerful wisdom to lead and design new forms of social intervention for the communities you have shared experiences with.’

‘The authenticity of this profile of leader must not be dismantled...it’s not a fad or a trend...it’s the very essence of a people-led approach to leadership.’

‘What’s also interesting is how many people are calling themselves a leader with lived experience. Living life and surviving adversity is one thing. Activating those experiences in your social purpose work to benefit the lives of the community you come from is something entirely different.’

‘We need to focus it [L&D provision] on those who have activated their expertise to tackle specific social injustices as opposed to more of a general demographic of a population profile. . . otherwise, what’s the point...and our communities will continue to be devalued and discredited.’

‘The work of a lived experience leader must trickle down to the communities you say you share experiences with – directly. Otherwise, it’s simply an exploitation of the term to benefit your own profile or work.’

Eight of the interviewees also recognised that lived experiences may have been some time ago and systems, services and conditions faced by communities they have shared experiences may differ, sometimes significantly. It was important for all LEx leaders not to project their experiences onto others and recognise the limitations of their knowledge and insights, and ensure that they were also learning from their communities and building the leadership of emerging leaders in their organizations.

‘My experiences of homelessness and public services are very different from the people who are experiencing today, but I am always reflective and self-aware of that...It’s one of the reasons I try to ensure that whatever program I’m developing includes people who are experiencing homelessness... but I find I still have a connection that is still really, really valuable.’

'I'm wary that the bulk of my lived experience was long ago and when I was a teenager. Although, some of it remains such as my mental health and my father being in hospital...but we need to be careful we don't think we know it all...We don't know everything and as time evolves, so does [sic] the services and environment around us.'

'I'm using lived experience within my work and what I'm trying to achieve...being careful not to make sure that I'm projecting that onto everybody who has experienced homelessness.'

'Certainly for me, as someone with lived experience, I'm always looking for others with lived experience to ensure that we have those voices around the table and ensure that they are heard and inform our work—probably more so than my colleagues.'

Where are Lived Experience Leaders (Lex Leaders) Working?

LEx leaders exist throughout the UK, across sectors, industries and communities. The breadth of sub-sectors and social issues covered by both interviewees and respondents illuminate the pervasiveness of LEx leadership across the UK.

- » Mental health (including, eating disorders, self-harm, suicide)
- » Disability/learning difficulties
- » Long term health condition/illness
- » Criminal justice system and prison reform
- » Migrant and refugee rights
- » Care system/care leavers
- » Homelessness/social and/or assisted housing
- » Substance misuse, addiction and rehabilitation
- » Unemployment/debt/poverty
- » Gang affiliation
- » Career
- » Domestic violence and abuse
- » Multiple and complex needs
- » Sexual violence, FGM
- » Forced/child marriage
- » War and trauma
- » Race equality
- » Class equality
- » Gender equality
- » LGBTQ rights/gender identity
- » Reproductive justice

They are (not an exhaustive list):

- » Practitioners (social workers; support workers; health workers; community workers)
- » Innovators
- » Entrepreneurs/business people
- » Educators
- » Artists
- » Policy strategists/makers
- » Public servants/officials
- » Philanthropists/grant-makers and decision-makers
- » Advisers (to funders; investors; government; national and international NGOs)

However, as with any other social leaders, the leadership levels and trajectories of LEx leaders differ significantly. This variance also determined an individual's leadership and development needs (discussed further below).

Before understanding the different levels of LEx leadership in the UK, it was important to place this discussion in its larger context, to understand the broader social sector landscape and also affirm and build upon the **'remarkable' 'tireless work'** of many social leaders across communities who have been working in this field—particularly those who are less visible to the social sector.

Sectorial considerations

Firstly, it was important to note that LEx leadership was very sectorial and was often more **'apparent'**, **'acceptable'** or visible in the third sector (voluntary, charity and not-for-profit sectors) and not as visible in the public and private sectors.

'[LEx leadership] is very sectorial. If you're in a certain sector, then there quite often more willing and able to draw upon those experiences. I think as you move into other sectors, such as public sector leadership, then often that lived experience aspect of your leadership isn't something that you can necessarily divulge or disclose. So it's almost as if...you park that somewhere and carry on with the leadership responsibilities you have without turning to that valuable source of knowledge and skills.'

'I've used the knowledge my lived experience brings throughout my career, including the private and public sectors, but the risks of public exposure far outweighed the benefits of sharing it publicly early on in my career. I didn't want to be seen as a "beneficiary" or "client".'

'Depending on the sector you work in and your level of leadership, it's not socially acceptable to talk about your lived experience. When I started to share my experiences at various leadership conferences I would often have people come up to me and say, "gosh, I was homeless too, but I've never told anyone about it because I felt like it would hinder me." And so there's definitely that stigma around it.'

Voluntary and charity sector

In the voluntary and charity sectors, however, LEx leaders have created unique resources for their communities, including numerous support, community and self-help groups, clubs, gardens and centers; and peer-to-peer roles (including support workers and researchers). Terms frequently used to describe initiatives and organisations involving LEx leaders include: Peer-led; Community-led; User-led; People-led.

Although, four of the interviewees notes that care was also needed with such terms and they suggest that such initiatives and organisations have been founded by LEx leaders, many have not, and LEx leaders do not necessarily have access to leadership roles or power in these organisations.

“User-led” is a term regularly used to describe organisations and gives the impression that LEx leaders are holding leadership positions in the organization. However, they’re often not...but [the social purpose organisation] is called “user-led” because the work is informed by service- users, not led by them.’

Some elements of the sector have effectively engaged a broader cross-section of people and communities with lived experience in their work. More recently, co-production initiatives brought together LEx leaders and other social leaders to inform local and public services, as one interviewee involved in advising a national co-production project noted.

‘Funding for the fulfilling lives project supported by the big lottery helped build positions for many emerging leaders in the multiple and complex needs sector, which helped surface, support and build the leadership capacity of many beneficiaries in that sector.’

Invisible LEx leaders

There are many LEx leaders currently operating outside the sector, despite it being a **‘vital part of their social change armoury’**. LEx leaders facing great hardship who are leading significant local and systems-level change without taking up social impact careers in the sector.

‘It depends on what you are chasing as a leader. Some people want to be a leader for the sake of being a leader for leaders sake.’

‘Some of the best leaders I’ve met they don’t have that label on their briefcase or sit in a director’s chair – they don’t want all of that – leaders can only be leaders if others chose to follow them.’

‘There are true warriors working across our communities carrying the loads of injustice and inequity within society on their backs and still loving, caring and providing for their communities. They are not born into privilege, they are fighting for their existence. For some sort of peaceful existence...they are my mentors, my Elders and we need to respect their leadership, which is often unseen and unsupported by the sector.’

‘My son is an influencer in his community; a thought leader and supporter of social support for our community...but he doesn’t want to be part of the system.’

Several of the interviewees also raised concerns over the inaccessibility of support and opportunity for some of these LEx leaders, and the lack of **‘invitation from the sector’** to join leadership roles in the sector was **‘deeply unjust’**.

“There will always be leaders working tirelessly in their communities, but where the deep injustice currently lies is the lack of opportunity or invitation we extend to them to be part our work because they lack the qualifications we prescribe to roles...They have families to feed, bills to pay...we need them, they need us...That’s a huge injustice in our system.’

Three of the interviewees noted that being in a position to assume leadership roles in the social sector was also determined in part by one’s identity and other external factors, such as access to financial and educational wealth. There was a need to recognise the role privilege and power played in defining and creating leadership roles in the social sector.

‘There have been incredible advances made by lived experience colleagues in the mental health sector... but mental health impacts all of us regardless of our background and I have [a] colleague in that sector who recognises that. . . the role his background as a white middle-class man has played in accessing various opportunities.’

‘I’m always aware of my privilege as a middle-class white woman and how much easier it’s been for me to access opportunities in the sector despite my lived experience of disability.’

‘I was naturally appealing to colleagues within our sector because I fitted in.’

There are many LEx leaders currently operating inside the sector who wish to keep their experiences private. Several of the interviewees believed that the current conditions of the social sector hindered or restricted the capacity of these leaders to bring their lived and learned experiences to their work (discussed further below in chapter 4). However, two interviewees laboured the point of respecting the privacy and autonomy of LEx leaders who do not wish to disclose their lived experiences publicly.

‘I have multiple experiences of injustice and there are some I don’t mind sharing publicly but there are others that I don’t for fear of discomfort from my colleagues...it’s simply not worth the hassle...and I know why others would choose to keep their experiences hidden.’

‘There are people I work with in my organization who have lived experience but don’t flout it around like I do and I don’t know if they know how powerful their lived experience can be.’

‘I know many LEx leaders working in the women’s rights sector, women with first-hand experience of sexual violence and assault leading change through their work...Why should they have to share experiences with stakeholders and strangers.’

Respecting and honoring all LEx Leaders and Elders

Three of the interviewees sought to honour the work of LEx leaders that had gone before them, leaders whose ‘lived expertise’ and practices have led to significant changes in their communities and informed their work, which is not necessarily embraced or respected by professionals in the social sector

‘Our Elders may not use the same language as us: using grass roots analysis to create similar changes to leaders in the sector, [and] centering the narratives of the most vulnerable, marginalised or the directly impacted by injustice and inequity... We need people to trust the expertise we hold from these worlds, which we are trying to bring to the work that we do in the sector.’

‘We have a lot to learn from all the leaders who have gone before us...The practices and teachings they have used to create the communities and worlds we live in today.’

Levels of LEx Leadership

As with other social leaders, the role, position and leadership experience of LEx leaders will differ depending on their experience in the sector. Interviewees unanimously agreed that it was important to understand these varying levels of experience to determine the leadership and development needs for those at different stages in their careers.

‘There is a need to understand and differentiate between those who are at their early stages of activating their lived and learnt experience compared with an experiences leader. Their levels of need will differ.’

‘Leadership development also has to go at the pace of the community, to meet them where they are at, aspiring to be. They may want to be in support roles, but many want much more.’

The four stages of LEx leader career development identified through interviewee and respondent responses, include:

- » EARLY STAGE AND ASPIRING LEADERS
- » EMERGING LEADERS
- » EXPERIENCED LEADERS
- » SENIOR LEADERS

Early stage and aspiring leaders

Often new to working in social sector services, projects and initiatives. They often transition from a **‘service-user’** or volunteer/community participation role into a frontline or organising role in an organisation.

Several of the interviewees reflected on young people in these roles as full of **‘passion’** to improve the lives of their communities.

‘There’s lots of hidden leaders wanting to improve the lives of their communities, especially those whose lives have been plagued by systemic injustice through institutions like prison, the care system.’

‘I think there’s an opportunity to really tap into the expertise embedded in communities, people aspiring to give back to their community, but who don’t have any opportunities open to them and have to put that passion aside to pay the bills.’

Two interviewees also commented on the role of experienced social leaders in this field who are in the very early stages of the **‘activation’** process, or recognising the power and value of their lived experience. Sector operations, **‘shame of experience’**, **‘ease of assimilation’** were cited as a few reasons for this.

‘There’s something powerful happening with the development of this field. I’ve seen experienced and senior leaders starting to embrace their lived experiences for the very first time and connect it to their work...[leaders] who’ve not talked about it or tried to suppress it because of shame...This is great but they also have to be careful that their personal journey in this field is not suppressing the work of those of us who have been activating our lived experience and lived expertise for a long time.’

Emerging leaders

Largely LEx leaders working in frontline positions in the social sector, examples of support workers roles; peer-to-peer staffing roles; community workers/organisers; and youth workers were cited by interviewees as examples of experienced LEx leaders. To help differentiate leadership stages of aspiring, emerging and experienced LEx leaders, six of the interviewees cited the length managerial or supervision experience as a qualifier (between 2 and 5 years of management and frontline experience) whereas three interviewees noted that this would depend on the individuals level of experience and ‘maturity’ in their role, especially if formal managerial positions were inaccessible to the individual due to current social sector understanding and treatment of LEx leaders.

Experienced leaders

These leaders were cited by interviewees as middle managers within the charity, voluntary and public sectors; or founders of community organisations, charities and social enterprises, with 5 to 10 years' management or supervision experience.

'There is a stage where you get more advanced in the game and need to understand how you take it to the next level.'

'I wouldn't call myself a leader...I've been working in the sector for a long time but often the when I hear the word leadership I think of CEOs, and members of the senior leadership team.'

Twelve of the interviewees felt strongly that emerging and experienced LEx leaders were often restricted in their leadership progression because they faced significant structural, systemic and cultural barriers in the social sector, explored in more detail in chapter 4 below. With few opportunities for advancement available within existing organisations and for leaders who were committed to developing new ideas, it wasn't uncommon for some leaders to initiate and/or **'start up'** their own organisation or enterprises.

'[Certain LEx leaders are] striving to make a difference within the communities that they work [in], but are struggling to gain momentum with their ideas or projects because they lack the leadership skills to carry things forward. These people often have boundless energy and enthusiasm, and yet can't get things off the ground because they lack "self-awareness" and the skills to bring and hold people together to make things happen.'

'I started a social business because of my experience and I was very aware that acquiring my disability, and my business, was connected and would be a consultancy...I'm not going to pretend that I was just there to change the world. I was also using it to make money. But there was definitely that social change piece. But it was all quite new to me.'

'There's many LEx leaders [sic] who could do so well in existing organisations...[they could] be intrapreneurs...But without access to opportunities to grow and develop, they feel forced to start up their own organisations to take their work and ideas forward.'

'The real world is a world where large national charities deliver 90% of services. To affect real change at a delivery level, we need leaders with lived experience working in leadership roles in those organisations.'

Senior leaders

'A select few who care to know, know we exist. This needs to change and we also need to also be responsible for that change'

There are senior LEx leader working across the social sector (public, private and charity sectors) with 10 or more years of leadership experience who have long activated their lived experience and have a sophisticated understanding of combining both their lived and learnt experiences to effect change.

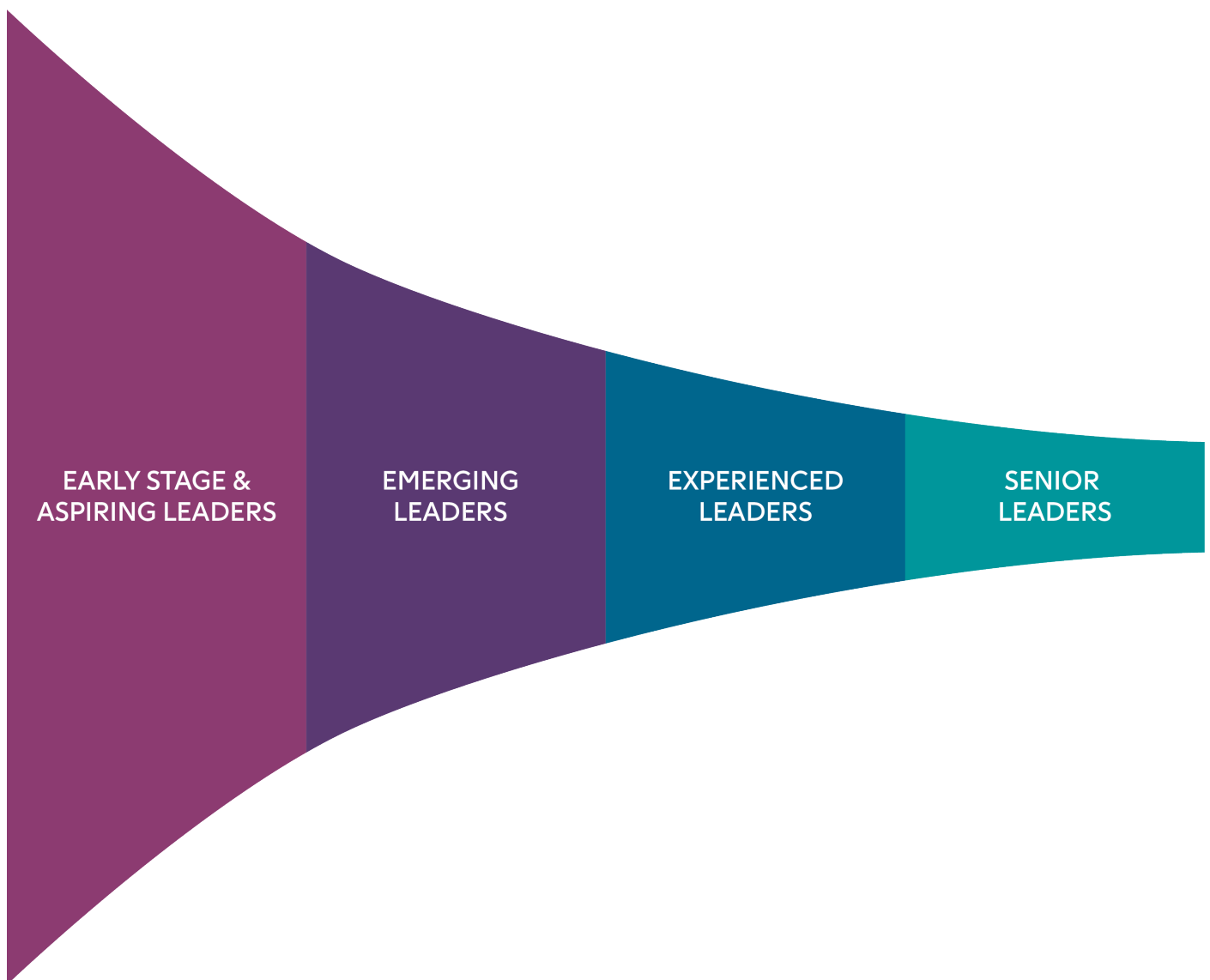
Many of the interviewees had over 10 years leadership experience. They were CEOs, Directors, program leads, managers, policy leads, strategic leads. Many have led significant legal, policy and systems change-level interventions to address the needs of the communities they serve.

'We're here and ready to support the wider work of the social sector – but the London-centric nature of current social sector dynamics mean that we are often invisible or overlooked.'

‘Working in collaboration with someone you recognise as a ‘beneficiary’ is not easy for some.’

Interviewees highlighted a wealth of challenges, structural, systemic and cultural barriers that LEx leaders faced in the social sector, explored in further detail in Chapter 4.

LEVELS OF LEx LEADERSHIP



This funnel represents the levels of LEx leadership identified by interviewees, and shows shrinking numbers of leaders moving into the upper levels of leadership due to the unique difficulties facing LEx leaders.

“There isn’t a comparable set of skills and experience to those people with lived experience, whatever sector they may be working in.”

— Interviewee

CHAPTER 4

The Value of Lived Experience Leadership

Unique Leadership Strengths And Competencies Explored

Various leadership competencies were cited by interviewees as prevalent in the ‘**make-up**’ of leaders with lived experience operating within the social sector. Because this particular element of lived experience has been under-explored, these competencies are worth parsing in greater detail. This list is not exhaustive and has only been captured from this small dataset, but includes:

Courage, resilience and adaptability

‘There’s a great deal of courage and resilience in fighting against injustice, not giving up and turning that energy into love and drive to create change in the world.’

‘You see your resilience play out when you can tackle uncertainty and change in the workplace.’

Purpose, passion and drive

'I wanted my negative experience of custody, and what led up to it, to stand for something. To help one person or save one other life would count.'

'I've deep connection and empathy to the cause, because of my own kind of suffering...tenacity, perseverance...the struggle itself...I'll always turn up, even on a bad day.'

Empathy and compassion

'You don't need to imagine yourself in someone[s] shoes. You were once there...It allows you to connect with people and their complex and multiple identities in such a human way...it's very difficult to explain to someone who hasn't been there.'

'That shared experience can be huge. The ability to connect to others in a way that others can't because they don't understand the human impact and feelings those issues create.'

Equity and justice

'The fight for justice for my communities gives a lot of meaning to my life.'

'It's rooted in who I am, my values, and ethos behind everything I do....It's powerful.'

Vulnerability

'People are kind of will[ing] do anything to avoid facing the terrors of their soul...For many of us, we've faced them head on and come out the other side.'

Love and generosity

'It's the reason we do what we do...I'm bright, I know that. My professional and personal life would probably be so much easier if I went off and did something else...but it's this work, my community, helping them out of struggle or seeing them excel...that gives me life.'

'Our determination to overcome our own challenges and oppression has driven us to our work. By that very nature, we never stop thinking about our communities.'

The Value and Benefits of LEx Leadership to the Social Sector

'There is a lot of talent out there in our communities. Talent that we fail to identify and support. With the right training and development, and probably with a bit of a platform, people could do unbelievable good for the system. Not just their own services or issues they focus on but services that could benefit everyone.'

As part of the research, interviewees also explored the value of LEx leadership for the wider sector. Unanimously agreeing that there was very little understanding of the utility of LEx leadership to shape innovation-, population-, and systems-level change to improve the lives of their communities, and civil society.

‘Investing in leaders with lived experience will not only transform their organisations, but it will transform the sector and our wider community.’

‘[Investing in LEx Leaders] would enable the social sector to be more agile, innovative and successful...by enabling organisations to benefit from the skills developed by lived experience leaders.’

‘Not only can you have a better sense of purpose and connection, there’s a closer understanding and knowledge of the social issue compared with those with less proximity, but equally a better understanding of what design might not work.’

Connection to community

Many LEx leaders have a solid grounding with the community they serve, a level of trust that has been produced by deep connection and understanding. LEx leaders do not cordon off their personal experiences from their professional experiences allowing engaging and generative conversations to develop with the communities they serve. They also understand the cultural contexts and multiple factors intertwined in their lives and in the lives of people in their communities.

‘We don’t see our communities as passive recipients of services...we understand the deep assumptions and personal dynamics that structure how they experience the injustices or inequalities they are facing.’

‘Within our communities there is wonder and power, love and friendship...I have the honour of seeing it everyday and the privilege to be used as a vessel to channel that goodness into action in the social sector.’

‘We don’t go into community in the image of ‘an organisation’ – we speak on behalf of ourselves as humans – human to human not institution to human.’

They have ‘**constant curiosity**’ about the knowledge, insights and wisdom that their communities hold, respecting what people bring to their work and use that knowledge in their work to disrupt and reimagine institutional and organisational practices that negatively and positively impact their communities.

‘Trust the knowledge that we have about our communities...It was only through that trust that our work was funded and has now been used as a framework for others work nationally. No-one could see our vision but one funder trusted us.’

‘You can’t quantify that relational advantage—I feel it makes a difference. It also means that when problems come up I can have a level of understanding and empathy. [It] also helps me explore what priorities we need to be funding and projects supporting.’

Many of the interviewees commented on their focus on harnessing and supporting emerging groups forming in communities, and creating new connections and collaborations outside of organisational agendas, objectives and outcomes

‘Building community in the truest sense of the word – engaging in dialogue with not just the communities we serve but others on the margins reaching out.’

Building community collaborations and partnerships

Many LEx leaders commented on the generative nature of their work, producing continual flows of new approaches and ideas, new ways of working in partnership with others, and new modes of community engagement. Many collaborating out of necessity, and the understanding that through deep community

connection new ideas, interventions, innovations and cultures can emerge, while destructive and toxic behaviours and attitudes can be addressed and changed for the better.

‘Centering the community you serve allows wonderful partnerships to grow and rallies together others impacted by the work, which can sometimes help address deep rooted issues underpinning a social problem or injustice.’

Understanding problems

LEx leaders bring to bear experience that no learned or earned qualification can match. While many professionals in the social sector are trying to solve problems many do not fully understand or appreciate. LEx leaders are connected to the realities of the problem they are addressing in their social purpose work.

‘If you’ve actually lived the thing that you’re trying to solve, then you have an authentic insight that you can’t buy. You just do, you see the world in a different way. You see it inside out and you can’t deny it is legit. It’s personal, and when you combine that with professional expertise is very, very powerful.’

‘It’s crucial for the sector to understand it’s not simply about creating environments that foster better connection and relationships with communities but the fact that lived experience brings with it knowledge and understanding of solution design to aid better problem understanding thereby as important as technical and learnt experience.’

‘My direct experiences of services also permeates through my understanding. I also understand how frustrating things can be and so [that understanding] hopefully give[s] me more understanding than the mere human pain but also systemic pain of person can face, what they are going through and why they are struggling. You can be more inclusive as a professional when you’ve been there and you can understand.’

Even where lived experience is ‘old’ it can still remain relevant.

‘But of course, things haven’t changed completely. My experience is still relevant. I understand the need for a social safety net and I always think about how lucky I was...how I got a lot of help and it sent me on my path, so I also really see the value services and interconnectedness of systems.’

Authenticity and accountability

Having LEx leaders in leadership roles can help bring heart, authenticity and vulnerability to staff teams while also providing a level of accountability to communities.

‘The role model stuff just can’t be underestimated in terms of change that can happen in people...I talk about mental health difficulties in my life rather than trying to be perfect all the time to encourage other leaders to show their vulnerability, be bit more vulnerable.’

‘I can hold honest conversations with other LEx leaders, be open, listen and challenge them in a positive way without it being seen as an attack or questioning the legitimacy of their work. So my LEx gives me a level of authenticity.’

‘To remain authentic to our truth and why we embarked on our social change journey to begin with, we have to be accountable to someone – and it’s our community.’

Strengthening organisations

Eleven of the interviewees commented on the power LEX leadership can have in building connected staff teams, which helps colleagues without LEX understand and connect with issues they are addressing; develop a more nuanced understanding of their collective work; the **'systems of oppression'** faced by communities and bring a **'human essence'** into the work that can create strong connection within teams beyond staff roles.

'I've seen empathy deepen in [colleagues without lived experience] once I've helped them expand understanding of why someone is behaving or acting in a certain way, which is initially seen as 'challenging' or destructive through their professional lens...then [witness them] grapple internally with their own understanding shaped by their own experiences or world views.'

'Colleagues have turned to me to unpack the systemic issues faced by my community, to help their work and create more impactful decisions.'

'When [colleagues without lived experience] hear and understand the depth of your lived expertise beyond that personal story - it's transcends anything a training module or report can provide.'

Mission focus vs. mission drift

Some LEX leaders commented on the tendency of some social purpose organisations to **'mission drift'** between goals they have committed to, due to political and economic incentives structuring that surround their work—including funder needs and incentives. Thereby, diluting the impact of work previously started and disconnecting from key relationships and partnerships with communities. Conversely, LEX leaders were careful and strategic about mission focus and resisted this drift

'I don't dilute issue or merge them with the funding initiative doing the rounds Even though domestic violence is important I will never try to merge that with gang and youth violence because, although it may at times be connected [to these issues]...it is different and it is important not to dilute issues and let other experienced leaders focus on those areas.'

Intersectionality

LEX leaders have a unique understanding of multiple marginalised identities and experiences. appreciating that experiences and identities can interconnected, multi-layered and multi-faceted. The intersectionality of unique lived experiences offers a unique vantage point from which to generate ideas and solutions for positive change. These experiences provide a more robust, **'real'** and sophisticated analysis of social problems and offer insight into necessary interventions and the scale of **'liberation'** or change needed to solve entrenched social problems.

'Many professionals in the sector focus on one issue at a time...it's one infection of the sector that is hard to move away from...systems thinking is helping some to understand the interconnectedness of social problems but when you have lived experiences that understanding comes pretty much naturally.'

'If you haven't lived it your [sic] unlikely to know what is happening in the lives of others...until you read a glossy report. We shouldn't have to wait for a report to identify social injustices members of society are facing. What we need to do is ensure that those valuable insights are continuously leading our work.'

Systems understanding and value:

Many of the interviewees have long been systems leaders and practitioners. Many use their insights to shape and/or lead initiatives that address systemic issues facing their community. Examples of these policies include designing new housing policies and impact funds, reimagining strategic narratives on refugee integration, and implementing ground-breaking user-led models that have shifted the sector's understanding of the value of co-production.

'We had to develop strategies to help understand the value of co-production and service-user involvement, which many institutions found very hard to embrace...Many organisations and institutions are now interested in understanding the value of lived experience in their work and wider strategies, including, the NHS, Local Authority strategic boards, as well as third sector organisations.'

'Fight the power, fight the system – as socially marginalised communities it's in our day-to-day...Our heritage, our music, our community discussions [is] the core of what we do as social justice activists.'

'We need to stop repackaging old theories and methods for social change that have long been used by our communities across the UK to fight oppression and injustice. Fighting the system is not new, we're often reframing old narratives and approaches used by LEx leaders who have done this work before... we need to celebrate and learn from what has gone before and stop getting wrapped up in the theory.'

Innovation skills and insights

'My lived experience has directly informed most of the innovative ideas I've activated to benefit our communities...if we don't acknowledge these experiences we're simply saying they don't exist or matter.'

Interviewees have advanced new and innovative approaches to create impactful change across the UK. No matter how underserved or under resourced, LEx leaders continue to bring imaginative solutions to the table.

'Innovation through necessity: need is the greatest motivator. When you have a need you can't do without, you begin to find very clever ways to find avenues out.'

'Our lived expertise can simplify often complex problems and with that simplicity can come great ideas and speeds up solution design.'

The complex understanding of social issues and problems that LEx leaders confront do not respect institutional boundaries and allow imaginative ideas to flow less restricted by the confines of operational barriers

'When you embrace your fears, aspirations and concerns and you work in a way that centers the community it gives you a different starting point to developing innovative solution and ideas...'

'My old boss often said [to me] that I got to solutions very quickly and sometimes it was important for other professionals to understand the problem first as it's not so obvious to them.'

“Systems change is needed – we need to invest in good people with diverse experiences and capabilities - but unless practices and policies across the sector change, nothing will have sustainable impact.”

— Interviewee

CHAPTER 5

Systems Change: Can the Social Sector deliver?

Systems Change

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‘To this day it is still the same 10 of us (within the drug and alcohol sector) that are known as “leaders.”...The landscape rarely changes by design, more by finding an open minded benefactor.’

‘We need to stop polarising the support needs and capacities of communities where we equally need to explore the sector’s operations, recruitment opportunities and leadership pipelines.’

Interviewees and respondents explored in-depth the current conditions and environment of the social sector, which were considered **‘unhealthy’**, **‘unwelcoming’** and often **‘harmful’** to LEx leaders, hindering their leadership capacity and progression in the social sector. Root causes such as lack of value and legitimacy of lived expertise (knowledge, insights, perspectives and views gathered through lived experiences); lack of transparency and accountability in the sector; stigma associated with lived experiences and lived expertise; and implicit and explicit bias and discrimination were all issues raised by interviewees as structural, systemic and cultural barriers LEx leaders’ currently faced in the social sector, which ultimately contribute to leadership inequity in the social sector.

Nearly all of the interviewees pointed out that L&D initiatives alone would not help LEx leaders thrive in the social sector if these underlying issues were not also tackled **'head on'**. At present, these conditions were creating an unequal and unjust exchange of knowledge production and value between social leaders; fuelling a culture of dependency or damaging disconnect between people and communities with lived experience and the social sector.

Leadership opportunities for emerging and experienced LE leaders in particular were noted as very limited, if present at all across some sectors and disciplines, creating a glass ceiling requiring urgent attention to promote social and economic justice in the social sector.

Structural, Systemic and Cultural Disadvantage

Interviewees highlighted key structural, systemic and cultural barriers limiting the advancement of LEx leadership across and within social purpose organisations. Key patterns emerged from participant contributions, which have been encapsulated under four main themes:

- » LEGITIMACY AND CREDIBILITY
- » POWER AND CONTROL
- » LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY
- » STIGMA, BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

Legitimacy and credibility

Interviewees and respondents were all asked to share their biggest leadership challenges. The findings were stark: for all but one, legitimacy and credibility ranked highest.

People with decision-making power in the sector do not meaningfully and equitably value the knowledge, insights, perspectives and views of LEx leaders bring to their work. Social sector organizations continue to rely on **'elite'**, professional and technical expertise. Credentials and qualifications take precedence over **'lived expertise'** and the promise of community- and people-led initiatives hold little traction when it comes to making **'real decisions for change'**.

'The biggest challenge I've faced is being taken seriously and not seen as a beneficiary overstepping the mark...Being allowed to be an expert beyond my lived experience and not having to tell my story to justify being in the room.'

'We have a complex understanding of our communities, human systems, cultural systems...It doesn't lend easily to feedback forms and evaluation reports.'

'My knowledge and expertise seem to get accepted if it's been confirmed by or vouched for by someone else.'

'For so long the sector has made me feel that my lived expertise is not good enough as a central experience...It's not enough on its own of course, but we need to understand its relevance and power as a form of knowledge.'

'How many social enterprises do we know that have bagged the big bucks to get off the ground but have collapsed or folded because they've been created by someone who's got a great idea, but doesn't know the community they're trying to serve or understand the problem they're trying to tackle?'

Interviewees commented on the significant discrepancy between the value of learnt expertise and lived expertise in the social sector. Most organizations prioritise learnt expertise to the detriment of lived expertise, and this imbalance leads to lack of leadership opportunities available for LEx leaders, which limits their growth and development; stifles effective collaborations between social leaders and new innovations and interventions needed to tackle evolving social problems.

‘Coming into the social sector from the private sector was very strange to me...Coming from the business world I saw my lived experience as an asset...It was then very difficult to see the dynamic shift in the social sector.’

‘The objectivity of lived expertise is constantly called into question in the social sector...“oh but he only knows his experience” – failing to take into account the success of our practice...but then also denying the skills needed to help innovate and propel our combined experience for bigger change.’

Power and control

For all participants, it was important to acknowledge the power dynamics at play in the social sector. By and large, the majority of senior leadership teams in institutions across the sector were made up of white, middle class, able bodied, straight people who have benefited from financial and educational opportunities, and large parts of the social sector continue to function with top-down approaches to servicing programs for communities, with LEx leaders from those communities holding limited decision-making power.

Several of the interviewees highlighted the lack of opportunity or capacity to meaningfully share their expertise with the sector, shadowed by the continued **‘bureaucratic’** and **‘meritocratic façade’** of current sector operations. Participants felt that their knowledge, insights and views were regularly **‘dismissed’**, neglected or overlooked by knowledge producers holding **‘qualifications’** and overall **‘meritocracy leads the way’**, with an approach that over-relies on **‘technical expertise’** that often preferred metrics over other forms of knowing. Some felt that this treatment of knowledge reasserts the sectors privilege and power through who it values as knowledge producers.

‘Sector leads often use antiquated methods to identify and make judgements about who is well equipped to achieve social change and impact.’

‘Funding for any programme that operate[s] within a lived experience context gain little funding...The evidence base is young, however compelling.’

‘Leading from lived expertise puts you in a unique position...Professionalism puts a limit on what you can do – it’s restrictive. Whereas before I was made to feel that my lived experience was a restriction... being liberated from that has been quite empowering.’

Power also affected resource allocation and decision-making in social purpose organisations. Interviewees pointed out that lack of access to decision-making powers and inadequate resources, including funding allocation, was a structural barrier to their success. Nearly all felt they were not on a **‘equal footing’** with their counterparts in the sector.

‘Sector leads need to understand they are part of, rather than in control of, social purpose work.’

‘Often [LEx leaders are] seen as the passive objects of decisions.’

‘When it comes to negotiating policies...articulating outcomes in a way that works for academia, local government, commissioners and central government, we are all too often at the mercy of our host employers to deliver those messages.’

‘We’re in it together – for me, the power comes from the community we serve – but try telling that to senior leads in the sector.’

‘I’m often consulted by people with power, I still have no ability influence the decision making process of the senior leadership team, board or trustees behind them.’

Several contributors commented on the paternalistic and **‘patronising’** approaches that some social leaders deployed in the sector, like summarising and undermining their views in public meetings; and **‘fascination’** with their lived experience stories over their practice experience. Contributors found these approaches disrespectful, and for those **‘without a feeling of power,’** these approaches could create a culture of dependency, whereby LEx leaders inhibited their unique leadership strengths and competencies to fit the **‘party-line’** or relied on **‘deficit based narratives’** to shape their initiatives for funding.

‘As soon as our project started doing well the regional director started to tell me what to say at meetings...as if I couldn’t be trusted to hold a conversation with people I’d been working with for some time. It was patronising and my disillusion started to kick in.’

“‘Bless, isn’t he doing well?’ So flipping patronising – but some people working within the sector verbalise what a large percentage think, and that’s because we’re seen as less than them.’

‘I’ve come across people with lived experience who, because they have had nothing to gauge themselves against or the “system” has patronised them by telling them that they are fantastic at something, believe that they have a particular level of skills but when tested in the real world these can often fall short.’

Contributors also commented on the **‘gatekeeping’** role many social purpose organisations have a tendency to play.

‘Organisations can be the gatekeepers of what lived experience initiatives look like. That’s why many have revolved around “service-user” involvement. Initiatives focussing on those who are still using a service...yet, very little, if anything, to support the thousands or millions who have come out the other end.’

‘Despite the success and impact of our work nationally, we’re constantly having to prove ourselves to the senior management team that we’re worthy.’

Others commented on the use of extractive practices deployed by some leaders in the sector, which they found **‘deeply disempowering’** or an **‘abuse of power’**.

‘I was very young and at an early stage of my leadership journey when [large national charity] asked me to share my story with the press and I did...The comments from the public were horrific, like “Oh great, so my taxpayers’ money paid for this girl to get a hostel and benefits...and now she’s running a charity and I’m wasting even more money.”’

‘What frustrates me is how large charities never support their alum...instead churning out numbers after numbers of people...like a factory and then one or two lucky ones get through and they become the poster children for the organisations and they then ride on their case studies without any investment into their development.’

‘They don’t understand what it feels like to be put on a pedestal and to tell your story again and again and again and then get cheques from funders that don’t go anywhere near you or your community.’

Three interviewees provided examples of instances in which social purpose organisations in their field — larger organisations—used their organisations work to secure funding for an initiative. Those who did know that their work going to be used in the funding application later received little or no funding as part of the ‘**so called partnership.**’

‘I learned from a funder that [organisation] had secured a large amount of funding because they named us as a ‘sister organisation’ on their application, which swayed the funder. We had no knowledge of it.’

‘We’re being forced to work in these often ruthless “competitive markets” with little support or training...It [is] exhausting, it takes up so much of our time and leads to burn-out.’

‘The [social purpose organisation] co-opted our methodology and then diluted our analysis and went on to deliver services to our communities from a privileged and unconnected space...the work was no longer coming from the community who created it and nor were they being compensated for it.’

Seven interviewees commented on the ongoing requests and demands for their time made by larger organisations, private sector organisations, funders, and public sector leads, without any offers of support or resources in return.

‘This isn’t simply about the money...it’s about valuing our expertise and knowledge....People meeting me regularly telling me that my work and expertise is the solution to their work...I’ve been really struggling with that because I want to make their services work for communities.’

‘Hearing “can I pick your brains” time and time again...it’s a lot of weight and pressure and it can feel like you’re carrying a flag for your entire community.’

‘My biggest challenge is not being valued. Not being recognised or valued financially for the expertise and knowledge that I bring...The cause might be good but quite often it’s people with wealth and resources who call me to go somewhere to help them develop whatever it may be that they are developing.’

‘I’m tired of attending meetings with governmental bodies; commissions and committees and various industry leads; supporting the development of their research and initiatives, mostly in my spare time, which takes its toll.’

‘It can be completely demoralizing, especially if you’re innovative and you’re changing the lives of communities, and evidenced that.’

Transparency and accountability

It is vital to integrate transparency and accountability into decision-making processes in order to improve power dynamics between LEx leaders and sector leads without lived experience. Interviewees felt that social purpose organisations regularly exploited LEx leaders and communities by creating highly-funded yet poorly-conceived projects on which to partner with PWLEx without offering them substantial mechanisms for holding these larger organisations to account.

‘It’s not rare to see organisations bid for contracts time and time again without any accountability or responsibility. It’s also not rare to see organisations bid for contracts to serve communities they haven’t even met, let alone spoken to.’

Interviewees also raised concerns over the true intentions behind certain initiatives branded as **'lived experience'** projects and questioned whether they were in fact 'chasing the funding, not the cause.' The leaders of these projects later taking **'top-down'** traditional approaches to relationships by devoting power and resources within their existing teams and expecting LEx leaders to support their work for little, if any, funding. These approaches also starved LEx led organisations of vital resources they need to strengthen their organisational infrastructures and collaboration capacity.

'We get contacted all of the time to partner up with organisations... We're asked to do the bulk of the work "in the community" whilst their staff teams get paid to come and listen whilst resource allocation, decision-making and strategy building remain with the senior management teams who we barely see... We've learnt the hard way.'

'There may be some shifts in discussions and more projects focusing on community engagement labelled with the lived experience badge...but when it comes to [a] leadership . . . job in the social sector...there's very few variations on the traditional operating model.'

Several interviewees also questioned the **'waste in costs'** for services and projects designed in this way, referencing examples of several national projects that were under-utilised by communities they purported to serve, and had little positive impact on those communities.

'Funders are ploughing in money on a daily basis to organisations who don't understand the problems they're trying to tackle...They spend the first part of the project trying to figure it all out and by the time of delivery little has really been discovered.'

'Funders are currently spending lots of money on problem understanding. There's a saying in social entrepreneurship—don't get married to the solution, get married to the problem—well when you've lived the problem it's hard to be divorced from it.'

Three interviewees pointed to the unjust irony of social purpose organisations including **'lived experience'** terms in their bidding and funding criteria, without little accountability mechanisms to establish the effectiveness; connection and power distribution to people, leaders and communities with lived experience. For some interviewees, the term was at risk of becoming a buzz word for the sector and losing its political purchase. There remains little accountability for how organisations engage and involve LEx leaders from the communities they claim to serve.

'The lip service that is paid to all lived experience exercises: "it's a pilot"; "we have service user representation"; but ultimately they – the senior leadership team or board have the final say.'

'We're an organization led by people with lived experience and regularly commissioned to help develop and implement service-user programs. Internally, we have a no-bid decision-making process where we think through whether we have the right skills, contributions and staff to design and deliver a program well. But also, we carefully consider whether the purpose and intention of the funded program benefits the group it targets and whether it will meet their needs.'

Stigma, bias and discrimination

'Whilst we discriminate against lived experience by way of exclusion...we are very unlikely to shift the balance of power away from those who hold it now to place where it is shared.'

Stigma, bias and discrimination ranked highly in interviewees discussions of their barriers to success. Stereotyping, discrimination and biased views and actions were sadly commonplace in the social sector.

‘Professionals in the sector have their own worldviews and assumptions about the world and what they think a lived experience leader looks like – I recently heard someone say, “Oh, they don’t look like they have lived experience.”...the mind boggles.’

‘The initiatives focussed on “giving voice” to lived experience... We have voice – we don’t need you to give it to us.... We need you to listen and then support us to lead with you. It’s time to stop the egotistical self-serving nonsense that dresses itself up as “professional.”’

‘If we really think about it, charities are based on the notion of “doing good to others” so people are drawn to wanting to help people... This brings with it hidden and unconscious biases about what they think lived experience leaders look like.’

‘I was recently involved in a project, which was supposed to be designed for leaders with lived experience – but ultimately we didn’t look for leaders, we rushed the project giving communities only two weeks to respond to applications... assuming communities were free at our beck and call.’

The label of **‘lived experience’** can also reinforce negative stereotypes and promote discrimination and make it harder for LEx leaders to challenge their treatment in the workforce.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever held them to account for some of the things that I’ve experienced, particularly in the workplace. A lot of discrimination.’

‘I’ve been asked to share my personal story when I’ve come to discuss policy reform... The context didn’t warrant it... The disempowering nature of that? The demoting and dehumanising nature of that? Having a sense of entitlement to ask without any sense or reason.’

‘There’s so many people that are out there that are just ready to pick holes in anything to reinforce the stereotypes. “Oh well, you know, you can only get so much quality work from them... You can only expect this... You’ve got to limit your expectations about what quality their contribution can make.”’

‘Once, at a government meeting that a government official asked me to attend, a policy worker from the sector said to me, “You’re just an ex-offender with an axe to grind.”... I hadn’t even spoken... I went on to have a conversation with the minister, critiquing his policy and his aides were taking notes on their notepads... Many of those policy officers from our sector at the meeting didn’t have a clue.’

Six of the interviewees discussed the role and responsibility of experienced and senior LEx leaders to help combat some of these stereotypes.

‘All social leaders are responsible to break these stereotypes, including leaders with lived experience. We also need to be role models for others so they can better understand their behaviours as well as sector perceptions, and attitudes, and then support them through their journey. As we’ve been through it, we’ve learnt and developed and can share those experiences with others.’

Navigating the System: Personal Challenges Faced by LEx Leaders

As interviewees explored the leadership needs of LEx leaders, they reflected on their own leadership trajectories, the personal barriers they faced in their work, and common pitfalls faced by other LEx leaders they have supported and worked alongside. All of these reflections illuminate the pressing need for leadership and development support for this profile of social leader.

Isolation

All but one of the interviewees highlighted isolation and loneliness as a significant personal challenge faced by LEx leaders. Their inability to be **'true to their identity'** and authentic in certain working environments also played into this.

'I definitely put a lot of onus on myself to become more acceptable to others, to fit...and then trying hard not to mould into anything that is not me and remaining authentic.'

'Being connected to other LEx leaders – being part of a supported network would be great.'

Playing catch up

Many LEx leaders have faced significant barriers in accessing education and professional experience due to the impact of their lived experiences, including lack of education due to adverse childhood experiences. Access to targeted training and development would have a **'significant impact'** on their progression in the social sector.

'Not often anymore, but certainly earlier on I felt really intimidated around people who used really long words because I didn't go to school, I don't have a university degree, everything I've got is self-taught.'

'For leaders with lived experience who have not necessarily had the life chances or opportunities that traditional leaders in the social sector have had, be you a refugee, care leaver, a person in recovery or the like, there is a need to play a sophisticated catch up game.'

Imposter syndrome

Several of the interviewees commented on how current sector operations can limit the confidence of LEx leaders and trigger anxieties and doubts about their leadership capacity.

'When you're not valued for your work it can also reaffirm all these internal doubts and anxieties "that I'm not good enough" or that "I'm just tricking myself and no one's ever going to give me a proper shot."'

'I wanted to be respected for my contribution. Now I want to be respected for the work that I do. I didn't want that to be that person, "oh, hasn't he done well in spite of...or hasn't he done well considering where he's come from"...''

Heart over matter

Two interviewees were also worried about LEx leaders focussing too heavily on community to the detriment of other skills, training and development needed for their organisation. The rise and fall of small community-led charities evidencing this.

‘Lived experience leaders have a lot of heart but a lot of heart with no technical skills – the head won’t take you far... We need to not shy away from professional upskilling... Both lived and learned experience is needed to become a good leader in the social sector.’

‘Some leaders can be emotionally charged, and sometimes rightly so. But that’s not necessarily what you need to make impactful change.’

The emotive story marketplace

Five of the interviewees shared their thoughts on the medium of storytelling as a tool for change. Aspiring and emerging LEx leaders are increasingly being asked to be involved in campaigning work, movements for change and advocacy work but little is being done to create **‘equitable’** and structured approaches to build their leadership positions within organisations.

For some, although sharing personal stories of ones lived experience can help shift mindsets and foster empathy, doing so was not always as influential as one hoped, and LEx leaders needed to develop more skills to use this tool effectively to create more substantive change.

‘I’m a refugee and I feel very emotional and passionate about the subject but I can’t simply lead with that story and emotion alone.’

‘But ultimately for me, of course stories are fascinating and you can listen to them all day long, but how do you tell that story and how do you make it impactful to make things move forward for people that come behind us?’

However, storytelling also subtly reinforces the unconscious narrative that LEx leaders lack the skills and competencies needed to succeed in the social sector.

‘The truth is, people in the sector judge you... It’s hard for people to hear stories that seem far-fetched in their own understanding of the world... I remember going to see a film about drug addiction with a colleague and her response to it was that was so contrived because “that’s not how people live.” And I was like, no. It is. For me, it was the realest thing I’d seen.’

‘Focusing on personal stories alone reinforces the idea that LLE merely lack the skills and competencies to lead in the sector without recognising the structural and cultural barriers at play.’

Keeping the ego in check

Five of the interviewees reflected on the sector’s treatment of LEx leaders, selecting, **‘parading’** or **‘showcasing’** people with lived experience and organisations to **‘tick their boxes’**, which can **‘inflate your sense of self’**.

‘The sector has a tendency to pick and parade certain people on platforms as ‘leaders’... It’s frustrating as you see people have their egos stroked and little is done to invest resources into leaders working on the ground or asking communities to pick their leaders.’

‘I turned into a know-it-all and had an inflated sense of self and started communicating in all the wrong ways...’

‘When we feed the ego we can start hurting each other and our community... [We are] becoming competitive against other lived experience leaders and organisations.’

Going it alone

For many of the interviewees, they reflected on the lack of training and development they received as emerging leaders. They explained that they had to develop their own leadership skills ‘**on the job**’ or ‘**go it alone**’. Nearly all of the interviewees have developed training and development for early stage and emerging leaders and noted that many LEx leaders support the development of other LEx leaders. But often these initiatives are run on little, if any resources, and it is important relevant technical skills and training are used to upskill themselves and staff.

‘When I look at those around me who are already leading a formal organisation or project, I believe that any training that will help them to develop their leadership skills and confidence is valuable. Often, without formal training, you don’t have anything to match or gauge your own skills or abilities against and this, whether consciously or not, could have an adverse effect on confidence.’

Burn out

One of the biggest challenges faced by LEx leaders is burn out and exhaustion. In addition to risk of overwork, personal, structural and systemic barriers can also be ‘**damaging**’ and ‘**unhealthy**’ for LEx leaders’ wellbeing.

‘It can be so hard to navigate and dance around the nuances of the sector and other social leaders, which can take your energy and make you de-prioritize other work, and the cycle continues.’

‘Imagine spanning that gap between community at the hard edge of injustice and then being the only person in a room full [sic] of influential people... You have to stretch your arms... The thing that stops you being burn[ed] out is being around truth and authenticity.’

LEx leaders exposed to violence, especially during childhood, may also face additional challenges and vulnerabilities if overworked. Developing an understanding of self; respecting and honouring ones leadership capacity; managing expectations and boundaries at work are key tools to support personal development and growth.

As one respondent noted, following their participation in a lived experience project:

‘Before I played a victim, or a survivor, and now I strip that away – I’m honouring my LEx, walking with a status, look guys I’ve gone through it, and I’ve got confidence.’

Institutionalisation

Interviewees reflected on the impact of social sector conditions that can stifle the unique leadership growth of LEx leaders who can be hesitant so as not to reveal themselves. Not unreasonably, they worry that any show of vulnerability or divergent thinking might become a weapon that others will use against them. In that case, the pressure to conform to certain norms can be overwhelming. Some LEx leaders thought that assimilation—or expecting people to behave and mould into the ‘**system**’—was very problematic, whilst others believed the system itself that needed the ‘heart’ of LEx leaders to change it.

‘I’ve seen this happen with a lot of NHS leaders. Detaching their human experience can lead to a disconnect between “the organization lead” from the community... Connecting with your lived experiences can help build organizational reputation and add credibility for the community, which draws communities in.’

‘It’s hard to push through systemic and structural barriers to be authentic and true to your lived experience.’

‘We need to be careful that we don’t spiral off into the fog of the social sector machine [and] become institutionalised and focus on individuality/growth, funding and scaling our own work to the detriment of others. It’s important not to disconnect from the truth of your life— what anchors you [and] how to navigate the landscape and keep the boat on track—and that’s a difficult game.’

‘There can be a deep anger towards the system and an environment of us and them attitude. This might be down to the lack of opportunity and access to leadership development as well as the lack of recognition of the varying profiles of leaders and organisations that populate our sector...but our leadership is needed to shift that change. The system needs the heart.’

Pressing Need To Address The Leadership Gap

Glass ceiling and lack of opportunity

‘Give us our place, just give us our place...our rightful place around the social purpose table.’

‘It is not simply about giving us voice or a seat at the table. It’s about power and leadership capacity to create the change we want to see for our communities.’

‘This is more about the will of the sector more than anything else. Do they care enough to step aside and let others lead beside them on an equal footing?’

The power imbalances, stigma, stereotyping and lack of accountability, amongst other barriers, have created an environment where many emerging and experienced LEx leaders are failing to progress their careers in the social sector. In hiring practices, senior leaders seem to favour hiring someone who shares the background of the staff team while assuming LEx leaders are suited for ‘**frontline**’ positions. LEx leaders were not given the same opportunities as of their counterparts.

‘Many organizations create progression routes for beneficiaries that stop with frontline staff roles. So if you’re a young person going through a youth services...You could become a youth worker – you might become a project assistant. And then if you’re lucky a program manager, but...that’s it and you never get a seat at head office.’

‘The leaders of today will not easily relinquish their power, using the excuse that lived experience hasn’t the qualifications, experience or skill for them to hand it over to.’

‘The sector talks a good game but when they’re recruiting people, it’s same old same old. Same people getting internally promoted or moving up in the organization. I think that’s the biggest barrier—that although you can feel like you’re trying to develop and stretch yourself and it always feels like you’re working ten times harder other people who seem to quite easily step into these positions because they know the right people or they’ve had the right education or the palatable voice.’

These practices have created a glass ceiling for LEx leaders working tirelessly in the sector, which perpetuates the feelings of isolation, a going-it-alone approach and/or burn out.

‘A limited number of “us” are naturally verbose and naturally resilient, however for the greater part we are not and there is a ceiling attached to those progressing through their careers based on their lived experience.’

‘... We’re not being trusted to lead the work and instead leadership of activities is being handed to those who tick job descriptions - largely people with privilege who’ve had the benefit of educational and financial support in the past.’

‘We say, bring them to the table. But we’ve been saying that for the last 20 years now. I’ve been working in this field for 14 years and I’m still not centred in equal ways to those who started 6 months ago. I’m still kept in the struggle and that’s why we burn out, we are ready to receive support, we ask for support... That’s why leadership fellowships and residencies are needed, that provide capacity, space—breathing and thinking around the work we do... Our leadership and progression.’

‘I have a sense that there is “nowhere for me to go” – my organization was trying to confine me in a certain position that suited their own needs failing to recognize that by developing my leadership we could bring two worlds together... Completely demoralizing, especially if you’re innovative and you’re changing the lives of communities, and evidenced that.’

Damaging disconnect

‘Lived experience leaders are not recognised, let alone celebrated. It’s because if you strip it all back – the sector doesn’t value it. It’s about the will of the sector. Do they care enough? Do they want to know?’

‘There’s not a moment you can be “off guard” or your “authentic” self for fear of being judged.’

The current conditions in the social sector are eroding the trust and relationships we fundamentally need to lead collective change. Interviewees raised concerns over the unhealthy relationship between LEx leaders and social sector actors.

Paying little attention to the valuable ideas LEx leaders have for interventions in their organisations; and failing to build leadership pipelines for LEx leaders working tirelessly on a community-level, fuelled mistrust, fear and anxieties between LEx leaders and social sector actors. Relationships matter. And they need to be healed. Not enough has been done to ask LEx communities what they need and want to help lead change, to honour and support their leadership.

‘Have our back. Set us up for success not failure. Giving a small pots of funding to carry out challenging but crucial work within communities is not doing that.’

Several of the interviewees argued that there is a need to change people’s priorities, culture, beliefs and habits. This includes changes in relationships and behaviours across the different layers and levels of an organisation.

‘We must rebuild trust and work together... When we do in a truly inclusive way, trust will come naturally.’

‘Frustration because I’m working in a space where there’s a lot of resistance and it’s hard to find people who understand.’

‘Feeling like a sub-part of my colleagues is what’s kind of driven my desire for self-development and self-investment. There’s good that’s come from it. But there’s also a lot of anxiety... a lot of turmoil that comes with that... All that imposter stuff kicks back in – what right have I got?’

‘They invest in what is more comfortable to them. We never know what the cause of that ‘comfort’ is. So much of our time and energy is wasted... explaining why we are competent and always trapped in

explaining our work and it takes away energy, resources and also means that we have to de-prioritize other work...it limits our capacity because we're having to spend half of our time analysing what they think is wrong with our work [and] getting people to buy into our vision.'

This damaging disconnect can lead to LEx leaders opting out by leaving the social sector, to the detriment of the social sector.

'I sacrifice my anonymity to make you understand...I speak your language so well you would not know...and I don't need to but I have. Many don't to make your [sic] realise that the "poor vulnerables" are sitting next to you. I then suffer your patronising and diminishing words when you see me as a poor vulnerable.'

As one respondent of the lived experience leaders project noted:

'The way they treated me...also kind of reaffirmed all these internal doubts and anxieties that I'm not good enough. and I'm just tricking myself and no one's ever going to give me a proper shot.'

Social and economic justice

'For a sector that worked hard to tackle social and economic inequalities, surely it had a responsibility to create economic opportunity and wealth for lived experience leaders seeking social impact careers.'

As a sector committed to addressing social inequality and seeking to improve the lives of the communities it serves, it is critical that current leadership inequities LEx leaders face in the social sector be addressed.

'If leaders with lived experience of severe and multiple disadvantage are expected to compete against leaders without similar lived experience, then surely those with should be at least offered the opportunity to train to compete at the same level.'

'We have to get real. People have families to look after...We cannot continue to expect lived experience leaders to work for free...Am I suggesting that one person is compensated for less despite all their educational achievements? Of course not, this is about starting to carefully and positively think through how underrepresented leaders and change-makers in society are valued and how they can fairly, justly, and effectively, participate within operations of the social sector.'

'The sector must take a look in the mirror...How do they expect people from marginalised communities to lead the change society needs?'

'Power and leadership are not limited the number of old white middle class men in leadership positions shows that.'

LEx leaders are facing disproportionate barriers to success in the social sector. We need systemic fair treatment of LEx leaders that offers them the same opportunities offered to social leaders without lived experience (**NON-LEx leaders**)

'Acting with good intentions isn't enough...I have no doubt that many are grappling with how to do better with diversity and inclusion...there are many trying to promote inclusive and diverse leadership... But ust look around the sector.'

'I work with great people who don't have lived experience and they're often talking about how bad diversity and inclusion is in the sector...Many then highlighting their own privilege as white middle class women. It's a start.'

'We also need to stop pigeonholing lived experience leaders to fit organisational agendas e.g. funded user-led projects also need to stop...These projects are time-limited with leaders given very little power to help shape or lead [their] design and future.'

'Other social leaders are trusted to lead and shape society...they're trusted to vision-set and we're not trusted...It's not an equal exchange. I think something about that structure that consistently makes you prove yourself despite the successes of your work and your potential is really dehumanizing because you're kept in this swirling power dynamic...we need that ecosystem and we need to invest in each other really well and support each other like visions and dreams as much as possible.'

'We just want to be respected like any other social leader, have access to the support and development we need to do bigger, and better for our communities, while nourishing ourselves...but not only are we not compensated equally or have access to opportunities...we're expected to be exceptional, absolutely exceptional, to be given a chance in the system where others are not.'

CHAPTER 6

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

The Pressing Need For Leadership Development

All participants were asked to provide their views on what they viewed as leadership, learning and development (L&D) needs of LEx leaders; explain their biggest leadership challenges and provide their views on L&D activities they feel they would benefit most from (and explain their answers).

Interviewees were asked to share their views on whether the L&D needs of LEx leaders differed from other social leaders in the sector; whether they thought there was a need for a dedicated leadership program for leaders with lived experience; and share their experiences, if any, of L&D initiatives they may have participated in.

All participants to the research unanimously agreed that there was a pressing need for a programme specifically aimed at recognising and supporting the learning, leadership and development needs of LEx leaders working across the UK. For eleven of the interviewees, this need was particularly critical due to the **'hostile landscape'** in which some emerging and experienced LEx leaders are working, often leaving them personally, professionally and emotionally exposed.

'Yes definitely. It would be great to have [lived experience] officially recognised. To highlight its value in the social sector.'

'You only have to look around you to see, hear and feel the injustices happening in our communities, in society. We need people with first-hand knowledge and lived experience from these communities to lead the change we urgently need.'

'There is a wealth of untapped talent, leadership, expertise and potential. This needs to be understood, 'scaffolded' and supported with real opportunities to thrive.'

'A programme dedicated to lived experience leaders could be magical. It could revolutionise and reinvigorate the sector...change the social leadership DNA.'

'It would be more impactful than other leadership programmes because you're taking people who are bearing and surviving injustices to be beacons of light for their communities.'

In addition to the legitimacy and credibility challenges faced by most LEx leaders, which ranked highest overall as the major leadership challenge faced by all participants, the following five leadership challenges were identified (ranked highest in order by participants):

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Isolation | <i>Loneliness; lack of connection to others</i> |
| Confidence | <i>Imposter syndrome; negotiating interactions and relationships; moving self, ideas and work forward</i> |
| Communication | <i>Understanding communication style; presenting ideas; public speaking</i> |
| Wellbeing | <i>Burnout; self-care; understanding and managing fears, anxieties</i> |
| Ownership | <i>Owning and managing your own narrative and lived experience.</i> |

Interviewees reflected on their own experiences of participating in L&D programmes available across the UK social sector, including:

- » Clore Social Leadership fellowship
- » Ashoka fellowship
- » London School of Business
- » Said Business School
- » Aston Business School
- » Academy of Chief Executives
- » Public Sector leadership Programmes, including, National Health Service
- » Windsor leadership program for inspiring black and Asian leaders
- » Griffins Fellowship at Cambridge University
- » School of Social Entrepreneurs
- » UnLtd (development support for award winners)

They also shared experiences of L&D programmes they have designed, developed and/or supported to benefit social leaders working across entrepreneurship, the Not-for-Profit and voluntary sectors, and the public sector (with and without lived experience).

The interviewees reflected on these extensive experiences to share their views, thoughts and opinions on past, existing and future L&D provision for LEx leaders.

Existing Provision

Many of the interviewees recognised that internal L&D initiatives currently led by larger social purpose organisations largely informed the goals and services of the **'beneficiaries'** and **'service-users'** of their programs. Recently, more initiatives have developed across the sector to support and **'give voice'** to PWLEx by way of targeted initiatives such as co-production, campaigning and community engagement efforts.

Although the work of these larger social purpose organisations is **'incredibly valuable,'** the opportunities they produced were largely targeted at supporting early stage and aspiring LEx leaders in specific sectors.

Opportunities for emerging and experienced LEx leaders to support their individual leadership development and progression as social leaders were scarce, inaccessible and/or failed to fully address the unique support needs of these leaders.

Five interviewees also reflected on specialist programmes that seeking to address the specific needs of leaders from diverse backgrounds, including leaders with disabilities and those from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. However, many of these initiatives were **'dwindling,'** focussed primarily on a specific sector e.g. education, or empowered leaders to address work-place barriers and/or focussed primarily on their identify and lived experiences as a person living with disability or as a someone from a BME background. From the interviewees perspective, the majority of L&D programmes developed specific and targeted programmes at the expense of more holistic approaches to individual leadership progression in the social sector as LEx leaders.

'I think there's a lot of diversity initiatives, but again, people get that confused with lived experience leadership and lived expertise.'

‘Did that tap into my lived experience? Not really. They were culturally based rather than lived experience based.’

‘Our programme is very much about lived experience but for young leaders and focusing on the creative industries and I based that on different models of programs that were out there, none of which specialized in lived experience.’

‘. . . There were a number of great programmes that featured lived experience quite heavily in the past to support the leadership in grassroots disability organisations...but there’s not many of them about now and much fewer than there was five years ago.’

‘Lived experience has featured in a number of leadership programmes I’ve been involved in as a trainer, speaker, coach or curriculum designer...But many focus on disabled staff working in specific sectors like higher education...or focus on how you can use your lived experience for change in the workforce.’

Reflecting on **‘traditional’** programmes available to CEOs, social sector leaders and entrepreneurs, interviewees highlighted specific benefits and gaps. The programmes provided real value with developing their technical expertise and skills as a leaders (e.g. project and programme management; team building; communication; conflict management; strategy and culture). However, interviewees found that programmes largely focussed on advancing an organisation’s overall vision, or one’s individual **‘brand’** as a leader, instead of helping them to explore their unique leadership skills, competencies and strengths or the unique challenges they faced as leaders.

‘There are programs that exist already for leaders or social leaders, but I think what they tend to do is discount, or not even take into consideration, the massive impact lived experience can have.’

‘I’ve attended several leadership courses at business schools. The value they add is crucial, of course. But they can never teach you how it feels to face the injustice you’re working to tackle.’

‘I don’t think there’s anything that as uniquely designed for that expertise of lived experience...There are many leadership initiatives that develop both corporate, social, charity but none that support the unique needs of this profile of leader.’

‘There’s a couple of Clore programs I’ve looked at, but they’re not necessarily explicit about how they can support people with lived experience to make the most of their experiences for social good. There’s a huge gap.’

Cohort based initiatives were said to be helpful when they provided experiential learning activities like action learning sets, speakers events, because of the specific challenges some LEx leaders may have faced as a direct result of their lived experiences, including lack of education, mental health etc. However, often their needs varied from other cohort members and as emerging leaders, they felt **‘raw’** and **‘overwhelmed’** at times.

Five of the interviewees had participated in the Clore Social Leadership programme. With the needs of emerging and experienced LEx leaders in mind, Clore Social Fellows reflected on their experience of the CLS fellowship.

‘. . . In terms of the general fellowship, there can be a focus on finding your personal driver for change and passion as a social leader, but for leaders with lived experience we have often found that fire inside and need more practical support and skills training to help build organisations or scale initiatives.’

‘... Many leaders with lived experience, especially those running their own social enterprises or user-led and community-led organisations, need support with developing strong and robust organisations, initiatives and interventions.’

‘Clare was unique and also good for social entrepreneurs who have little access to sophisticated understanding of the wider social sector, systems and local and public policy.’

Respondents who fall largely into the ‘**emerging**’ leaders category⁶ defined in the report, recorded the following responses:

- » 100% of respondents believed it was important for the social sector to invest in the leadership development of lived experience leaders/experts by experience.
- » 75% believe that Leadership training and development programmes do not exist for lived experience leaders/experts by experience.
- » 50% believe that leadership development and training only exists for those in senior/executive positions in the social sector.

Exploring the Leadership & Development Needs of LEx Leaders

As many interviewees noted, LEx leaders are like any other social leader in that they have their own individual leadership trajectories. And as is the case of other social leaders, practice and experience still play a large part in that trajectory, and so LEx leaders have the same needs as any other leader at their level of leadership.

However, interviewees unanimously agreed that LEx leaders also have unique L&D needs outside of those terms, and these needs have for far too long been ‘**neglected**’, ‘**ignored**’ or overlooked by the social sector.

Before turning to the specific needs identified by participants for LEx leaders, interviewees identified unique overarching development needs of all LEx leaders.

Overarching development needs

RECLAIMING POWER: PEOPLE-LED (LIVED EXPERIENCE DEVELOPMENT) APPROACH

Participants in this research unanimously agreed that the most compelling part of this study was its exploration of the unique skills, competencies and needs of LEx leaders. Any L&D programme therefore must develop a new approach to encourage LEx leaders to reclaim ‘**ownership**’ and ‘**power**’ over their work.

An approach that would help LEx leaders embrace their lived experiences, understand its full value, the skills and expertise it brings, as well as its limitations and how it all translates into mainstream leadership, would be ‘**truly powerful**.’

‘Understanding the challenges and limitations that come with lived experience and how to work around and harness those challenges to innovate and influence. Understanding the innovation we have already done and how to articulate that to others.’

‘... When I’ve contributed to leadership programs where there is a strong focus on lived experience—

⁶ 64% respondents stated having 1-3 years’ management experience; 0-1 years’ (18%); 3-5 years’ (6%) and 5-10 years’ experience (12%)

it has huge impact...it's the most life changing. Shifts in mindset, behaviour, confidence...it's powerful...really transformative.'

'A strengths-based approach to exploring and understanding our unique lived experiences, coupled with our learned [experience]...Wow, a powerful paradigm shift that I've long envisioned in my work.'

'A sophisticated understanding of our own lived experiences alongside our learned skills— appreciating the difference, uniqueness of it – its limitations as well as extensions...Where do I sign up?'

Several interviewees highlighted that the success of this developing field would be determined by the involvement of LEx leaders in its development, design and implementation.

'There is a wealth of expertise that must be used to inform these new support initiatives, to help meet the unique needs of Lived experience leaders and support the development of all social leaders across the sector.'

'Solutions will be feasible and sustainable only if they are led by and involve lived experience leaders.'

NETWORKED APPROACH

All but one of the interviewees and respondents highlighted the need for a networked approach to supporting all LEx leaders working across the UK social sector. By connecting LEx leaders with other social leads—both LEx and non-LEx Leaders—a network approach to an L&D programme would address the isolation and loneliness many leaders face and would help LEx leaders 'plug-in' and connect to resources, learning, mentoring and collaboration opportunities.

'Leadership can be lonely place. Especially if you're also leading that in isolation from your counterparts or outside of London. So it can be really valuable to have a network of people around you with similar or attributable lived experience, I think it would be massively beneficial.'

The shared commonality of lived experience leaders is unique and powerful...to allow for those connections to be build so that they can support and love one another on their leadership paths and beyond the lifetime of any program.'

'It would be so valuable to cultivate an ecosystem of leadership support to help them thrive and bounce back from setbacks - and realise that all leaders in the sector encounter setbacks,'

'To generate new ideas for systems change you have to learn from your peers – be connected to other social leaders and learn from one another,'

For experienced and senior leaders, connecting into leaders from different fields and industries would be highly beneficial.

'What we as lived experience leaders often lack is access to those in other sectors because lived experience leadership is not understood or valued with regards to transferable skills.'

'What's exciting to me as someone fairly old in the game is tapping into a wider network of social leaders, like Clore, working across the sector that isn't readily available on your doorstep – to share knowledge, connect and collaborate.'

'How can we develop those high-level connections for partnership-building and influence and I've come to realise that who you know does make a difference.'

WELLBEING

The need to address the well-being of LEx leaders ranked highly as an area of need. Lived experiences are unique and this must be respected and valued in L&D development and design. This was especially important for LEx leaders who are experiencing or have experienced personal and/or collective trauma. The need to help LEx leaders manage personal and external boundaries and relationships to avoid burnout and thrive was also noted.

‘We need help with getting over the humps...I’ve been my own worst enemy for a while. I’ve been dealing with a lot of trauma from my childhood having fought my way out of a bad family situation and although I developed this tough outer shell that I was very proud of, the problem is when you no longer need to fight anymore that can turn inwards...so I’ve had to do a lot of work to use that fire in a productive way and allowing myself to be and not always have to do.’

‘Something around self-care, mental-health first aid. This stuff around self-awareness. So that’s been a bit of a barrier for me.’

‘Self-care and balance as part of lived experience leadership can’t be escaped and the work we do with communities impacted by systemic oppression is valuable to help heal the mind, soul and body.’

‘Support to help internal challenges...the burning need to always validate my presence amongst those in power...to move that towards a place of strength.’

COMMUNICATION

Like other social leaders, LEx leaders need support to develop their communication skills. However, due to the impact of lived experiences on some LEx leaders; the lack of access to L&D support and the distinct structural, systemic and cultural barriers they face as leaders necessitate focussed and enhanced support in this area.

Many interviewees highlighted the need to learn how ‘**take ownership**’ of ones lived experience narrative. Specifically, they identified a need to learn how to express and translate it so that they can effectively communicate with staff teams, key stakeholders, influencers and those with power – on their terms.

‘How to translate your lived experiences into ways that doesn’t scare people or focus on a pity part.’

‘Communicate in a way that helps people trust you and that can influence them to act.’

‘Moving beyond storytelling to strategic intervention, as lived experience leaders are often only given space if they bare their soulstory to justify their access to a room and other leaders don’t have to do that.’

‘The support to encapsulate lived experiences in narratives that can aid strategic influencing work with those with power.’

Systems thinking and practice

For many of the interviewees, understanding the ‘**world and systems**’ around them would be valuable. This was especially important for those LEx leaders who work in specific sectors who don’t necessarily understand the wider work happening across the sector and how it interconnects with their own.

For LEx change-makers and early stage and aspiring LEx leaders, understanding the broader structures of the social sector beyond the charity and voluntary sector was also important. For many social entrepreneurs

with lived experience a broader understanding of government, it was important to understand the operations of the policy and charity sectors.

‘Real value in an access scheme to help lived experience leaders realise how their skills and experience could be understood in traditional structures.’

‘My background in political activism developed and sharpened my thinking and helped me understand the wider political and government structures.’

‘All LEx leaders need a better understanding of social sector operations, who does what, how, where.’

‘For local projects and innovations to have scale it’s important to have an understanding of complex systems that layer levels of society.’

Lived Experience Leadership Development Needs

It is important to note that several interviewees highlighted that there is no single, existing approach to tackling the glaring inequities faced by LEx leaders in the social sector. To effectively address these inequalities, the social sector needs to re-evaluate its organisational practices and opportunities for development and growth it offers to LEx leadership both within and outside of their organisations and institutions.

‘Only through collective efforts will we be able to pave the way for greater stability and success for lived experience leaders,’

The majority of interviewees also believed that by establishing targeted L&D initiatives would not only address the structural, systemic and cultural barriers many LEx leaders faced in the sector but it would also accelerate sector understanding of the varying levels of LEx leadership populating the sector and communities across the UK; and help enhance existing L&D provision available to LEx leaders who currently lack access and opportunity to current L&D provision.

However, it was also important to note that Interviewees also recognised that a range of L&D opportunities were needed to support the leadership of LEx leaders. What works for one community of leaders may not necessarily translate to others for example, the needs of LEx leaders who are social entrepreneurs will differ from grassroots community leaders, volunteers and campaigners.

Interviewees unanimously agreed that a critical first step in addressing these inequalities would be developing a range of L&D approaches that appreciate and embrace the different development stages of LEx leaders. Different levels of leadership require different interventions. Many of the interviewees had a wealth of experience developing L&D programs for the communities they serve, from service user involvement initiatives to developing projects aimed at supporting **‘leaders with lived experience.’** Drawing on these valuable expert insights, this final section explores and captures the approaches discussed during conversations. Respondents were asked to highlight their biggest challenges and L&D needs through survey questions, which will also be incorporated into this section.

It is worth restating that the majority of interviewees highlighted the learning, training and development needs of emerging and experienced LEx leaders as a primary concern. This chapter will explore this topic in greater detail in the following sections.

Senior LEx leaders

Interviewees reflected on the current needs of senior LEx leaders (largely those with 10+ years of senior leadership and management roles). In short, LEx leaders at this stage in their career identified collaborating with, and supporting the growth of emerging and experienced LEx leaders as key opportunities for their leadership trajectory, while also connecting into networks with senior leaders working across industries e.g. private sector.

‘I’m interested in giving back – mentoring, supporting other LEx leaders coming up the ranks.’

‘Having a peer network with other LEx leaders but also connect into a wider network with other social leaders so we can connect and collaborate.’

‘Connect to other leaders with lived experience – that’s what I’m interested in. A training course on a particular subject isn’t necessarily what I’d be looking for.’

‘I’d love to mentor other LEx leaders and also find a mentor working in another sector or industry to gain more insights and knowledge.’

Aspiring LEx leaders

Aspiring LEx leaders, namely PWLEx who are in the process of activating their lived expertise to lead change, will activate their lived experiences in various ways. These aspiring leaders may be at early stages of this activation process (e.g. service-users; participating on a lived experience panel; engaging with a community project etc). For the purposes of this report, aspiring LEx leaders are those who are **‘exploring’** their social purpose work and change-making capacity beyond simply **‘informing’** initiatives designed by others.

Interviewees recognised that not all aspiring LEx leaders will benefit from a leadership programme during these early stages. Many are unlikely to have a clear vision of their social purpose work or their role in the social sector, and some might not fully understand the potential of their lived experience as a tool to contribute to the social good.

‘Some may have not grasped the potential of lived experience as a means for social good.’

‘Essentially, what propelled me into my work was having someone who believed in me.’

‘I was forced out of school at 13. When I wanted to give back...having some hands-on experience helped me get into the swing of things.’

‘Not all service-users will benefit from a leadership programme during these early stages...Meet them where they are at and see what works.’

‘When I started out I didn’t have many organisational skills and I spent so much of my energy dealing with personal and emotional stuff.’

The need for practice experience was highlighted as key component of building and developing the leadership of aspiring LEx leaders. To create environments that enable LEx leaders to learn whilst tapping into their own experience to inform their practice and share this with colleagues.

Combining the shared views of interviewees, there are some clear preconditions and values that emerged that can advance opportunities for aspiring leaders to thrive beyond their narrative and informant roles in social purpose organisations.

For social sector operators working with aspiring LEx leaders, valuable insights shared by interviewees have been captured in the table below to help inform new and existing initiatives to foster environments that promote and given agency to aspiring LEx leaders (including initiatives that may be involving PWLEx in their work).

HOW TO WORK WITH ASPIRING LEx LEADERS

Listen

Go into community. Meet people with lived experience (PWLEx) where they are. Understand their unique circumstances, needs and aspirations and tailor your initiatives and investments to those needs. This includes providing necessary support to those who wish to transition from informant/participant towards LEx change-maker/leader. Shift away from old, extractive practices and instead create alternatives that engage PWLEx in co-design efforts.

Promote respect, dignity, and self-determination

Develop safe spaces that promote respect, dignity and self-determination. Design with inclusivity in mind and to meet individuals' unique needs. To be inclusive, offerings must be flexible enough to accommodate unexpected life challenges. Allow people to share what they may need to be present ad/or healthy e.g. costs to cover childcare/travel/time; flexibility to come in and out of initiatives as needed.

Respect privacy and autonomy. LEx narratives belong to the individual and must not be discussed or shared with others without their consent, in any circumstances.

Allow aspiring LEx leaders opportunities to share their learning, development and leadership needs and aspirations with the program and leadership team.

Practice transparency and accountability

Be clear about the purpose, goals and strategies for initiatives. Share this information with all involved (including PWLEx ; aspiring LEx leaders; internal and external staff/funders). If these goals change at any stage, share these changes with everyone.

Set the scene – allow people to understand the context leading to the initiative; wider network of people; services and systems involved in the issue(s) area.

Listen and act on what you hear, and share what you learn. Give feedback regularly.

Shift the power

Distribute and share decision-making resources and opportunities. Be bold. Lead with humility, curiosity and vulnerability. Know and own your biases. Appreciate and embrace difference.

Value LEx: The medium of storytelling in a trusted and safe space can be a great tool to connect people.

Value the power of LEx: Consider the breadth and depth of LEx beyond story. Respect the insights, knowledge and wisdom it brings. Credit the knowledge producer with gratitude.

Know your limitations: Involve and engage the right people and experts. Step back and listen.

Support and build capacity and pathways

Create pathways for aspiring leaders. Actively listen and act on needs. Connect aspiring leaders into relevant projects, positions, resources and networks, run workshops and share knowledge to meet learning and development needs.

Provide/locate opportunities for practice experience.

Finally, interviewees also recognised that individuals working in communities as volunteers, affiliated with and organisation or not, may not be actively using a **'service'** of an existing social purpose organisation, and so may lack access to L&D initiatives.

'Not all impactful work happens inside of a traditional social sector structures.'

Social purpose organisations committed to developing LEx leaders should **'open their doors'** to all and help build local community capacity. Creative approaches to supporting and funding this profile of LEx leader may also be necessary (e.g. funding temporary/ permanent placements in organisations; fellowship placements; residencies).

Leadership Development for Emerging and Experienced LEx Leaders

Throughout discussions, interviewees explored the possibility of a dedicated L&D programme for LEx Leaders. All unanimously agreed that a targeted programme was necessary to address the unique hurdles faced by emerging and experienced LEx leaders.

'It would show the best of these leaders—not only in time will their individual growth and leadership be improved but their support for other people, their communities; they will act as beacons...in a way that you can't fully foresee.'

'Any new programme like this would be the first of its kind and would be a bright paint for a new canvas to be shared and celebrated widely.'

THE VALUE OF COHORT-BASED LEARNING

All interviewees agreed that a cohort-based L&D programme would best support the skills, strengths and competencies that LEx leaders needed to thrive. A collective experience would allow leaders to build a community, or an **'ecosystem'** of support.

'It would allow diverse perspectives to come together and stretch learning.'

'Important to feel part of a community and not alone—to be part of a collective experience would be very powerful.'

'It's important to feel part of something bigger when you have been working in isolation for so long.'

Fourteen of the interviewees also commented on the value of stepping away from the **'day to day'** to find space to reflect and renew.

'Time out and away from the office for self-development is critical. People should benefit from this.'

'Each of us are under so much pressure within our organization or for family pressure/some of us have ongoing experiences a[n]d we're expected to perform well and to provide. So alongside the practicalities of being a social leader it also understanding the 'self' as part of that development and a lot of the time you need space to get away from it all—to focus on yourself and your development.'

'Participating in Clore really helped improve my leadership. I really, really enjoyed the experience. Reinvigorated me. I learnt a lot. Elements of the programme I found particularly helpful were the residencies. Having a structured learning invested in developing your leadership. The ability to step away from the office, immerse myself into a programme focussing on leadership and share experiences with other leaders proved vital in my development.'

The majority of the interviewees felt that a cohort-based programme (a community of social leaders on a learning journey together e.g. fellowship) dedicated to emerging and experienced LEx leaders would be highly valuable, especially as they amalgamate their lived and learned experiences.

‘It would be important to have a safe space. you know, just honest reflection in terms of feelings and emotions and values you know.’

‘I think it’s really important, particularly the external pressures and things that are happening to us and around us.’

Some interviewees were concerned with ‘**side-lining**’ LEx leadership into its own category of leadership, which could potentially stifle their connection to other social leaders outside of their experience area, however the majority agreed that a cohort of LEx leaders for emerging leaders would be best due to the need to share and master their lived experiences in safe environments.

‘Lived experience often means you experience barriers accessing mainstream opportunities and if lived experience leaders are going to “compete” with other leaders it would be easier if it was recognised through the mainstream system and structures.’

‘I think that there are programs that exist already for leaders or social leaders, but they tend to do is discount, or not even take into consideration, the massive impact lived experience can have. On one hand, I think there’s a bit of a danger of perhaps pigeon-holing if it’s not done in the right way. But I would say overall for me the positive benefits outweigh the negatives.’

‘...When I was early on my career I would have loved to have joined a cohort with other early stage lived experience leaders – to not be intimidated, and have space to share and master my lived experience through connected support.’

‘...Early on in your career I think it’s important to be with others who understand you and are at the same level as you...to be able to share insecurities, as well as examine experiences – both positive and negative – that have shaped their lives and leadership journeys.’

Nearly all interviewees agreed that cohort-based needs for experienced LEx leaders differed from aspiring LEx Leaders and it would be valuable for experienced LEx leaders to be part of programmes alongside other social leaders, with or without lived experience.

‘At that stage of your leadership you need to learn from others...Get out there and learn about other sectors and industries.’

‘I remember being in a room full of CEOs wondering what I was doing there...I didn’t have a degree and I started doubting myself...you can’t underestimate the power of someone believing in you... The fellowship team, the other fellows. It was powerful and instilled a confidence that helped me to understand my valuable contribution to the sector’

‘Knowledge transfer is really important...Being in a cohort of social leaders from across sectors really stretched me intellectually, helped me develop a deeper understanding of the social sector.’

‘People at different stages within the group...stretch each other by sharing their experiences and how they’re operating internally, or the way they’re developing themselves within their organizations...It’s expertise to tap into.’

‘Those discussions on leadership journeys and, advice on tricks of the trade that actually I took away most from the Clore program.’

Eleven of the interviewees also shared their experiences mentoring and/or coaching emerging LEx leaders, which helped their growth and development. If they were matched with a mentee they could effectively assist, they considered the relationship a great source of development and learning.

‘The space to reflect, learn about yourself and also benefit from the wisdom of someone.’

‘Learn the tricks of the trade—done well, mentors stay with you for life and enhance your leadership for years.’

‘I’ve never had a mentor and know that I would benefit so much from one...I’ve seen the impact that mentors have had on colleagues’ leadership journeys and I think I would benefit from it greatly.’

‘One of the things I’m noticing in my work is there are a lot of cycles...sector operations, environments and approaches...and having a mentor to help identify these cycles and extract learning from what has gone before.’

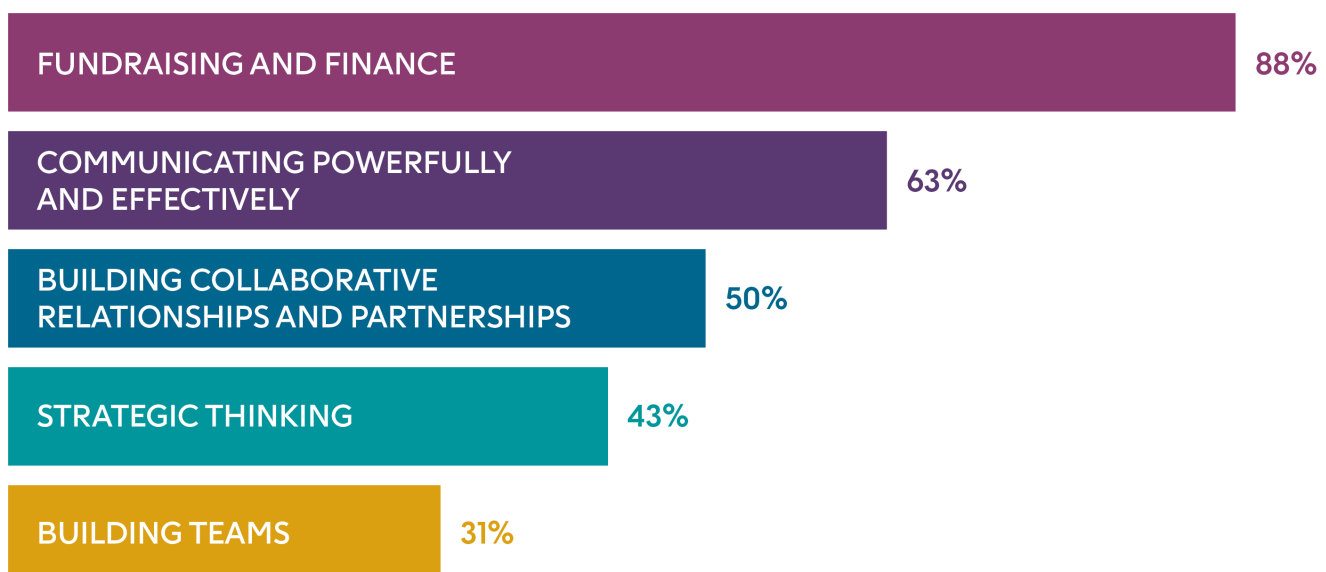
EMERGING LEADERS

‘Someone can have a hundred ideas but it’s about the execution of that idea.’

Respondents cited top 5 competencies that would be most valuable to their leadership development. These responses mirrored those offered by interviewees.

1. Fundraising/finance (88%)
2. Communicating powerfully and effectively (63%)
3. Building collaborative relationships/partnerships (50%)
4. Strategic thinking (learning how to identify and develop opportunities to make change (43%)
5. Building, developing and managing teams (31%)

COMPETENCIES MOST VALUABLE TO EMERGING LEADERS



Interviewees also kindly reflected on their own personal leadership journeys to share skills, competencies and strengths that have proven helpful in their journey and would likely prove helpful to emerging leaders.

In addition to the competencies highlighted by respondents, ten of the interviewees also identified the following key skills as skills that would prove valuable for emerging leaders, especially those working in social justice. These skills would also improve the health and sustainability of smaller user-led and community-led organisations.

- » Systems thinking and practice: especially understanding system stakeholders (including government and private sector), their roles and how they connect.
- » Business skills human resources, finance and governance, board structure; managing board meetings.

Half of the interviewees also commented on the value of experiential learning activities, such as reviewing case studies of organisational/sector challenges to enhance critical thinking skills.

‘Because of your lived experiences you might not have had access to mainstream education provision like everyone else and so different learning methods will be needed to flex critical thinking.’

‘I really learned a lot from speakers...sharing their leadership journeys, challenges they’ve faced, how they overcame them...what steps they took to get something done.’

EXPERIENCED LEADERS

Interviewees ranked the following skills and competencies valuable for experienced leaders:

1. Communicating powerfully and effectively
2. Strategic thinking and influencing
3. Systems practice (mapping; thinking; understanding systems of oppression)
4. Diversifying funding streams (impact investing)
5. Building, developing and managing senior teams

Clore Social Leadership Fellowship

Finally, interviewees were asked if they would apply or nominate someone to be part of a Clore Social Leadership (CLS) program if one was aimed at LEx leaders. If so, to share any thoughts on activities/ components that should be included in the program.

Fourteen of the interviewees felt that access to a CLS fellowship programme would be **‘invaluable’** for emerging and experienced LEx leaders.

‘An inaugural [CSL] program targeting lived experience leaders can not only support more leaders but also help other leadership programs understand what is missing and what they can do to bespoke and develop their programs.’

‘[Being a CSL fellow] would be a recognisable qualification as a result of attending the programme... people would take notice.’

‘It would give the skills and confidence for leaders to lead. It would also give their natural leadership skills credibility with formal recognition and qualifications.’

‘...It would provide larger organisations an opportunity to identify and support lived experience leaders in their organisation...help them get to the next level...I’m sure many would be keen to nominate and be part of this growing movement.’

‘It would dispel fears and anxieties of the sector...It would inspire other individuals as well as demonstrate to the wider system that lived experience can not only lead, but they have the formal recognition to prove that.’

Seven of the interviewees said they would consider applying if there was a program targeted towards experienced LEx leaders due to the quality, reputation and expertise of CLS in developing social leaders in the UK social sector

‘We’re expected to fight and challenge the status quo daily...but having the space to reimagine the new, develop ideas would be wonderful.’

‘Have shared opportunities to explore ideas and learn new skills to experiment with solutions to the problems I understand so deeply.’

‘I crave space to test my own assumptions and learn more about what others were doing in the sector – build collective intelligence.’

However, one interviewee felt that CSL risks being too prescriptive and so was not interested in applying.

‘I worry [CSL] it has become too prescriptive which makes it less accessible and appropriate for lived experience leaders.’

Clore Social Fellows shared their experiences of their fellowship and reflected on the elements of the programme that enhanced their leadership skills and development. These elements included:

- » Coaching & mentoring
- » Residentials
- » Training
- » Action learning sets
- » Research/provocation piece

‘Clore is few and far between and I know many leaders with lived experience that have come through UnLtd who would benefit hugely, with multiple lived experiences, who would benefit from Clore. If it wasn’t by pure chance I would never had gone for it.’

‘We did an excellent negotiator training course which I still use today...[The course] helps you understand a room, be aware of various factors at play during challenging discussions and build your persuasion techniques in challenges situations.’

‘The residentials were a really good opportunity for leaders to help support each other think critically about their leadership journeys.’

‘Personally, I found the provocation piece the most stretching element of the fellowship...It helped me to channel both my lived and learnt expertise in the refugee sector; platform the wider work of our organisation...and help highlight a missing gap in campaigns strategies in the field—resulting in a number of new partnerships and alliances...’

'I found the action learning sets a little frustrating, particularly in my action learning set where people were trying to "find" their passion or the problem area they wanted to tackle. As a lived experience leader, I had mine. It's good to have dreams and find that fire inside and maybe that's because of I bring my lived experience to the work that I do.'

Design and delivery of L&D provision

Interviewees also made the following suggestions on the design and delivery of any targeted L&D programme:

- » Reflective of the values shared by LEx leadership

'It would have to be grounded in the values of lived experience leadership.'

- » Co-designed by LEx leaders/include LEx leaders in delivery of the programme (including women of colour and disability rights sector)

'I would only be involved if it was focussed on the needs of leaders with lived experience, and included lived experience leaders in the co-design and delivery of key elements.'

'There are so many amazing lived experience leaders I want to learn from.'

'Having leaders with lived experience share their leadership journeys, challenges and successes.'

Interviewees, also expressed concern of 'elite' programs being inaccessible to LEx leaders and those who did not have backing from larger social purpose organisations. They offered insights into a selection process:

- » Ensure marketing reaches LEx communities
- » Allow for nominations to be included from across the social sector
- » Applicants should be directed towards personal reflection and identification of their lived and learned experiences so that those needs can be individually or collectively met
- » The complex trajectory of many LEx leaders, and the varying stages of their development can differ significantly, any program should ensure that they match cohort(s) of leaders on a similar stage of their leadership journey
- » Participants, should be offered a selection of courses to meet individuals' specific needs
- » Clear and sensitive guidelines on cohort community practices and learning activities e.g. action learning set

Due to the profile of many LEx leaders (working in community organisations; volunteer groups; small user-led initiatives) financing fellowship/course fees may prove difficult and bursaries for time away would be valuable and be inclusive. Peer to peer learning forums or platforms were also cited as tools to engage and support LEx leaders so that they can share experiences and learn from one another.

This report reminds us that social leadership is not simply the province of those who have had the opportunity to study it in their academic life or practice it throughout their professional careers. Rather, this report is a stark reminder that there are change-makers, innovators and leaders with first-hand experience of social injustices flourishing across all of society. These are leaders seeking to activate their lived and learnt experiences to benefit and improve the lives of communities they share lived experiences with. These are inspiring leaders who have wrestled with adversity and who want to pioneer positive change in their communities and the world.

This report does not seek to undermine the expertise of other leaders in the social sector, nor does it seek to impugn the value of evidence-based approaches to social change. Indeed, all of the informants shaping this work hold technical and practice expertise as fundamental facets of social leadership armoury. Instead, this work highlights LEx leaders inability to access those learning opportunities, to develop and enhance their leadership; to cultivate the valuable leadership strengths, competencies and capacities they hold so they can continue to lead positive change alongside us. Their needs have long been ignored and woefully neglected in our leadership and development practices—at the peril of the social sector.

By failing to create inclusive opportunities for LEx leaders and PWLEx, we are missing out on the expertise and insight they can bring into the change-making process. Lasting and transformational change is not possible without them. The moment the social sector begins to fully realise and support LEx leadership development is the moment it can begin shifting the culture and conditions hindering its work.

At a time where we are trying to connect more than ever with most marginalised members of our society, we cannot ignore the leadership that flourishes within it. It is the sector's responsibility to heed to the calls for action in this report. It is the hope that the chapters, frameworks and information detailed herein will help us all focus our initiatives and create a healthy, inclusive and powerful sector that supports and benefits us all, across all of our communities.

APPENDIX



Appendix 1: List of Interviewees and Questions

Interviewees

- » David Ford, Founder, Expert Link
- » Darren Murinas, CEO, Expert Citizens
- » Dominic Ruffy, Entrepreneur, co-production specialist (formerly Programme Lead Amy Winehouse Foundation)
- » Farzana Khan, Educator, Director of Healing Justice LDN, Project Lead, Voices that Shake!
- » Fuad Mohammed, CEO, Ashley Community Housing (Clare Social Fellow)
- » Kate Hitchcock, Grants Manager, Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- » Louise Cannon, Award Manager, UnLtd (Clare Social Fellow)
- » Luke Hunka, Strategic Adviser, NHS England
- » Junior Smart, Business Development Manager, St Giles Trust
- » Paula Harriott, Head of Prisoner Engagement, Prison Reform Trust
- » Peter Atherton, Managing Director, Community Led Initiatives
- » Sade Brown, CEO, Sour Lemons
- » Steph Culter, Head of Employment, Thomas Pocklington Trust (Clare Social Fellow)
- » Sunny Dhadley, Systems Analyst, and Government Adviser (formerly Programme Lead of SUIT, Service User Involvement Team)
- » Zara Todd, Stakeholder & Engagement Manager, ProjectScotland

Guideline questions

1. Do you think there is a need for a leadership learning and development programme for leaders with lived experience? Please explain your answer.
2. What do you believe are the current leadership needs of people with lived experience?
3. Are these needs unique to this profile of leader and/or how do they differ to other leaders in the social sector?
4. What difference would an investment in leaders with lived experience make, if at all?
5. To the individual?
6. To the wider social sector?
7. What are the biggest challenges you have faced as a leader in the social sector?
8. Are there any other leadership initiatives that you know of that support leaders with lived experience?
9. If yes, please provide details of the programme.
10. Have you participated in any other leadership programmes in the past? Please provide details
11. If one existed, would you apply for and/or nominate someone for a Clare Social Leadership programme aimed at leaders with lived experience? What would/would not attract you/others?
12. In your view (and in light of your own experience) what activities/components should be included in the design of any targeted leadership program for leaders with lived experience?

If you are a previous Clare social fellow, did you benefit from the programme?

1. If so, what elements of the programme did you find most helpful/valuable?
2. Were there any gaps?

Appendix 2: List of Survey Questions

1. How would you best describe your role in the UK social sector? Do you identify with any of the following?

(Please tick):

- Practitioner
- Campaigner
- Artist
- Social entrepreneur
- Expert by Experience
- Change-maker
- Community Leader
- Leader with Lived Experience
- Social Sector Leader
- Emerging Leader
- None of the above

Please feel free to use the space to best describe your role in the social sector

2. This survey also assumes that you have, are in the process of, activating your lived, as well as learnt, experience to create positive change. Please provide details of the social issue/justice you have direct, first-hand experience of.

Please feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights.

3. In what area/field are you carrying out your social purpose work?

Please feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights

4. Do you have direct personal experience of the following public services (please tick all that apply)

- Social services – children’s services
- Social services – social care
- Probation services
- Mental health services
- Police services
- Immigration services
- Welfare and benefit services
- National Health Service (NHS)
- None of the above
- Other (please describe)

Please feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights

5. Do you think it is important for the social sector to invest in the leadership development of people using their lived experience to create positive change?

- Not important
- Somewhat important
- Very important

6. Do you think that people using their lived experience to create positive change face leadership challenges in the social sector?
- Yes
 - No
 - Sometimes
 - Not sure

Please feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights

7. Please say if you disagree or agree with the following statement:
- Leadership training and development programmes already exist for people using their lived experience to create positive change?
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Don't know
 - OtherPlease feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights
 - There is a lack of leadership development and training programmes across the whole social sector
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Don't know
 - OtherPlease feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights
 - Leadership development and training only exist for those in senior/executive positions in the social sector, not for everyone
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Don't know
 - OtherPlease feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights
 - Leadership development and training is only available to those with higher education qualifications
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Don't know
 - Other

8. What are the top three challenges YOU currently face in your social purpose work?

9. If you participated in a leadership development program, what top five topics would you want to see covered that would make it most valuable to you personally?

Please feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights

10. What are your favorite/most effective ways to learn - rank in order from 1 (favorite/most effective) – 5 (least favorite/effective)

- Reading
- Listening
- Discussion
- Online tools
- Coaching & Mentoring
- Other (please describe)

Please feel free to use this space to explain your answer or share any other views/insights

11. Other thoughts or suggestions.

12. How many years of management experience do you have?

- 0
- 0-1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-15 years
- More than 15 years

