A&M CONSULTANCY

Building Leadership From Experience

Mapping And Analysis Of The Lived Experience Leadership Landscape In The UK Refugee Rights Sector

A report for One Strong Voice and the Asylum Reform Initiative

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Who we are

About Ana & Mishka (A&M) Consultancy

A&M CONSULTANCY

Authenticity.
Lived Experience.
Expertise

Ana & Mishka Consultancy is a partnership of two consultants with lived experience of the UK immigration and asylum system:

Ana Asatiani

Co-partner

Ana is an advocate, campaigner, researcher, and evaluator with over eight years of professional and volunteering experience. She has lived experience of the UK's asylum system. Her lived experience is one of her main motivations for campaigning and advocating in these areas.

She has an extensive focus on the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in campaigns and advocacy, co-production, organisational strategy, grassroots/community level organising, campaigning, and movement building.

Mishka Pillay

Co-partner

Mishka is an advocate, campaigner, researcher, evaluator, and writer with a focus on refugee rights and immigration detention in the UK.

He has first-hand experience of the UK's immigration and asylum system and has a particular focus and expertise in the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in campaigns and advocacy, co-production, and co-delivery. Mishka has over eight years of professional and volunteering experience in this field.

About Asylum Reform Initiative (ARI)/Together With Refugees (TWR) and One Strong Voice (OSV)

One Strong Voice (OSV) is the UK campaign network of networks and individual activists with lived experience of the UK immigration and asylum system. Their vision is a welcoming and non-discriminatory immigration and asylum system that treats people with respect, dignity, and fairness. They support people with lived experience of the immigration and asylum system in campaign leadership roles across the sector. OSV also undertakes campaigns to influence public opinion, media narratives, and policy. They are currently fiscally hosted by Freedom from Torture. OSV is a member of the Together With Refugees coalition and of the Asylum Reform Initiative (ARI) governance structures that sit behind it, with seats in all the decision-making groups.

The Asylum Reform Initiative (ARI) is an alliance of leading refugee groups set up in 2020 to work for deep change in the UK's refugee and asylum system. As a central part of its strategy, the ARI incubated, launched and now supports the Together With Refugees (TWR) campaign coalition which works across three strategic pillars: shifting the public and media narrative; movement-building and mobilising public voice; developing political support and winning system and policy change. The coalition now has over 600 national and local members.

Acknowledgements

This report was researched and authored by Ana Asatiani and Mishka Pillay of A&M Consultancy.

We would like to thank our interviewees for sharing their views and experiences about Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights movement. We appreciate the honesty of both people with lived experience and other stakeholders without lived experience, and their commitment to positive change for refugees and people seeking asylum.

We acknowledge the contribution of people with lived experience, who shared their firsthand experiences of navigating the UK asylum system as part of their Lived Experience Leadership journeys. We also thank the allies in the UK refugee rights movement for sharing information about Lived Experience Leadership initiatives, which was vital for the report.

We would also like to thank everyone who shared and completed two surveys that generated rich data for analysis.

We express our thanks to the OSV and ARI project steering group for their support and feedback throughout this project.

Finally, we would like to thank the external panel below who shared their feedback on the report and its recommendations:

- **Yusuf Ciftci**
  The Head of Refugee Involvement at Refugee Council
- **Mohamed Omar**
  The Head of EbE & Partnerships at Refugee Action
- **Bridget Young**
  The Director of NACCOM

While we greatly valued their input to the report, none of its conclusions or recommendations should be taken to be their opinions, which remain those of the authors alone.

Key terms, phrases, and acronyms

OSV – One Strong Voice

ARI – Asylum Reform Initiative

TWR – Together With Refugees Coalition

Consultations – The word 'consultations' is used in this report to refer to interviews and surveys conducted as part of this research.

People with lived experience – In the context of this report, these are people who have past or present experience of the UK asylum system, including refugees and former refugees.

Leaders with lived experience – The authors acknowledge that the definition of leadership and what it means to be a leader is unique to each individual and there is not one universal definition of the term. In the context of this report, 'leaders with lived experience' are understood broadly to be individuals who have lived experience of the UK asylum system (past or present) and experience in campaigning and advocating for refugee rights. This definition includes individuals who focus specifically on Lived Experience Leadership and may be in leadership positions within the UK refugee rights movement and those who have the potential to become leaders. (please refer to page 10 for more details)

Led by and for organisations and initiatives – Organisations and initiatives led by people with lived experience of the UK asylum system, for the benefit of those going through the UK asylum system.

Stakeholders – The word 'stakeholders' is used throughout this report to refer to individuals both with and without lived experience who were interviewed or responded to a survey as part of this research. 'Stakeholders' is used interchangeably with 'interviewees', 'survey respondents' and 'participants'.

Trauma-informed approach – The authors refer to a 'trauma-informed approach' as a way of collaborating with people who have experienced trauma that aims to prevent re-traumatisation and promote safety and healing.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The need to accelerate Lived Experience Leadership is increasingly recognised in the refugee rights sector in the UK. People with lived experience actively collaborate with multiple stakeholders and campaign for an asylum system that is fair and just. Their extensive knowledge of migration issues, along with their firsthand experiences, makes them effective movement leaders. Through the inclusion of their unique perspectives, skills and expertise, the movement can gain a deeper understanding of the issues directly affecting refugee communities. These diverse and unique perspectives also enhance the movement's advocacy and campaigns efforts to achieve systemic change, such as policy and legislative reform.

Even though the momentum surrounding Lived Experience Leadership has increased, there are still a number of significant structural and systemic barriers. Many people with lived experience still face significant obstacles, such as being seen only as vulnerable victims, subjects of a 'saviourism' perspective. The integration of Lived Experience Leadership into the refugee rights movement will require concerted efforts at the organisational and systemic levels, including the transformation of policies, funding structures, and cultural practices.

From its launch in 2021, the Together With Refugees (TWR) coalition has included a strong commitment to building lived experience involvement and leadership within its campaigns strategy and Theory of Change. One of its four 'big goals' is to help build a 'thriving, diverse and united movement for a just, humane and effective asylum system at national and local level, with people with lived experience leading.' Elements of the work to advance this goal have included:

- Developing the governance and decision-making structures. (This included an agreement that One Strong Voice become ARI members with representation on both the CEO-level Governance Group and the Campaign Directors Group.)
- Ensuring refugees shape coalition campaigns.
- Refugee lead spokespeople for coalition campaigns.
- Membership and mobilisation work.

However, ARI has also acknowledged it has a long way to go to achieve the goal it set on building Lived Experience Leadership within the TWR's work. A 2022 external evaluation of ARI's strategy recognised its effectiveness in movement building in the sector whilst noting 'the need to accelerate Lived-Experience Leadership within the network and to include more at-risk asylum seeker and refugee voices.' This is mirrored by findings of a 2023 wider report by Migration Exchange, which highlighted the need for 'a strategic, resourced approach towards lived experience' in the refugee and migration sector'[1].

In response to the evaluation, ARI Governance Group agreed on three key components of advancing Lived Experience Leadership in the next phase of its strategy:

01 Strategy-setting, leadership, and decision-making.

02 Campaign organising, membership, delivery, and action.

03 Campaign voice and communications.

As part of this commitment, ARI and OSV are partnering to implementing a two-year project aimed at accelerating their shared commitment to help foster a thriving, diverse, and united refugee rights movement led and shaped by people with lived experience so that it can effectively campaign for an asylum system that is fair, humane and effective. There are four main objectives of this project:

- Boosting progress to achieve a transition of coalition leadership to leaders with lived experience through identifying and supporting pathways to ensure a pipeline of refugee movement leaders at all levels into the future.
- Strengthening the capacity and effectiveness of OSV to support lived experience campaigners and leaders within the movement, including within the TWR coalition, and to help take forward the next phase in OSV's strategy.
- Supporting work to ensure more leadership of the TWR coalition is transferred to refugees.
- Promoting cross-movement learning from this work with other social movements in the UK and other countries to inform best practice.

[1] https://global-dialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/People-power-and-priorities_REPORT_MEX_July2023.pdf

TWR and OSV, as the co-convenors of the two-year project, advertised an open tender to commission some support from consultants to help provide a foundation to inform the project and its goals. Following the tendering process, A&M Consultancy was selected and conducted a research and consultation process to create a clear picture of:

- The current landscape of Lived Experience Leadership within the UK refugee rights movement.
- The key initiatives and strategies currently being pursued across the sector in relation to Lived Experience Leadership by OSV and other key players – and the opportunities and gaps these initiatives present for advancing Lived Experience Leadership within the TWR coalition.
- Views and ideas of lived experience activists and movement leaders – as well as other stakeholders without lived experience - on the obstacles, opportunities and strategies needed to advance Lived Experience Leadership within the movement.
- Conclusions and recommendations that will assist OSV and TWR to advance the strategic goals above and secure the transition to leadership by people with lived experience across the coalition.

The outcomes of the work for this report will provide a foundation for the project – and will be shared with OSV members and TWR coalition members, as well as other lived experience networks and groups, to inform strategies to accelerate the shift of power to leaders with lived experience.

Key Findings

A&M Consultancy conducted desk research based on existing evidence relating to Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights movement including a mapping of the past and present leadership initiatives, strategies, and support mechanisms. Between July and August 2024, A&M Consultancy also conducted consultations with people with lived experience and other stakeholders without lived experience through one-to-one interviews, focus group sessions and two surveys. More detail on the methodology adopted, and key findings from our research are set out below.

The UK refugee rights movement is committed to achieving a systemic change through Lived Experience Leadership.

People with lived experience are widely accepted in the UK refugee rights movement as bringing a unique perspective essential for meaningful change. As a result of this recognition, people with lived experience are increasingly involved in leadership roles, campaigns, and advocacy for refugees and people seeking asylum.

There are several initiatives in the current UK refugee rights movement that promote leadership development, including mentorship programmes, leadership training, and peer support. There is also an increasing emphasis on grassroots organisations, where leaders with lived experience assist others in developing their leadership skills.

Lived Experience Leadership takes many forms and is defined in a variety of ways - we need progress on all fronts

There is not one universally accepted definition of Lived Experience Leadership. Existing evidence combined with consultations with people with lived experience and other stakeholders without lived experience shows that people define the concept differently.

Some individuals define Lived Experience Leadership as the direct knowledge and expertise obtained from first-hand experiences within the asylum system. Their leadership comes from their experience overcoming the hardships and bureaucratic challenges of being refugees and people seeking asylum. Knowledge of this type provides unique

insights not available through academic or professional study. Lived experience is something that cannot be learned in school, and when advocating for policy change or helping others facing similar challenges, it carries a tremendous amount of authenticity and power.

According to others, Lived Experience Leadership encompasses more than personal expertise, it also includes social activism and community leadership. Leadership for these individuals comes from the deep connection they have developed over years of navigating systems of exclusion and discrimination. They view their role as a way to pay forward their experiences through support for those who are less experienced or 'voiceless'. Thus, leadership is a process of collective progress rather than a process of individual achievement. Based on this perspective, Lived Experience Leadership plays a vital role in promoting systemic change and social justice within diverse and marginalised communities.

Some participants expressed concern about how the concept of Lived Experience Leadership has become a buzzword in certain sectors. According to them, the term has become commodified and used as an academic or "tick box" exercise rather than being genuinely incorporated into organisational structures.

Additionally, some participants stressed the importance of balancing lived experience with "learned experience." Although lived experience provides valuable insights, it is not always sufficient for running an organisation or developing policies. In some instances, it has been advised that placing people in leadership positions solely based on their lived experience could be challenging. This does not ensure they have the skills and support necessary to succeed. This perspective emphasises that a balance between professional training and lived experience is vital for leadership positions.

The UK refugee rights movement is committed to achieving a systemic change through Lived Experience Leadership.

Although Lived Experience Leadership is gaining momentum within the UK refugee rights sector, significant systemic and structural challenges must be addressed to ensure sustainable and meaningful leadership pathways. It is crucial to implement substantial changes to organisational policies, funding structures, and cultural practices. In addition, it is

essential to shift away from tokenism towards a genuine commitment to equity and inclusion.

The findings show that tokenism is one of the most significant barriers. Including people with lived experience in strategic discussions and decision-making platforms has become more common, but their contributions are often superficial and extractive. People are often consulted for their personal stories, which are then used for fundraising or advocacy purposes rather than being invited to be part of decision-making. Consequently, some people with lived experience have become frustrated, burned out, and disengaged from the movement.

Additionally, refugees face challenges associated with structural barriers such as racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic discrimination that disproportionately affect them. People with lived experience are often excluded from traditional recruitment processes within many organisations that operate under white-dominant leadership cultures. Furthermore, the expectation that these leaders contribute voluntarily undermines their ability to commit to leadership roles fully and hinders their progression.

Burnout and re-traumatisation are common among people with lived experience who are in leadership positions, particularly those who work in environments that are connected to their personal traumas. Often, leaders with lived experiences lack the emotional and psychological support to prevent burnout and achieve their full potential. This applies especially to grassroots organisations with limited resources.

Other barriers include lack of funding and resources. Even though funders increasingly recognise the importance of Lived Experience Leadership, there is still insufficient sustained financial support for leadership development initiatives across the movement, and in a way that can support deep, long-term transition. Adequate funding is particularly problematic among grassroots organisations.

Furthermore, Lived Experience Leadership is hindered by the exclusionary power dynamics within organisations, resulting in some leaders without lived experience holding back from sharing their power, further delaying the process.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice could play a crucial role in advancing Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights movement

Findings from this research suggest that TWR alongside OSV could play a significant role in advancing Lived Experience Leadership within the UK refugee rights movement. According to consultations with people with lived experience and other stakeholders without lived experience, TWR and OSV are expected to expand their focus on creating a supportive and inclusive space for people with lived experience to lead and will advocate for their inclusion in decision-making.

This research also shows that TWR and OSV could play a significant role in bringing together fragmented initiatives within the refugee rights movement. In this way, Lived Experience Leadership programmes may be unified around a common goal, avoiding duplication of effort, and creating alignment around a common set of objectives.

For long-term success, TWR and OSV should support the promotion of cultural change within the sector, challenging structural barriers such as racism, tokenism, and colonial power dynamics. Moreover, TWR and OSV are in a strong position to advocate for systemic change, pushing for more funding and resources dedicated to community organising and campaigning in addition to the focus on service delivery. As a result of addressing structural inequalities and promoting meaningful involvement of lived experience leaders, TWR and OSV can contribute significantly to the creation of a more inclusive and effective refugee rights movement.

Recommendations to TWR and OSV for the next phase of their strategy for advancing Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights movement

More detailed recommendations with evidence can be found under Conclusions and Recommendations section.

1

Recommendation:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should promote and create inclusive and safe spaces for people with lived experience to discuss opportunities, challenges, and gaps they face during their leadership journeys.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should improve the connection and trust between national refugee and grassroots organisations to increase collaboration and build trust.

2

Recommendation:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should challenge tokenism by upscaling and further expanding meaningful involvement and representation of people with lived experience in campaign activities, governance, decision-making and team make-up and team make-up.

Together With Refugees, along with the wider refugee rights sector, should recognise the value of both lived and learned experiences in achieving systemic change.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should amplify the voices of people with lived experience to lead as spokespeople on campaigns and influence public and media narratives through focused support, training, and development.

One Strong Voice should collaborate with existing sector initiatives to ensure clear guidelines for the compensation of people with lived

experience in the campaign work of Together With Refugees and the wider refugee rights sector.

3

Recommendation:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voices should promote the implementation of cultural change within the UK refugee rights sector to recognise lived experience is fundamental to achieve systemic change.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should collaborate with existing initiatives and discussions about anti-racism, tokenism, and structural barriers within the UK refugee rights sector.

4

Recommendation:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should work with the sector stakeholders to help create better formal leadership pathways, training and mentoring for people with lived experience, particularly in campaigns and advocacy.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should call for more ring-fenced leadership roles for people with lived experience within TWR membership organisations and collaborate with the relevant stakeholders to develop a guide for organisations seeking to create ring-fenced roles.

One Strong Voice should build upon existing initiatives about redefining traditional leadership to recognise Lived Experience Leadership. One Strong Voice should prioritise redefining traditional leadership as part of their ongoing lived experience convening events.

5

Recommendation:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should promote mental health and trauma-informed initiatives and support for people with lived experience.

6

Recommendation:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should work with the sector stakeholders to help facilitate the process of developing a joint sector strategy on Lived Experience Leadership and so bring together current fragmented initiatives, promoting collaboration and learning across the membership of Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice.

One Strong Voice should significantly expand its membership to represent the wider voices and views of people with lived experience in the refugee rights movement.

7

Recommendation:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should advocate for increased funding for Lived Experience Leadership initiatives and grassroots organisations led by people with lived experience to address capacity and resource gaps across the sector.

Funders should consider strategic partnerships with cross-sector campaign convenors such as Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice to support the strategic shift to Lived Experience Leadership required in this area.

Methodology

Mapping the current landscape and lived experience initiatives and strategies

Desk research and survey

Desk research focusing on the current landscape of the UK refugee rights movement was carried out. Desk research was not limited to the UK refugee rights movement and includes literature that captures learning from other sectors on Lived Experience Leadership. The desk research included analysis of ten reports.

A mapping of the leadership initiatives, strategies, and training, both past and present was carried out via desk research. A Google form was also circulated to refugee sector organisations with the support of ARI to capture Lived Experience Leadership initiatives/support mechanisms are available within organisations. This generated 40 responses in total.

Semi-structured interviews

This report is based on semi-structured interviews done with 15 people with lived experience representing different organisations, or networks and who participated within their individual capacities. The authors also interviewed eight stakeholders without lived experience representing various organisations in the UK refugee sector. All the interviews were conducted remotely between July and August 2024.

It was important to gather diverse views and consult a wide range of stakeholders.

We sought to gather the views of:

People with and without lived experience and with diverse backgrounds

People of different genders

Refugees

People who are still in the asylum system

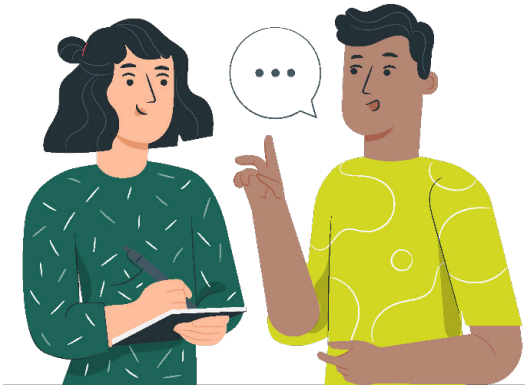
People representing grassroots organisations or groups

People representing national organisations

The authors believe prioritising grassroots voices was an important part of this research.

Interview questions

All interviewees were asked the following questions:



?	What does Lived Experience Leadership mean to you in the UK refugee rights movement and what do you think about the current landscape?
?	Could you describe your/your organisation's journey to Lived Experience Leadership and any challenges/systemic issues and opportunities you had throughout the process?
?	What key initiatives and strategies are being pursued across the sector concerning Lived Experience Leadership?
?	What are the obstacles, opportunities and strategies needed to advance Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights movement and Together With Refugees Coalition?
?	What support mechanisms are available for Lived Experience Leadership within your organisation?
?	What other support mechanisms are you aware of in the current UK refugee movement?
?	What role TWR and OSV could play in advancing Lived Experience Leadership within the UK refugee rights movement?
?	What are your recommendations to address the current challenges in Lived Experience Leadership and secure the transition to people with lived experience?

Surveys

Two separate surveys were conducted between July 7th 2024 to 7th August 2024:

One survey was aimed at people with lived experience of being a refugee or seeking asylum. This survey generated 25 complete responses suitable for analysis.

One survey was aimed at other stakeholders without lived experience. This survey generated 42 complete responses suitable for analysis

The two surveys comprised different questions, and with both consisting of both open and close-ended questions. The questions included in each survey are set out below.

Survey questions for people *with lived experience*:

01	What is your immigration status?
02	In which capacity are you participating in this survey?
03	How important is Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights movement?
04	Could you briefly describe your journey to Lived Experience Leadership and any challenges and opportunities you had throughout the process?
05	From the list of options below, could you describe the current UK refugee rights organisations' progress on embedding Lived Experience Leadership?
06	What are the obstacles to advancing Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights movement with an emphasis on campaigning leadership?
07	Are there support mechanisms available for Lived Experience Leadership within your organisation/group/network?
08	What other support mechanisms are you aware of in the current UK refugee rights movement to advance Lived Experience Leadership?
09	What role could Together with Refugees Coalition/Asylum Reform Initiative and One Strong Voice play in advancing the opportunities and gaps for advancing Lived Experience Leadership?
10	What are your recommendations to address the current challenges in Lived Experience Leadership to secure the transition to people with lived experience?

Survey questions for stakeholders *without lived experience:*

01	How important is Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights movement?
02	Could you describe your organisation's progress on embedding Lived Experience Leadership?
03	What key initiatives and strategies are being pursued across the sector concerning Lived Experience Leadership?
04	What are the obstacles to advancing Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights movement with an emphasis on campaigning leadership?
05	Are there support mechanisms available for Lived Experience Leaders within your organisation?
06	What other support mechanisms are you aware of in the current UK refugee rights movement?
07	What are the opportunities and strategies needed to advance Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights movement with an emphasis on campaigning leadership?
08	What role could Together with Refugees/One Strong Voice and the wider refugee rights movement play in advancing the opportunities and gaps for advancing Lived Experience Leadership?
09	What are your recommendations to address the current challenges in Lived Experience Leadership to secure the transition to people with lived experience?

Ethics, confidentiality, and anonymity

All the interviews were undertaken ethically with informed consent to participate. A briefing document with a clear introduction and background to the project was sent, along with written consent forms to each participant. All the interviewees were assured that their responses are anonymised by default unless prior consent was obtained to quote them in the final report.

The authors of the report provided assurances relating to the confidentiality of the interview process and data protection before starting every interview. Both the surveys were anonymous, and no email addresses were collected. We believe it is important for the respondents to share their honest views and opinions.

The work was overseen by a steering group consisting of three representatives from the OSV network and two representatives from the ARI core team.

Upon completion of the first draft, we consulted with an external panel of three people representing UK refugee sector organisations. As a result, they provided feedback and suggestions on the report and its recommendations.

Findings

Existing evidence base

A&M Consultancy conducted a literature review focusing on Lived Experience Leadership and further explored the current landscape, strategies, initiatives, and barriers to the UK refugee rights movement.

The existing evidence base suggests a growing recognition of the importance of Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights movement. People with lived experience can offer credibility, authenticity, and profound insight into issues that impact them.

The unique perspectives and experiences of people with lived experience are considered essential to creating impactful and positive solutions for refugee communities. This has led to a focus on increasing lived experience representation in leadership and other senior roles within the refugee rights movement.

Lived Experience Leadership actively advocates for societal change, including a change in government policy. The perspectives of people with lived experience add credibility, authenticity, and a depth of understanding to discussions about issues that affect them directly.

While Lived Experience Leadership is increasingly recognised, significant structural and systemic challenges must be addressed before it becomes integral to the movement.

These structural and systemic challenges are currently leading to:

01 Power imbalances

02 exclusionary decision-making

03 lack of equity within organisational structures and bureaucratic processes

04 unconscious bias

05 lack of inclusive policies

This is further exacerbated by systemic discrimination that is present within society as a whole and also exists within the UK refugee rights sector, such as racism, sexism, and other forms of exclusion.

As a result, there are a number of challenges to overcome, including lack of leadership opportunities, insufficient organisational support, and ongoing discrimination within the sector.

These factors, in addition to the challenging political and social context, prevent the advancement of Lived Experience Leadership and often cause the burnout of people with lived experience.

Overall, while there is momentum behind Lived Experience Leadership within the UK refugee rights sector, significant challenges still define the landscape. The UK refugee rights sector needs to develop sustained efforts on an organisational and systemic level, which will include changes to policies, funding structures, and cultural practices.

Current Lived Experience Initiatives and strategies based on existing evidence base

Lived experience is an essential form of expertise needed to achieve systemic and policy change

There is growing recognition within the refugee rights movement that lived experience is a form of unique expertise that cannot be replaced with other forms of expertise. Many leadership initiatives and strategies are being pursued across the refugee rights movement. These include a growing recognition that Lived Experience Leadership is a catalyst for policy change and advancing leadership more widely among refugees and people seeking asylum. This process requires:

- formal and structured leadership development programmes,
- media training,
- coaching and mentorship,
- grassroots leadership initiatives, and
- career development and professional growth.

A list of Lived Experience Leadership initiatives, training and mentorship programmes are listed in Appendix 1.

In addition to formal initiatives and support mechanisms, such as leadership training programmes, informal support mechanisms, peer support, and mentorship have become popular and beneficial for leadership development. This is especially the case for grassroots organisations, where leaders with lived experience support other people with lived experience at a community level to become leaders and create solidarity and resilience among them. Above all, there is growing momentum among people with lived experience to pursue Lived Experience Leadership pathways and play a leading role in the UK refugee rights sector. More people with lived experience are leading strategic discussions about shifting power to them and holding the sector organisations accountable for playing their role in achieving this crucial aim.

Emerging conversations about racism, discrimination and power dynamics

Shifting power to people with lived experience within the refugee rights sector entails difficult but essential conversations around addressing power dynamics, racism, discrimination, tokenism and rigid structures within charity organisations. There are emerging conversations and initiatives on these key topics in the UK refugee rights sector. For example, Refugee Action is focusing on tackling racism in the UK asylum system. Refugee Council is working on a pilot project about developing career pathways and progression for staff and volunteers with lived experience. For more details please refer to **Appendix 1**.

An increasing number of organisations within the refugee rights sector currently focus on creating employment opportunities for people with lived experience. This includes some organisations using the creation of ring-fenced roles for them to pursue their leadership pathways more effectively. This is only one part of an overall strategy and needs further development, including clearer employment law advice the sector as a whole can draw on. However, this approach presents one opportunity for the movement to harness unique lived experience expertise, increase diversity within staff teams and shift the power to leaders with lived experience by recruiting more individuals with lived experience to leadership positions.

Leaders with Lived Experience challenging media narratives

Negative media narratives about refugees and people seeking asylum have been a major issue in the UK for many years. One impactful way to address this issue is by giving people with lived experience the opportunity to become media spokespeople so that they can challenge these false and negative stereotypes. There has been an increased number of spokespeople with lived experience talking about refugee issues to broader audiences.

However, with training and support, there is an opportunity for more leaders with lived experience to become media spokespeople and to play a key role by being their own

advocates and spokespersons with the capability and confidence to represent themselves in the media.

Equitable funding practices to advance Lived Experience Leadership

Funders have increased their contributions to Lived Experience Leadership development. This includes unrestricted funding for small, grassroots organisations, which can enable people with lived experience to step into leadership roles by dedicating time and resources to their development. This is also an opportunity for funders and the refugee rights sector to collaborate and shift their mindset away from traditional funding practices and ensure leaders with lived experience play a central role in achieving systemic change.

Funding trusts and foundations have increased their contributions to Lived Experience Leadership development. This includes unrestricted funding for refugee sector organisations, including grassroots organisations, which can enable people with lived experience to step into leadership roles by dedicating time and resources to their development. However, it is important that such funding also supports leadership transitions in cross-sector, strategic initiatives not limited to grassroots organisations.

This is also an opportunity for funders and the refugee rights sector to collaborate and shift their mindset away from traditional funding practices and ensure leaders with lived experience play a central role in achieving systemic, cross-sector change.

Tokenism and limited influence

One of the main barriers for people with lived experience during their leadership journeys is still tokenism. While they are more involved in strategic discussions and invited to join committees and different decision-making platforms nowadays, there is a concern that their involvement is sometimes superficial, rather than meaningful. There are still instances where people with lived experience are often involved in a consultative capacity, and there is a big focus on them sharing their personal stories and experiences, which are often leveraged for fundraising and advocacy purposes. This focus on identity and experience is reductive and neglects the fact that lived experience is also a form of knowledge and expertise. This leads to feelings of exploitation among many lived experience leaders, and potential leaders.

A tokenistic approach undermines the meaningful involvement of leaders with lived experience and affects their confidence and agency in the decision-making process. Frustration caused by given titles without the corresponding authority leads to burnout and disempowerment. The ongoing existence of tokenistic approaches is likely to undermine Lived Experience Leadership development, by causing a loss of trust among those with lived experience in the refugee movement, leading them to disengage.

Structural barriers

While progress has been made in promoting Lived Experience Leadership, significant structural barriers remain in the current UK refugee rights sector. Structural inequalities, which can be observed in many different areas, are not always intentional but significantly affect people's progress to leadership roles.

Refugees and people seeking asylum are disproportionately affected by racism, sexism, and other forms of structural inequality and discrimination. Often, structural barriers are replicated in inequitable recruitment processes, which discriminate against people with lived experience.

Some organisations still use traditional recruitment processes that place greater value on certain types of experience and qualifications and operate under white-dominated leadership cultures that may unconsciously exclude individuals from different

backgrounds or experiences. In this case, it results in a bias toward other candidates who do not have lived experience, but who are perceived to be more capable, qualified, and experienced than those with lived experience. Therefore, it creates an additional burden on people with lived experience to prove their suitability for leadership roles. This approach prevents them from becoming involved in key decision-making processes within organisations and gaining access to senior positions.

In many cases, people with lived experience are expected to contribute their insights on a voluntary basis, which limits their ability to devote themselves fully to leadership roles. In addition, there are limited opportunities for leaders with lived experience to move from volunteer or entry-level positions to more senior leadership positions. Many people feel unsupported as they advance in their careers because there are no structured leadership pathways. Therefore, many people with lived experience stay in entry-level positions despite their qualifications and potential.

Existing literature on Lived Experience Leadership also identifies issues concerning organisational culture and the lack of strategic approach to supporting individuals during their leadership journeys. Leadership development often occurs as a byproduct of other programmes or ad-hoc initiatives. This approach sometimes leaves formal leadership support and training gaps, particularly in smaller, community-led organisations.

Inadequate line management and lack of formal leadership development for line managers are other concerns that often create power-sharing issues and leave a gap in support for those transitioning into leadership roles. While many organisations claim to support Lived Experience Leadership, there is sometimes little accountability when it comes to actually sharing power.

Burnout and re-traumatisation

Many individuals with lived experience working in leadership positions experience high levels of stress due to various factors, including structural barriers and psychological impacts of working in an environment that is closely tied to their personal experiences of trauma, and exacerbated by the hostile political environment.

There is a bias towards the expertise of people with lived experience, and they may feel the need to continually prove their value or navigate complex dynamics within the refugee rights sector. Many of them end up taking on multiple roles and responsibilities, which puts a great deal of pressure on them.

Emotional burnout is more significant for those in under-resourced settings such as grassroots organisations. The lack of emotional support is not only harmful to people's

well-being, but it also exacerbates the gap in current leadership development programmes and prevents individuals from reaching their full potential.

Barriers to accessing funding

Funding remains a significant challenge for promoting Lived Experience Leadership. Organisations often need more financial resources to support individuals with lived experience in leadership roles adequately.

Many organisations still face challenges in securing the resources needed to develop leadership pathways. Although funders increasingly recognise the importance of Lived Experience Leadership, this has not yet translated into sufficient financial support for Lived Experience Leadership development initiatives across the movement.

Small grassroots organisations led by people with lived experience particularly struggle to secure the funding needed to sustain their initiatives, which limits grassroots leaders' ability to take part in sector-wide discussions and access the resources they need to grow.

Consultations with stakeholders with and without lived experience

Between July and August 2024, A&M Consultancy conducted semi-structured interviews with people with lived experience and other stakeholders without lived experience to explore their views and ideas on the obstacles, opportunities and strategies needed to advance Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights sector.

Two surveys were conducted for the two audiences mentioned above, representing different national and grassroots organisations as well as leaders and activists from the refugee rights movement in the UK.

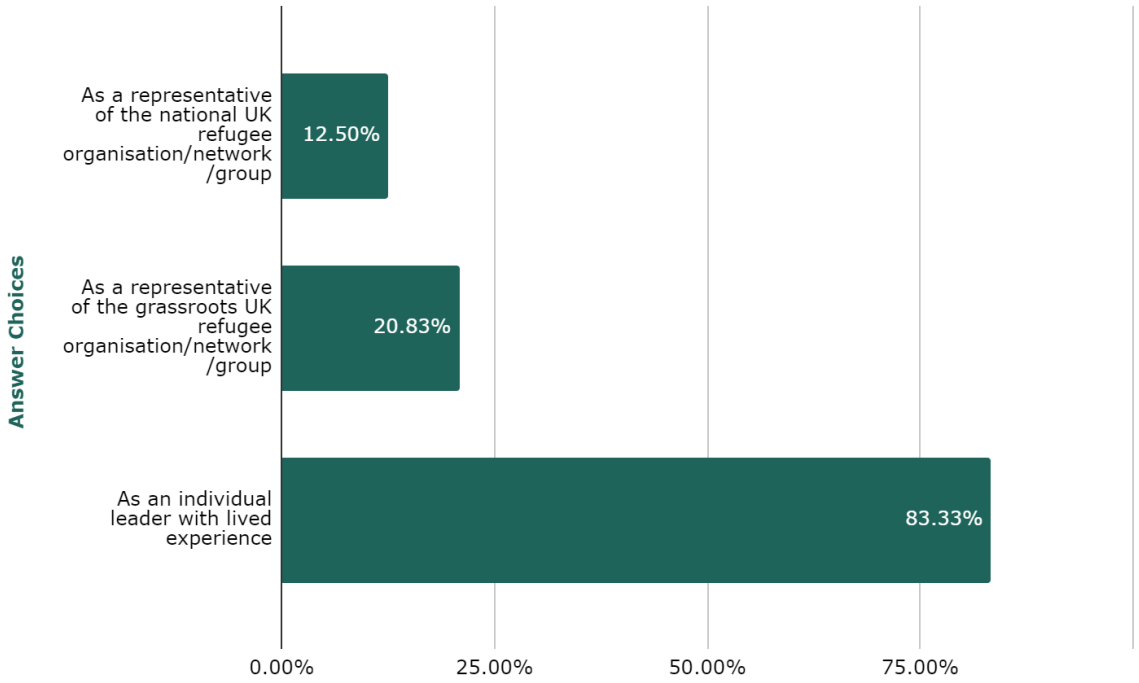


Figure 1 - Bar chart showing in which capacity people with lived experience completed the survey.

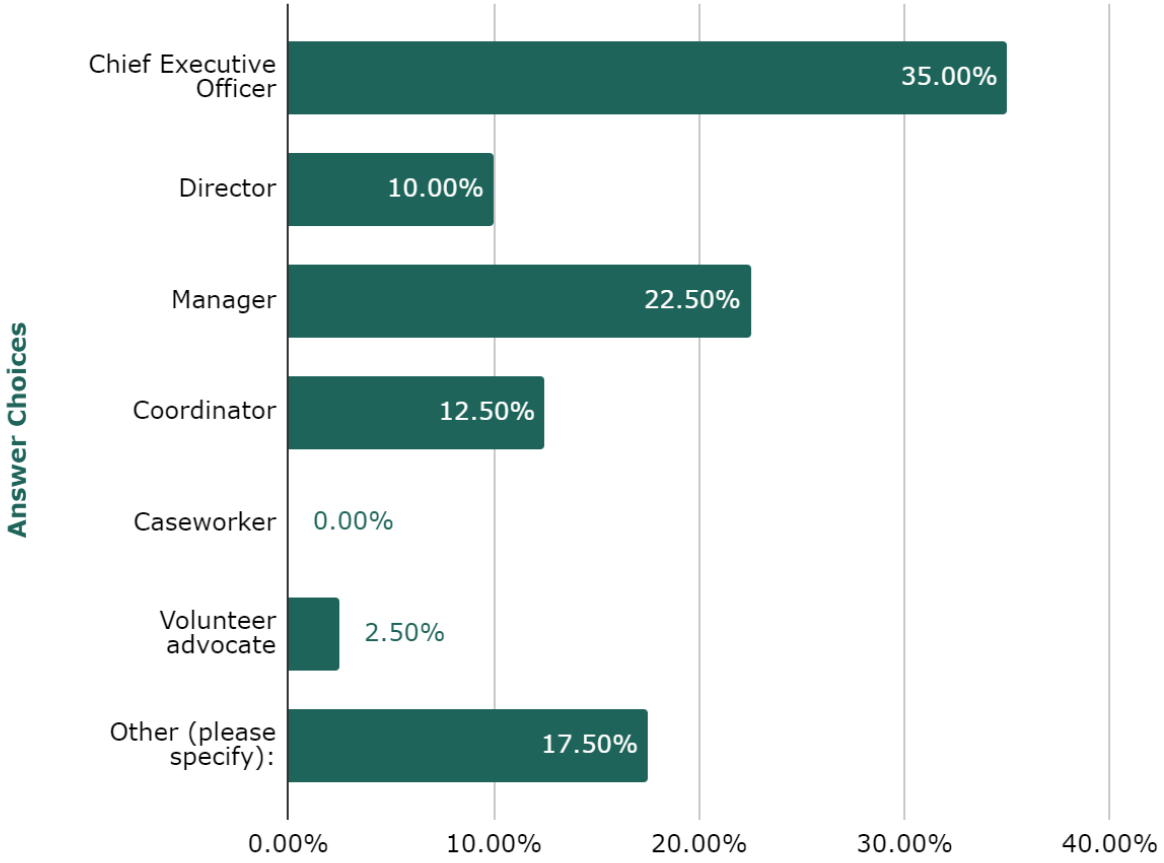


Figure 2 - Bar chart showing in which capacity stakeholders without lived experience completed the survey.

Other respondents:

Member of Council
Co-Director
PhD Researcher
Research Lead
Chair of Trustees
Chair of trustees and founder
Advocacy Officer

The reason for having separate sections for individuals with lived experience and stakeholders without lived experience in the main findings is to capture the similarities and differences in their views and perspectives due to their unique circumstances.

Areas of discussion that emerged from the interviews included:		
Analysis of the current landscape in the refugee rights movement	ARI/TWR and OSV's role in advancing opportunities and addressing gaps in support for Lived Experience Leadership	Recommendations and ways forward

The findings are set out thematically, exploring the current state of Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights sector, existing Lived Experience Leadership initiatives strategies and support mechanisms, barriers gaps and challenges to advancing Lived Experience Leadership, and the role of TWR and OSV in advancing Lived Experience Leadership going forward. The perspectives of people with lived experience and those without lived experience are set out separately, to ensure the perspectives of each of these groups are fully explored, and to allow for similar and contrasting views to be identified.

Perspectives of people with lived experience

Where are we now?

Participants in the consultations shared their views on what Lived Experience Leadership means to them and highlighted its importance in the UK refugee rights movement. According to them, Lived Experience Leadership is not limited to firsthand experiences or identity but is also a form of knowledge, skill set, and expertise. Through it, people can effectively convey their realities and challenges and campaign for change.

> *What does live experience leadership mean to me? I have undergone a lot of challenges such as homelessness, destitution, and racism. With time, I have built resilience and developed qualities of showing compassion, patience, care, and leadership skills. I have learned to inhabit that, which has made me stronger.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 1

They also think there is an increased number of leaders with lived experience, grassroots organisations, and Lived Experience Leadership initiatives aiming to embed lived experience at many levels in refugee organisations, from policy-making to daily operations and building more equitable and effective organisational systems.

Interviewees highlighted the growing interest in Lived Experience Leadership among organisations, including national and grassroots organisations, local authorities, and others. These organisations often consult with people with lived experience to learn and improve their practices.

> *I think it has a long way to go, but I am happy to see that there is a momentum towards it, like there is a movement towards trying to increase Lived Experience Leadership.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 3

Participants with lived experience highlighted that Lived Experience Leadership is fundamental to the success of a refugee rights movement and the achievement of systemic change. They stressed that involvement in the refugee sector involves more than just being consulted; it also involves developing and implementing campaigns, advocacy, and policy changes.

> *Lived experience involvement is not a project. It is a journey and you need to treat it in that way. If you treat it as a project with a beginning, middle and end, it never happens.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 6

> *Why is it important to me? We have first-hand experience that allows us to campaign and advocate for policies that affect us and to ensure organisations that are working with refugees are not just speaking for refugees but including them in the conversations.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience

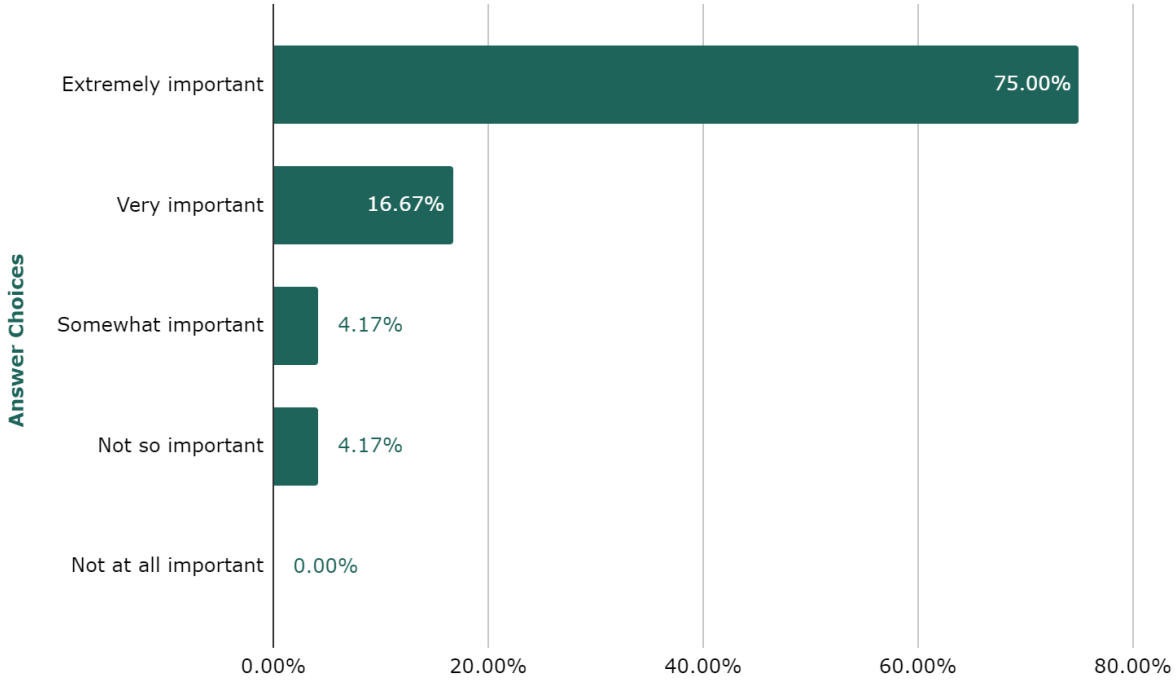


Figure 3 - Bar chart showing how respondents with lived experience consider the importance of Lived Experience Leadership

Participants with lived experience highlighted that increased focus on Lived Experience Leadership has opened opportunities for natural leadership when leaders can explore their leadership styles and gain the trust and reputation of the communities they serve. Some people may be naturally gifted with leadership qualities, while others might have the potential to become leaders. Leadership programmes are essential for increasing confidence and developing personal strengths.

Lived Experience Leadership initiatives have also increased opportunities for meaningful involvement in the movement, including the opportunity to design campaigns, shape policies, and provide input into projects to bring about systemic change.

> *If I talk about the opportunities you can be given as a person with lived experience, there is the opportunity to advocate for policy change, we can actively participate with policy makers or any organisation about the change we want to see in the political policies made for people seeking asylum, and then forming alliances with other social justice movements can amplify our impact of refugees or people seeking asylum, and we can promote solidarity with other sectors.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 5

Many participants with lived experience thought that their natural leadership style was influenced by their hardships throughout the asylum process. They explained that these prepared them for leadership by teaching them patience, resilience, and the ability to navigate complex systems. Difficult experiences often lead to further motivation and determination to pursue leadership and advocate for people in similar situations. Existing leadership opportunities were the cornerstone for many leaders to transform the frustrations caused by the asylum system into practical actions for change.

Participants with lived experience discussed the importance of the support they received from their colleagues and other leaders with lived experience throughout their leadership journeys. People often gained confidence in their leadership abilities due to the trust and appreciation they receive from their line managers. Networking with other leaders with lived experience also inspired and empowered them to generate more ideas and overcome obstacles.

> *If you asked the question a few years ago about Lived Experience Leadership, I would have said, what does that mean? In the last couple of years, there have been so many reports and so many activities and events happening on this issue. I participated in a leadership programme, which actually opened my eyes about what leadership means, including my leadership style and approach on that. So, I am learning more and more on that. But you know, as I learn, I understand the importance of leadership, and what we say about leadership on that as well.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 3

With a growing number of leaders with lived experience in the refugee movement, interviewees discussed the possibility of creating more inclusive spaces and practices within organisations. Participants felt that this approach would contribute to embedding Lived Experience Leadership into organisational practices and decision-making.

> *We have set up a lived experience group to inform that because we do not want the office to be unwelcoming for our staff, and it needs to be welcoming for refugees as well. So, we have put in a bit of a pause in all our procedures. So, when we plan a major project or something, then we slow down and ask, what is the refugee involvement in this?*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 7

> *What's the purpose of this leadership? That's an important element. I think we need to be in every space. "Home Office" includes only two words, but it is huge. There are civil servants, there are politicians and all other stakeholders. That's the purpose, like Lived Experience Leadership; you need to be in every space to talk about the lived experience aspect of this. We need to be open. We shouldn't say no to any opportunity that may be meaningful and purposefully creating some good outcome.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 4

The number of organisations led by and for refugees has increased in the UK refugee rights sector, as referred to in the **Appendix 1** section of the report. Some grassroots organisations consulted during this research were represented by a majority of staff members with lived experience. They expressed the view that a significant number of staff members with lived experience is essential for a power shift and for creating best practices in the refugee movement.

Those leaders who are currently leading grassroots refugee organisations said that Lived Experience Leadership projects and initiatives played a crucial role in helping them gain the confidence and skills needed to establish their organisations. Creating new organisations and a network of people with lived experience further empowered the leaders and opened new opportunities and momentum for change.

Participants with lived experience described their leadership journeys as relatively lengthy processes involving firsthand experiences, qualities, skills, existing opportunities, and support mechanisms. According to the participants with lived experience who were interviewed, it is essential to take a multifaceted approach and to represent lived experience voices on various platforms, not only within the UK refugee charity sector.

> *It was a huge opportunity for me to open my eyes, make my network, gain my confidence. As a result of that, I get some technical advice from organisations about how to set up a charity or social enterprise. Those programmes helped me. It is just like creating and designing a new service and also learning how to address barriers. I am very happy to see that charities are interested and listening to us.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 3

> *For me, being a leader is similar to travelling. One has to leave your fears, your insecurities, and everything that you doubt about yourself because if you carry it with you, it pulls you back from ever meeting people, and it leaves you wanting home and begging for home. It takes time, but you are doing the right thing for the group because you care for another person. The bonus of the situation is that when you leave yourself last, you see the landscape much clearer and people much clearer for what they are.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 8

While acknowledging positive changes, there are a number of challenges that people with lived experience encounter during their leadership journey. People with lived experience face systemic barriers that limit their ability to fully participate in leadership roles. These include:

Tokenism	Re-traumatisation	Racism and discrimination	The persistent perception of refugees as vulnerable individuals rather than as assets who can contribute to refugee movement growth

Most participants think that the term “Lived Experience Leadership” has become a “buzzword” or too “academized” in the UK refugee rights movement, which can strip it of its authenticity and power. Over-intellectualising lived experience can distance it from the grassroots and reduce it to a topic of study rather than a lived reality.

Below graph highlights the current progress in Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights sector according to the participants with lived experience.

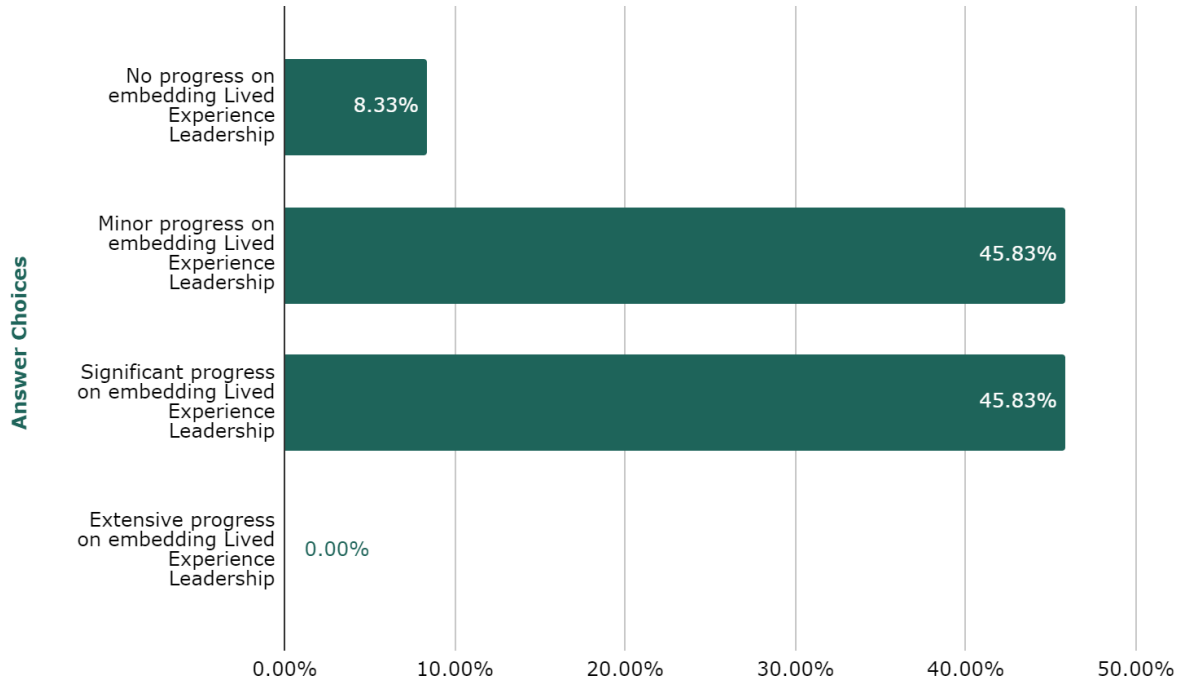


Figure 4 - Bar chart showing the current progress in Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights sector according to the participants with lived experience.

Key Lived Experience Leadership initiatives, strategies, and support mechanisms

Most interviewees were aware of or part of some key strategies and support mechanisms in the UK refugee rights movement. However, their knowledge of these initiatives was limited to their own organisations or network.

Training and mentoring

Training and development programmes related to Lived Experience Leadership were discussed in a positive light during the interviews. Leaders with lived experience explained that they had had opportunities to attend training where they were able to develop their public speaking, advocacy, and media engagement skills. Information gathered through interviews suggests that many organisations also offer mentoring programmes where emerging leaders can collaborate with experienced leaders and gain new skills and confidence.

> *We can be barriers to ourselves when we do not own our expertise. So what do we do? We need to own that belief in ourselves. And I know this is not easy. So, it is crucial to encourage experienced people to have, peer support, to have mentors who are people with lived experience, who are thriving, who are doing amazing work in their sector, or whatever they are doing.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 8

Stakeholders with lived experience explained that some organisations are restructuring their governance models to ensure the inclusivity of leaders with lived experience as part of boards and decision-making platforms. According to them, this approach ensures organisational strategy change at all levels through the meaningful involvement of leaders with lived experience.

> *I allocate time to meet with lived experience board members periodically, especially ahead of board meetings, and discuss key decisions with them so they know what we are deciding. So, they do not feel like they are passengers around that table and that they can put in an objective challenge to me and others as well.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 7

Stakeholders with lived experience thought that there was already comprehensive knowledge about Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee movement and that it is crucial to pause, explore and take practical and bold steps.

> *Now we are at a stage where we are working towards creating the conditions to enable us to achieve Lived Experience Leadership. Is it an easy process? It is, it is not. So, I believe that commitments at the top are essential, and I believe that we need to be brave to ask for change. We have been talking a lot about lived experience for many years already. So, we need to do a lot of actions, learn, review and redo and learn from the mistakes.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 4

Stakeholders with lived experience explained that even with limited funding, grassroots organisations still offer some opportunities for leaders with lived experience, such as supporting the growth of lived experience campaign groups and women's groups and amplifying their voices through media campaigns and public speaking.

Opportunities for career growth

The interviewees discussed some progress in improving opportunities for career growth for leaders with lived experience and noted that there has been a shift from creating only entry-level roles that are increasingly available to refugees. However, leaders thought that more emphasis should be placed on creating structured career development opportunities, which is essential for advancing Lived Experience Leadership beyond project coordination roles. Interviewees explained that to ensure digital inclusion, organisations should provide practical tools such as laptops, internet access, and mobile phones to make it easier for leaders to perform their jobs effectively and to remain in touch with the digital world.

> *Whoever is joining us ends up with a laptop. You need to give them one of these internet boxes as well because if someone else is connecting through high speed fibre, why shouldn't somebody else in asylum accommodation not have access to that?*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 7

Interviewees discussed the fact that some organisations take a more holistic approach and support individuals professionally throughout their leadership journey, but also

refer individuals to appropriate services and provide continuous support. Interviewees explained that taking this approach ensures refugees receive both professional and personal support.

> *One of the initiatives is looking at post-granted refugees working on their immediate integration, having those foundations, having that forum, that group to talk to within whilst they are working, whether it is part-time or full time. There are funding opportunities for most of our activities for queer asylum seekers with mental health as well as workforce and ingenuity workshops every 2/3 quarters.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 9

Interviewees spoke about the importance of mental health support, referring to several organisations that offer mental health services to help refugees and people seeking asylum deal with the trauma by accessing counselling, therapies, and other mental health support projects.

The importance of both lived and learnt experience

While discussing key strategies, initiatives, and opportunities for advancing Lived Experience Leadership, people with lived experience highlighted the role of both leaders with lived experience and other stakeholders. According to the interviewees, while promoting Lived Experience Leadership, it is essential to avoid isolating the concept from other leadership qualities, and to value the engagement of those leaders who do not have lived experience, but are passionate about refugee rights and share their expertise with leaders with lived experience supporting them through their leadership journeys.

> *Lived experience is very important, but there are also people in the British communities with good skills, good management skills, such as running projects. We need to identify that they have many skills and do not have lived experience, but they want to promote refugee causes. So, for us, the first kind of support we get from these communities without lived experience is crucial.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 9

Below is the breakdown of the support mechanisms to advance Lived Experience Leadership according to the survey respondents with people with lived experience.

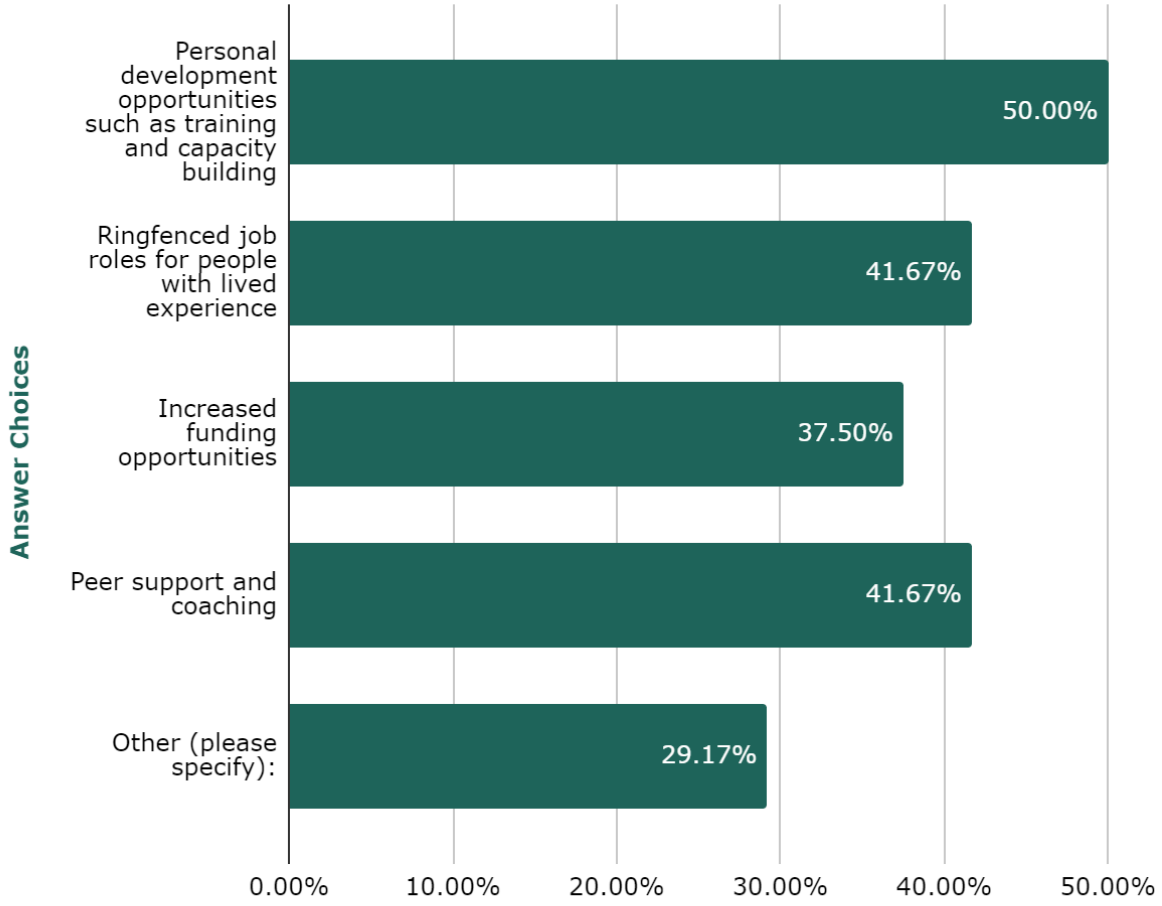


Figure 5 - Bar chart showing breakdown of existing support mechanisms to advance Lived Experience Leadership according to survey respondents with lived experience.

Barriers, challenges, and gaps to advancing Lived Experience Leadership

In addition to analysing existing evidence, to better understand the current Lived Experience Leadership landscape, it was also important to speak directly to leaders and activists with lived experience regarding the obstacles they encounter when pursuing Lived Experience Leadership opportunities.

Information gathered through interviews and surveys suggests that despite having access to multiple initiatives and strategies related to Lived Experience Leadership, people still face various barriers that require multifaceted approaches and resources to overcome.

Power-sharing

According to interviewees, power dynamics and issues associated with power-sharing continue to significantly affect the development of Lived Experience Leadership in the refugee rights movement.

Initiatives such as creating ring-fenced roles and creating senior leadership positions are still at a limited scale. While most interviewees highlighted the importance of mutual collaboration between leaders with and without lived experience, they noted that the leadership within many organisations is dominated by people without lived experience, limiting access to leadership roles for people with lived experience, which in turn limits their ability to influence decisions.

Interviewees with lived experience explained that some leaders without lived experience in the refugee sector are reluctant to share power with people with lived experience, fearing the loss of control, and that this reluctance is a barrier to meaningfully involving people in decision-making.

> *The power is concentrated within the sector, within the leadership of the sector. Most of the leadership has no lived experience. In crucial positions, like managers, project leads, or heads of departments and others, most don't have lived experience. My analysis is that people struggle to share the feeling that their power is being taken away. If there is no balance between learnt experience and lived experience, we cannot move things forward accordingly.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 4

> *What I want to highlight here is that the moment you start seeing these changes, mainly at the grassroots, more roles are becoming available for people with lived experience. However, there is not much going on when you look at the senior managers and teams of big organisations.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 10

Interviewees also highlighted that training and support for stakeholders without lived experience would be crucial to addressing power dynamics and increasing their compassion towards leaders with lived experience.

> *The manager would have no sensitivity or training or awareness of who is a leader with lived experience. They need some training so the managers are more sensitive and compassionate to the lived experience experts they've got in their organisation.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 2

Recruitment processes and career development

According to stakeholders with lived experience, many leadership opportunities include complex application processes and requirements preventing those with lived experience from applying. Furthermore, some people with lived experience do not possess adequate language skills and expertise, which exacerbates this issue.

> *The barrier was that the application was long and complex. There were so many words I did not understand. I would not have gone through with that application if someone had not encouraged me. So, applications, or, you know, opportunities, can be done depending on how they are placed before a person with lived experience because that could be a barrier.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 8

Existing biases related to the perception of vulnerability of people with lived experience also often act as a barrier for people seeking to gain access to leadership roles. 45% of survey participants with lived experience thought that there is a stigma about people with lived experience being less capable and always vulnerable, which is a significant barrier to advancing Lived Experience Leadership.

> *One big issue within the sector is that they tend to treat us as vulnerable all the time. We are being looked at from a vulnerable perspective, rather than an asset, to build our organisations on, and to direct all our energies from services to campaigns to partnering with other organisations. So, there is lots of work to be done in our sector*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 4

> *By creating that obstacle of vulnerability, they are not even creating opportunities for people. Yes, people are vulnerable, but also people are capable. Vulnerability does not remove a skill, does not remove the capability of people to do the job and to do work, and also to think for themselves and to come up with a solution for the problem that people are going through challenges.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 4

Some leaders highlighted that limited pathways to senior campaigns and advocacy roles in large charity organisations often create another barrier: lack of communication between large and grassroots organisations, especially in campaigns and advocacy work. This can lead to gaps in campaigning and advocacy work, or lead to an extractive dynamic between large charities and grassroots organisations.

> *That is important because it would enable us to dissolve this gap between senior campaigners and what is happening at the grassroots. They do not have communication often. If there is a lived experience senior manager in those settings, they would be able to communicate and know the issues of the grassroots, what barriers people are facing, and what they need to do to address them.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 8

Support and well-being

Interviewees pointed to the fact that inadequate access to mental health support still remains one of the existing barriers to Lived Experience Leadership. Interviewees explained that negative experiences of the asylum process combined with multiple

obstacles related to their personal and work lives hampers people's ability to pursue their leadership aspirations. Certain groups, such as women, are particularly affected, considering their multiple responsibilities and circumstances.

> *You come into the country. Your mental health is not looked after. You are already in the asylum process. You are re-traumatised by your housing situation. You have to choose, as a woman, whether to go for your antenatal or eat healthy food because the bus passes have gone up. You are living on little or no money. There is so much responsibility on you. You do not have free bus passes because you live 2.9 miles and not three miles from your child's school. So many things can be a barrier for anyone with lived experience to go into a leadership journey.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 8

Tokenism

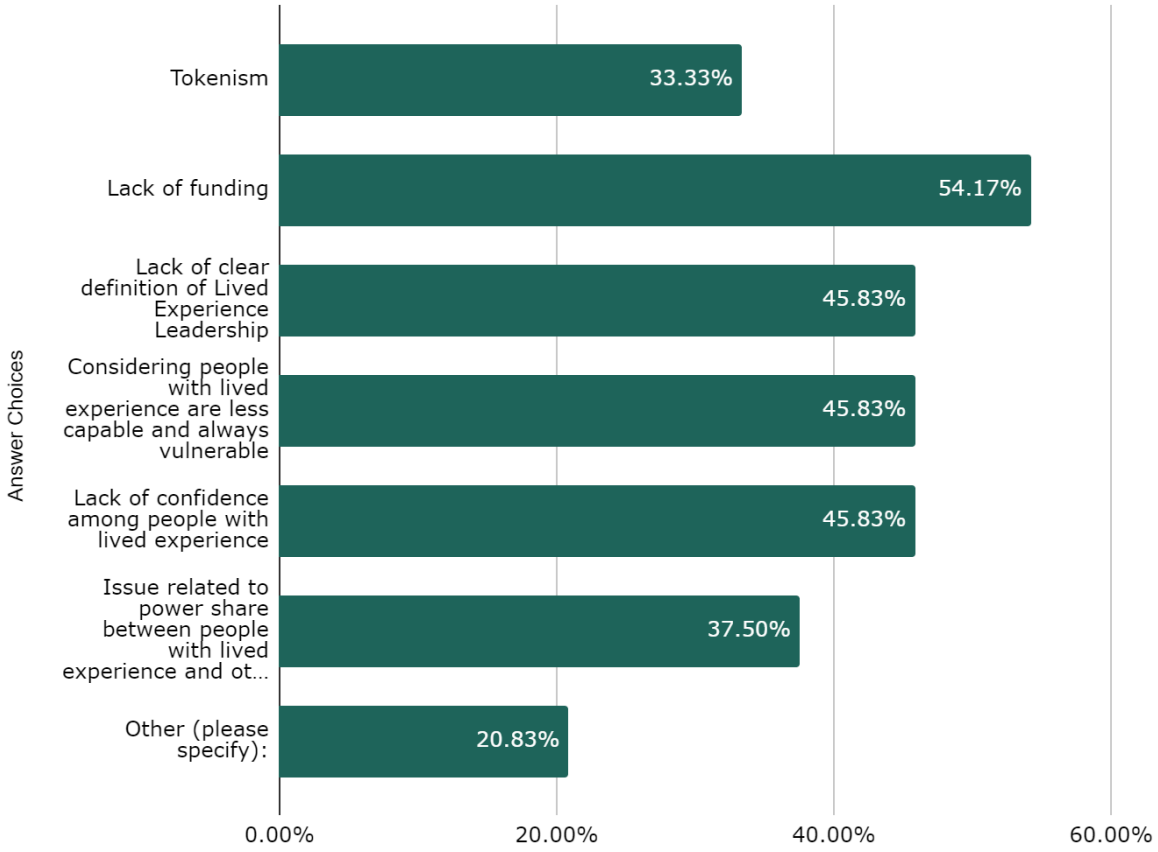
33% of survey respondents with lived experience think that the Lived Experience Leadership initiatives can be extractive and tokenistic, with few genuine opportunities for refugees to shape organisational decisions in meaningful ways. While survey respondents acknowledged the growing emphasis on involving people with lived experience, this often happens at lower levels as part of the project rather than in strategic platforms.

> *Currently, everybody is talking about lived experience because it is appealing for funders as well. But the question is, are they doing it correctly? Then, the answer will be no. Some are better than others, but overall, it is mostly tokenistic.*
>
> – Participant with lived experience 10

Funding

People with lived experience who responded to the survey mentioned lack of funding as one of the barriers to Lived Experience Leadership. Grassroots organisations particularly face this issue, which creates a gap in developing and promoting Lived Experience Leadership within them.

The graph below shows the percentage breakdown of the barriers and obstacles faced by people with lived experience while pursuing Lived Experience Leadership.



Other barriers:

- Lack of networks
- Seen as less capable
- Limited to entry job roles

Figure 6 - Bar chart showing obstacles to advancing Lived Experience Leadership according to respondents with lived experience.

Perspectives of stakeholders without lived experience

Where are we now?

Based on one-on-one interviews and survey responses, we have gathered views and insights from 50 stakeholders without lived experience altogether. The data gathered clearly show that the journey to achieving Lived Experience Leadership within each organisation is unique. Organisations have overcome their own set of complexities, gaps, and challenges that are specific to each organisation's context. They have made progress in the following areas:

01 Involving people with lived experience in co-designing and co-delivering campaign work

02 Involving them in organisational decision-making processes

03 Recruiting people with lived experience in entry-level and senior staff positions

04 Recruiting people with lived experience for trustee boards

Despite the progress, there is room for improvement in fully integrating Lived Experience Leadership at the top levels. The interviews identified tokenism, systemic issues, trauma, and funding constraints as barriers and challenges to advancing Lived Experience Leadership.

Recognising the importance of Lived Experience Leadership has been the fundamental turning point for most of the organisations consulted. As shown in figure 5 below, 78% of survey respondents consider Lived Experience Leadership to be “extremely important,” while only 8% consider it to be “somewhat important”.

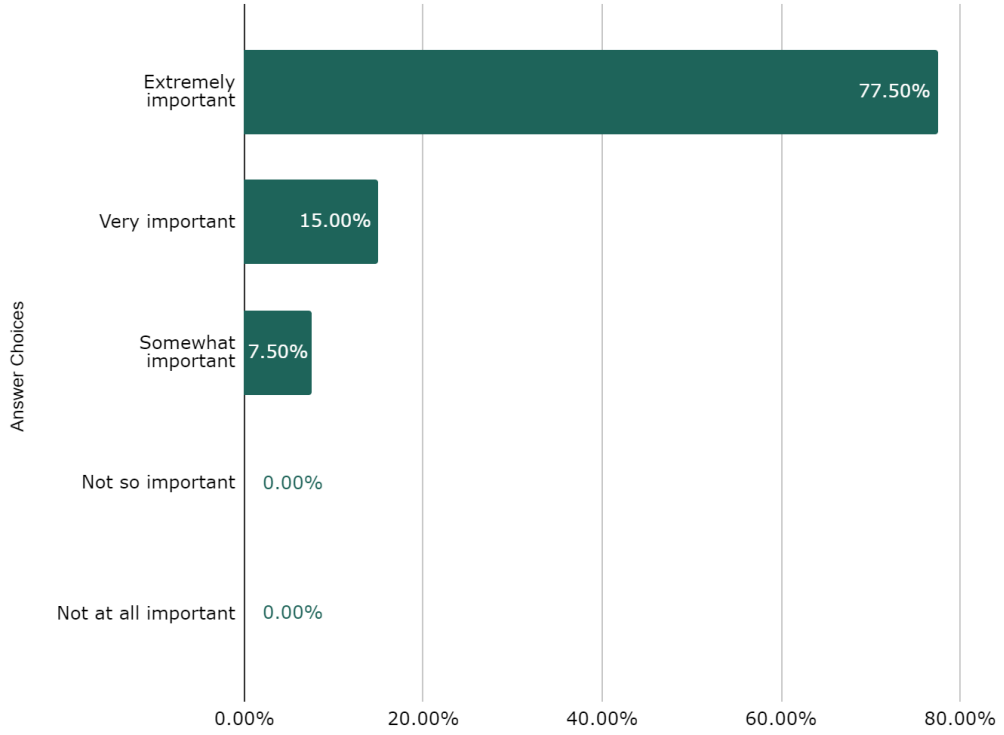


Figure 7 – Bar chart showing perspectives of stakeholders without lived experience, when asked: 'How important is Lived Experience Leadership?'

All stakeholders without lived experience considered there is a growing willingness in the current UK refugee rights movement to support Lived Experience Leadership. The UK refugee sector has evolved in the last two decades. Organisations and funders have increased their focus on creating more support mechanisms and funding opportunities. Many organisations have enhanced their recruitment practices and have employed more people with lived experience and ring-fence roles.

While acknowledging the importance of storytelling, interviewees explained that the sector has focused more on power-sharing with people with lived experience so that they can pursue their leadership journeys more effectively. One interviewee explained that going forward, there is a clear need for lived experience leaders to participate in shaping campaign strategies.

> *I think the current landscape, as I understand it, is that there is very broad acceptance of the need to move forward in Lived Experience Leadership. So, there is increasing opportunity and even encouragement for people with lived experience to participate, not necessarily in leadership roles. Going forward, as strategies are developed, people with lived experience will shape*

those strategies. They should be integral to everything and place huge value on lived experience.

– Participant without lived experience 1

> *I would say that things are shifting where organisations are moving away from thinking that meaningful engagement with refugees in kind of organisational activities such as getting their feedback by asking them to fill a form or like getting people to go and speak at schools, but not having them in the management structure of organisations and in decision-making roles.*

– Participant without lived experience 2

When discussing the concept of Lived Experience Leadership, some organisations focused on the creation of opportunities and removing barriers for people with lived experience. Some described working on shifting away from storytelling to decision-making and equal partnership between lived and learnt experiences.

Other organisations described prioritising support mechanisms where people with lived experience play a central role in establishing the organisational strategy and overseeing its implementation. Overall, organisations consulted were at various stages of their Lived Experience Leadership journeys and this was clear in the survey responses as well.

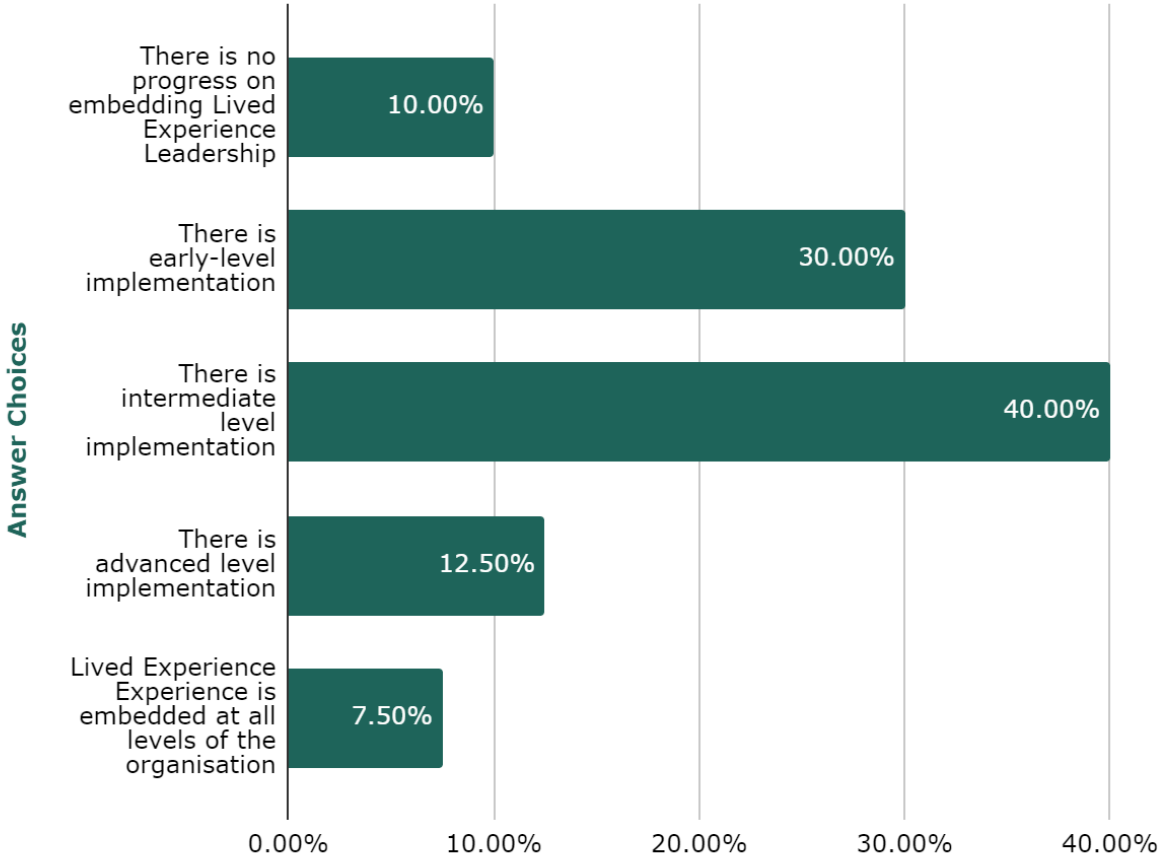


Figure 8 - Bar chart showing when asked from stakeholders without lived experience: 'organisation's progress in embedding Lived Experience Leadership'?

Interviewees observed that there has been a rise in leaders with lived experience challenging the refugee rights sector for recognition as equal partners. Furthermore, conversations about racism, power relations, structural issues, and the charity saviour model have also caused the organisations to rethink their approach to Lived Experience Leadership.

> *In terms of what it means for us, it is about the genuine ambition to place people with lived experience at the forefront of our organisation and the movement at various levels and the leading of various fronts.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 3

Key Lived Experience Leadership initiatives, strategies, and support mechanisms

Interviewees without lived experience and survey respondents indicated that a variety of initiatives and strategies are currently being pursued in the UK refugee rights movement to advance Lived Experience Leadership.

In summary, interviews and survey responses suggested that organisations are at various stages in their Lived Experience Leadership journeys. Some interviewees indicated that their organisations are at quite advanced stages, while others suggested that their organisations are still at the initial stages. This is where cross-sector collaboration has become important and effective. Organisations that are at advanced stages of Lived Experience Leadership processes are collaborating and supporting other organisations in their Lived Experience Leadership journeys (please refer to the list of the current Lived Experience Initiatives on the page for more details). This is done by creating resources, programmes and initiatives, toolkits, advice sessions and workshops on Lived Experience Leadership. This collaboration has helped to create a sharing environment for resources and learning.

Below are the main themes from interviews and survey responses.

Skills development opportunities

A number of interviewees and survey respondents explained that their organisations have begun the process of transforming their approach to Lived Experience Leadership. This has resulted in increased opportunities for people with lived experience to participate in leadership positions within their organisations. One organisation has created a 'Board Observer' position as a pathway for people with lived experience to become trustees in the future. Another organisation has established a Lived Experience Trustee Working Group as a meaningful pathway for one of their lived experience members to become a trustee.

> *We formed a Lived Experience Trustee Working Group, which included representatives from across the organisation, to address potential barriers that members might face in transitioning to trustee roles. This led to the implementation of several accessibility adjustments, such as using plain English, providing shadowing opportunities, and mentoring programmes to ensure an inclusive environment. Throughout the process, we encountered challenges, including the need for legal adjustments and managing*

expectations around eligibility. However, we also found opportunities to empower members through leadership training and targeted support.

– Participant without lived experience 4

One key aspect of the Lived Experience Leadership journey is creating distinct pathways for individuals with lived experience to transition into staff roles within organisations. To guarantee meaningful engagement, some organisations shared how they developed programmes that will discourage tokenism. A key aspect of these programmes is robust training and mentoring initiatives, as well as the inclusion of lived experience members on recruitment committees.

Developing community-based leadership via interactive programmes is becoming an increasingly important focus for organisations. For example, volunteers with first-hand knowledge made significant contributions to one organisation's campaign strategy and execution via a community research programme. Volunteers with lived experience benefited from this work while making meaningful contributions due to the individualised training and support they received. This also led to gaining transformative leadership insights and enhancing transparency on how the organisation considers the feedback and insights received from people with lived experience.

> *We did work on a community research programme, and what we did through that was starting to think about how we meaningfully engage people with lived experience in our work in a way that does not feel tokenistic and gives people the power to make decisions. This community research programme has been really amazing and quite transformational for us in terms of as a model. It has really felt like putting a lot of time and effort into working with a group of incredible volunteers, doing meaningful training, one-to-one, support progression, support so that it wasn't extractive, and we wanted to make sure it felt like everyone was benefiting. We have learned a huge amount from their research, but also their contribution to our strategy, and theory of change.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 5

Leadership roles for people with lived experience and inclusive recruitment practices

A number of past and present initiatives and programmes aim to empower people with lived experience via leadership development, mentorship, and career progression support. For example, some organisations offer shadowing and mentoring programmes for staff with lived experience to support them in taking on leadership positions while also boosting their self-esteem and feeling of belonging.

Many interviewees stressed the importance of their organisation supporting and training people with lived experience to excel in their roles. One interviewee highlighted how important it is that their organisation provides support, guidance, and training for people with lived experience so that they are "not set up to fail." This has been the main focus of their organisational journey to Lived Experience Leadership, and they have also started initiatives that would assist other organisations in this area.

> *It can be extremely harmful to place people in roles where they do not succeed or when they don't receive enough support. So I think it's really important ...we need to work on Lived Experience Leadership as it's something very important, but it needs to happen in a way that it's not just done, or people with lived experience are just promoted without being adequately supported and sometimes set up to fail. This is why bespoke support, training and mentorship are essential. So that said, I think if we did everything … too slowly, that change would take a really long time.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 6

Creating new staff positions, advisory committee memberships, and joining the trustee boards were seen by interviewees as significant steps for advancing Lived Experience Leadership.

Employment was a widely discussed theme throughout the consultation. The refugee rights movement is moving towards inclusive recruitment practices, which emphasise systemic barriers, racism, bias, and other challenges people with lived experience face while pursuing career growth.

A number of interviewees explained that their organisations are exploring novel approaches to hiring. This includes creating distinct positions and ring-fenced roles for people with lived experience, which helps to ensure that they will have equal opportunities to hold leadership roles within refugee organisations and get employment. This also marks a shift from the past approach of involving people with lived experience only as volunteers, even after securing refugee status and permission to work in the UK. This strategy also helps to increase diversity and harness the wide range of skills people with lived experience can bring, according to a number of interviewees.

Additionally, some interviewees explained that their organisations focus on offering specialised training and support to people with lived experience involved in their organisations in various capacities as a response to concerns about re-traumatisation and burnout.

While people with lived experience bring skills and expertise, the nature of the asylum system in the UK can significantly impact people's ability to maintain or develop skills and access education. Moreover, there are ongoing issues with recognising qualifications acquired abroad. To address these, some interviewees explained that their organisations have various initiatives, including leadership training in the following areas:

English language

media

campaigns and Advocacy

UK parliamentary processes

Facilitating lived experience groups or networks

Facilitating groups or networks of people with lived experience to campaign on the issues that directly affect them has been another part of the journey to Lived Experience Leadership for a number of organisations.

There are challenges associated with this process, particularly in the initial stages, and one organisation described how not getting things right from the beginning has led to the failure of one project that they have facilitated. However, this experience has made them think profoundly and reflect on topics such as power dynamics, tokenism, and meaningful involvement of people with lived experiences going forward.

> *In our previous experience of coordinating a lived experience group, a lot of things that worked and a lot of things did not work. We have done quite a lot of serious reflecting in the last few years on this as an organisation. There are things that we did that, from the best of intentions, did not really work and a number of key mistakes that we made. One of the things that we would take from that, stepping back from it, is that there are clear risks around tokenism when having a lived experience group and doing things in a divided away and isn't genuinely centralised and consulted in a way that's tied into all of the work.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 1

Co-production

As part of co-production, multiple interviewees stated that their organisations have included people with lived experience not only in service planning but also crucially in designing campaigns and advocacy work. Interviewees talked about how collaboration on these projects has resulted in the development of new frameworks and toolkits that could be shared with other organisations keen to advance Lived Experience Leadership.

Governance and setting strategic direction

Another growing practice in the refugee rights sector is organisations' focus on involving people with lived experience in governance and setting strategic directions. A number of interviewees indicated that their organisations already have trustees with lived experience in their boards, while setting up clear goals that the trustee board should comprise a specific percentage or a number of trustees with lived experience. As a step prior to recruiting trustees with lived experience, some interviewees explained that their organisations had set up advisory groups or advisory committees with lived experience, designed to influence the decision-making of boards in the areas of policy, strategy, service design and campaigns.

Governance and setting strategic direction

Another growing practice in the refugee rights sector is organisations' focus on involving people with lived experience in governance and setting strategic directions. A number of interviewees indicated that their organisations already have trustees with lived experience in their boards, while setting up clear goals that the trustee board should comprise a specific percentage or a number of trustees with lived experience. As a step prior to recruiting trustees with lived experience, some interviewees explained that their organisations had set up advisory groups or advisory committees with lived experience, designed to influence the decision-making of boards in the areas of policy, strategy, service design and campaigns.

Equitable funding initiatives

The funders have a crucial role in advancing Lived Experience Leadership in the refugee rights movement. There is growing momentum within the funding landscape to practice equitable funding and move away from traditional practices that have acted as barriers to securing funding, especially for grassroots organisations led by people with lived experience. This is essential to ensure funds are allocated to programmes that empower people with lived experience and support Lived Experience Leadership activities.

Most funders want to explore people's involvement in organisations' activities, decision-making, and leadership. Some major funders have specific funding calls for 'led-by-and-for' organisations. Equitable funding practices have been a focus, alongside strategies to address systemic barriers faced by people with lived experience, including racism and discrimination and the UK's colonial history and structures.

Barriers, challenges, and gaps to advancing Lived Experience Leadership

Most stakeholders without lived experience highlighted various barriers and challenges they experienced while working on the concept of Lived Experience Leadership. Concerns related to re-traumatisation, tokenism, overwork, and burnout. In addition to this, interviewees raised concerns related to equitable employment and limited leadership role opportunities, and decreasing funding opportunities, which slow down the advancement of Lived Experience Leadership

Below are the key findings from the interviews and surveys about the main barriers, challenges, and gaps in advancing Lived Experience Leadership in the refugee rights sector.

Lack of clear definition of Lived Experience Leadership

While stakeholders without lived experience considered Lived Experience Leadership the future for the refugee rights movement and "the only ethical way forward," opinions varied about the definition of the term. Some organisations mentioned that they lacked clarity on the definition and the role people with lived experience play in the respective organisation and sector affecting their progress in this area.

Some stakeholders without lived experience felt that defining Lived Experience Leadership would be helpful. On the other hand, Lived Experience Leadership can take many forms, be individual and unique, and depend on the context of each organisation and the individuals. Interviewees and survey respondents without lived experience expressed that a narrow definition of Lived Experience Leadership may not capture all these nuances.

> *I think organisationally, we have not got a clear answer on this, on that particular phrasing, Lived Experience Leadership as such, that isn't something that we've got spelt out and defined. We do not have a clear understanding of a lived experience leader and leadership.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 3

> *It feels like we are consistently talking about this. It is more often and consistently part of funding application discussions about your staff team. It is not something like, oh, and we have got to think about this too. It is more sort of genuine. So that is a good thing, but I do not think we have a proper roadmap yet.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 5

Interviewees suggested that the role of people without lived experience in Lived Experience Leadership journeys needs further exploration. Participants also highlighted a need for common, shared practice and for organisations' approaches to be less fragmented and more coordinated.

> *The tension for me is around whether Lived Experience Leadership means leadership only by people with lived experience or whether that means meaningful participation in that leadership exercise. As someone without first-generation lived experience, I am somewhat biased, and I believe that individuals with expertise from other sources can also play a leadership role. So, I do not think that Lived Experience Leadership needs to be an exclusive concept.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 7

Racism and systemic barriers

According to interviewees and survey respondents, many organisations and funders have started embedding anti-racist policies and practices within their organisations. However, there is a long way to go. Interviewees and survey respondents highlighted that refugees and people seeking asylum face significant issues related to systemic barriers, unconscious bias, racism, and other forms of disadvantage during their asylum journeys and after. These obstacles have a direct negative impact on their leadership journeys.

> *So, there is increasing opportunity and even encouragement for people with lived experience to participate, not necessarily in leadership roles. But I*

believe there is a limited understanding of the barriers involved. People with lived experience often face obvious barriers, such as a lack of understanding of the system, trauma from discussions, racism, discrimination, and language barriers.

– Participant without lived experience 7

Funding, resources, and capacity constraints

The stakeholders without lived experience highlighted the need for more funding and resources to advance Lived Experience Leadership. Many interviewees consulted explained their challenges that their organisations face in providing training, mentoring, and continued developmental support due to a lack of funding, capacity, or expertise. Findings suggested that grassroots organisations particularly are affected by funding and resource limitations, a lack of staff, and an inability to prioritise advancing Lived Experience Leadership. The cost-of-living crisis has also adversely affected many charities in the refugee rights sector, increasing the cost of operating their core functions.

> *For small grassroots organisations it ultimately comes down to lack of funding and capacity, particularly as there is a lack of core/unrestricted funding which is what usually funds the leadership roles in smaller organisations. Funders could specifically fund leadership posts for people with lived experience and provide additional funding for training, mentorship, and support.*

– Participant without lived experience 8

> *One very obvious challenge is funding. Ensuring that people with lived experience receive proper training, support and compensation for their work is crucial, yet small charities often lack a pre-planned budget, necessitating immediate funding solutions, especially for those facing unexpected challenges. The ongoing running costs have become a challenge especially due to the Cost-of-Living Crisis. So, everything is harder to find. Securing additional funds necessitates financing additional activities. Not only does the lived experience component need funding, but it also requires finding*

additional activities. This does not diminish its importance. However, this implies the need to find additional resources, not just money.

– Participant without lived experience 4

Tokenism

While the refugee sector has improved its awareness of tokenism over the last decade, many interviewees and survey respondents without lived experience pointed out that the tokenistic involvement of people with lived experience impedes the advancement of Lived Experience Leadership. Many stakeholders without lived experience felt that it was not sufficient to include people with lived experience in symbolic roles or limit them to entry-level positions without enabling them to lead in campaigns and advocacy, develop strategies and agendas, and participate in decision-making processes.

These stakeholders explained that "effective campaigning" is often seen through the lens of professionalisation or institutional expertise. This often undermines the role of those directly affected by the issue.

> *We need a movement where there is Lived Experience Leadership throughout the system, not just in figurehead roles, and people with lived experience are effectively supported to be confident to thrive in their roles. One of the primary concerns is dealing with re-traumatisation, overwork, burnout, and other related issues. This can be extremely harmful to place people in roles where they do not succeed or when they don't receive enough support.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 6

> *Funders increasingly focus on it. Sometimes we might talk about this, … in the way that funders ask about lived experience involvement; it'd be in a way, without them intending to, that leads people to give answers […] that are like ticking a box, or are quite tokenistic, which I think is a serious risk with approaching this type of work.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 3

> *In terms of campaigning, I have witnessed a situation where a person with lived experience was put in front of a mic and asked to share their story and became really upset, and it didn't seem the person had been properly prepared and the care taken to make sure the person was ready for the interview, so it felt extractive and like their traumatic experiences were being sensationalised. I think perhaps organisations are worried about not getting the balance right; wanting to make sure all of the work is trauma-informed and careful, but also letting people with lived experience have agency to decide for themselves.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 9

Accelerating Lived Experience Leadership too quickly without careful planning

Interviewees and survey respondents raised a concern that organisations may appoint people with lived experience to leadership positions and push them to conduct campaigns and advocacy without providing the necessary support and training. Interview and survey participants were concerned that this may negatively affect people with lived experience and discourage them from pursuing leadership roles in the future, because attempts to advance Lived Experience Leadership in the sector quickly, without careful consideration and planning, may have adverse effects.

Some participants stated that another challenge was the pressure to deliver on Lived Experience Leadership without adequately addressing power imbalances within the UK refugee rights sector. During the consultation process, participants without lived experience raised key questions about whether the sector is prepared to transition leadership of the TWR coalition and the general refugee rights sector to individuals with lived experience.

> *I wonder whether the pendulum has almost swung too far too quickly. The other way, maybe. And I feel that it has suddenly become fashionable, and everybody's trying to do it now. That is a good thing. But it is not like "we're going to do some lived experience work this month." It is a long process. It is time consuming, but hugely rewarding. So, I think it is both exciting many organisations are focusing on this, but maybe with different motivations, different purposes, different interpretations. And as someone like me as a Director and who is on a journey, and I am trying to understand how to get this right. I do not understand everything, and I have made some real mistakes in the past, but I am really keen to learn and listen.*

– Participant without lived experience 5

Challenges in recruiting the right candidates for leadership positions

Refugees and people seeking asylum may have experienced past and ongoing trauma due to a variety of reasons, including torture, bereavement, family separation, and adverse journeys to seek safety in the UK. Some interviewees and survey respondents without lived experience raised the question of whether every person with lived experience wants their professional identity to be defined by their lived experiences. There may be individuals with lived experience who do not wish to take on conventional leadership roles in the field.

In addition, stakeholders without lived experience noted that leaders with lived experience are often expected to quote their stories and experiences repeatedly and to describe themselves as leaders with lived experience. This may be emotionally challenging or triggering to individuals who are already experiencing difficulties with their mental health.

> *Maybe lack of recognition that people with lived experience may not want to be defined/pigeon-holed as people with lived experience, or that their identification as such (and therefore engagement) may be short-lived and transitional […] Maybe the emphasis should be less on Lived Experience Leadership per se and more on "lived experience" as a component of a larger "advocacy/campaigning leadership" career pathway -- and thinking about how people with lived experience can be supported in translating this experience into skills for such a career.*

– Participant without lived experience 10

Stakeholders without lived experience also shared their challenges in finding the right candidates with lived experience and the necessary expertise for specific leadership positions. This gap is particularly apparent in the campaigns work. Among the challenges identified were language barriers, cultural and educational differences, a lack of understanding of UK systemic approaches, GDPR issues, and inadequate IT skills. This issue relates to the right balance between lived and learned experiences and to what extent both are needed to fulfil leadership roles in campaigns, advocacy, and other roles.

> *Finding refugees with the necessary knowledge (e.g. of the UK environment) and skills (particularly English), experience and motivation to take on Lived Experience Leadership roles like governance or senior management, or the confidence to take on campaigning roles can be challenging.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 11

> *I think with staff roles, many of the people with lived experience will still be in various stages of the immigration process which affect their capacity and their eligibility to work. Issues around their mental well-being, ability to volunteer and participate in things. Obviously, you always want to recruit the person you think is best placed for a particular job, and you look at the depth of the people that experience that people have. People with lived experience will often have serious problems in terms of gaining sufficient experience for a particular role, and that has a knock-on effect in terms of recruitment.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 12

There is a willingness among stakeholders without lived experience to empower and assist people with lived experience to take on leadership roles. However, the issue of resources, time, and funding was still highlighted as a main barrier for the refugee rights sector to pursue this approach. This has been further exacerbated by constant 'firefighting' and the need to respond to adverse external factors, such as political events or new legislation.

> *If we ask ourselves a question, is lived experience at the heart of the sector at the moment? I think the answer is no, not enough. There are some of the leading and biggest charities in the space, with chief executives with lived experience, but that is not enough. We need to do more, and we have not come far enough.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 1

> *Every time we talk about lived experience, there is also the government coming up with [hostile policies], at least the last government, and something new to tackle. So, the priority for Lived Experience Leadership always went down the bottom of the pile as a result.*
>
> – Participant without lived experience 13

The graph below shows the percentage breakdown of the barriers and obstacles faced by stakeholders without lived experience in supporting Lived Experience Leadership.

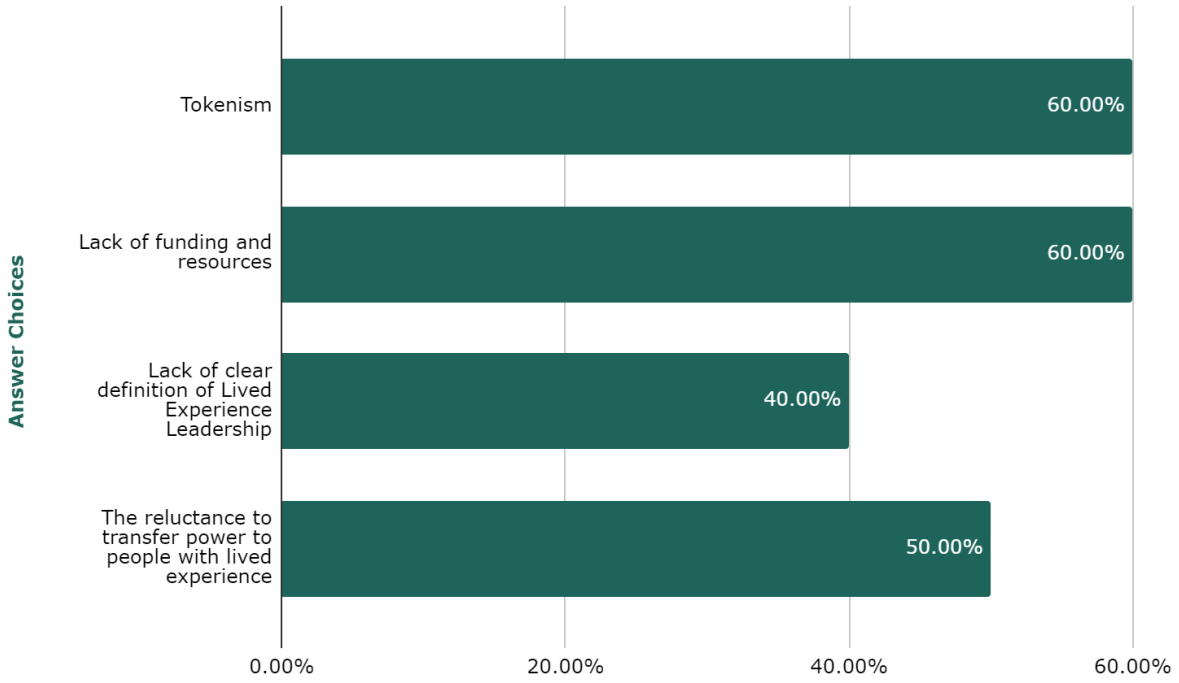


Figure 9 – Bar chart showing perspectives of stakeholders without lived experience on the barriers they face when advancing Lived Experience Leadership

Other barriers include:

- Fear of getting things wrong
- Lack of knowledge of how to embed Lived Experience Leadership
- Finding refugees with the necessary knowledge

Overall conclusions and recommendations

This report focuses on advancing Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights sector, with a particular focus on campaigns leadership so that it delivers strong, effective campaigning to secure a just, humane, and effective asylum system. The report captured a snapshot of the current landscape within the refugee rights sector by mapping and analysing key initiatives and strategies currently being pursued across the sector to advance Lived Experience Leadership. It aims to build on the previous research and initiatives in this area.

The findings from the interviews and the two surveys conducted echoed the findings from the desk research and literature review (existing evidence base), highlighting the increasing importance and commitment to centre Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights sector. There are several initiatives and programmes that aim to achieve this. This commitment stems from organisations, funders and importantly, people with lived experience themselves.

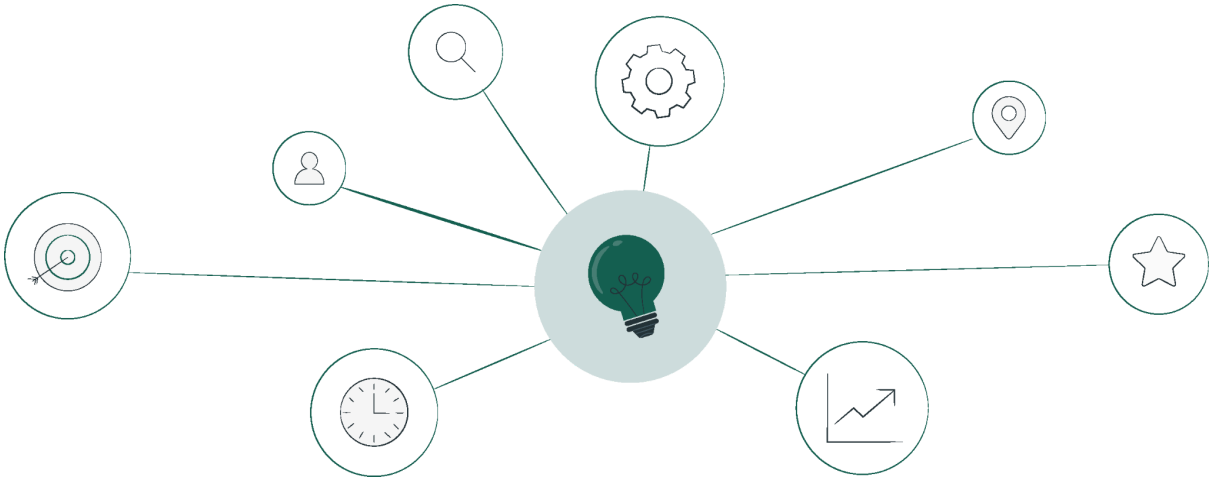
The findings explored in this report confirm that Lived Experience Leadership and the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience is crucial to achieving systemic change. People with lived experience bring unique insights and first-hand knowledge of the challenges and barriers that exist in the UK asylum system. Lived Experience Leadership also ensures that solutions to any particular social issue, in this context, the issues in the UK asylum system are grounded in reality, making them more effective and impactful while also addressing structural inequalities and leading to long-term change.

Both people with lived experience and other stakeholders without lived experience acknowledge that there has been a notable improvement in advancing Lived Experience Leadership. They highlighted a number of initiatives, strategies, and support mechanisms in their organisations and the wider refugee sector. Both parties also agree that there are more inclusive recruitment opportunities, leadership training programmes, well-being support, and funding opportunities. However, much more needs to be done to sustain the progress. Findings from this report show that current support mechanisms are fragmented, and there is a lack of communication and avenues to access information.

Despite the growing momentum around Lived Experience Leadership in the UK refugee rights sector, there are still ongoing challenges and obstacles that prevent people with lived experience from fulfilling their leadership potential. This is exacerbated by the negative impacts of tokenism, racism, structural inequalities, biases, and power imbalances. These factors need to be addressed head-on with open

dialogue and concrete actions if the refugee rights sector genuinely wants to advance Lived Experience Leadership.

Based on the existing evidence and consultations with both stakeholders with lived experience and without lived experience, there is no joined strategy in the UK refugee rights sector regarding Lived Experience Leadership, including clear coordination between existing leadership programmes and initiatives, making it difficult to advance it throughout the UK refugee rights sector.



This report intentionally gathered and presented opinions from stakeholders with and without lived experience separately during consultations. By this approach, we wanted to capture the similarities and differences the parties might have related to advancing Lived Experience Leadership. As a result, the report highlights that while there is alignment between the two parties, there are also significant differences that are crucial to consider in supporting and promoting Lived Experience Leadership.

For example, leaders and activists with lived experience are still concerned about tokenistic approaches and the lack of power that they have in decision-making within the UK refugee rights sector. While stakeholders without lived experience are also concerned about these barriers, some of the most critical challenges for them include a lack of clarity about the definition of Lived Experience Leadership and a lack of resources. Both people with lived experience and other stakeholders without lived experience agree that there is reluctance within the UK refugee rights sector to share the power with people with lived experience.

Findings from this report show that both stakeholders with and without lived experience agree that there is a need for more structured leadership pathways, equitable funding, and a genuine commitment to empowering lived experience leaders. They believe that they must collaborate meaningfully and support one another and that adequate resources must be available to overcome existing challenges and advance Lived Experience Leadership.

The process of advancing Lived Experience Leadership still requires a significant amount of work, collaboration, and a clear commitment from every stakeholder in the refugee rights sector. The findings from this research show that TWR and OSV have a crucial role to play in advancing Lived Experience Leadership among membership organisations and the wider refugee rights sector. The two-year project they plan to start in due course is a good opportunity to accelerate this process and ensure that Lived Experience Leadership is embedded at every level of decision-making and in campaign activities.

In the following section, based on consultations, we set out seven key strategic themes which should be priorities for action. We present why they are important, our analysis of what needs to be done and key recommendations for the two-year project by TWR and OSV. Our recommendations are directed at TWR and OSV as the organisers of the two-year initiative to advance Lived Experience Leadership, with some also applicable to the wider refugee rights sector.

We provide our suggestions as lead researchers and authors of this report, individuals with lived experience, and campaigners and advocates with extensive experience relating to the UK immigration and asylum system. Furthermore, we point to existing examples of good practices that can be replicated or scaled up by TWR and OSV.

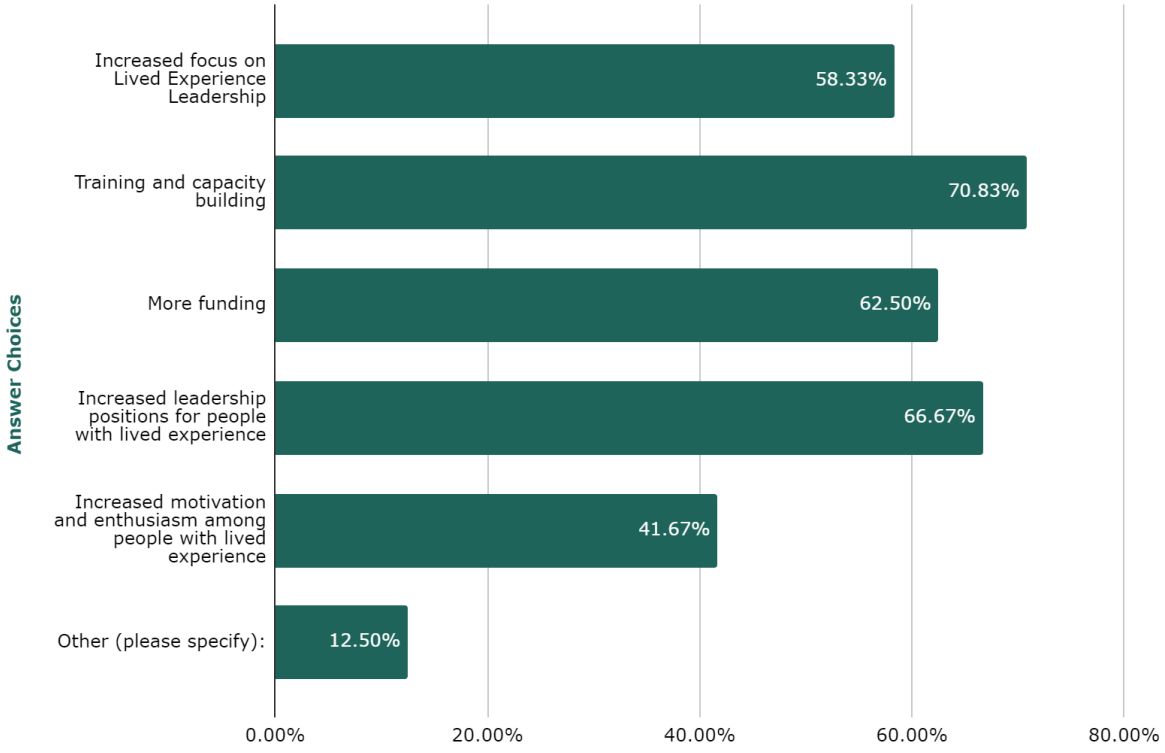
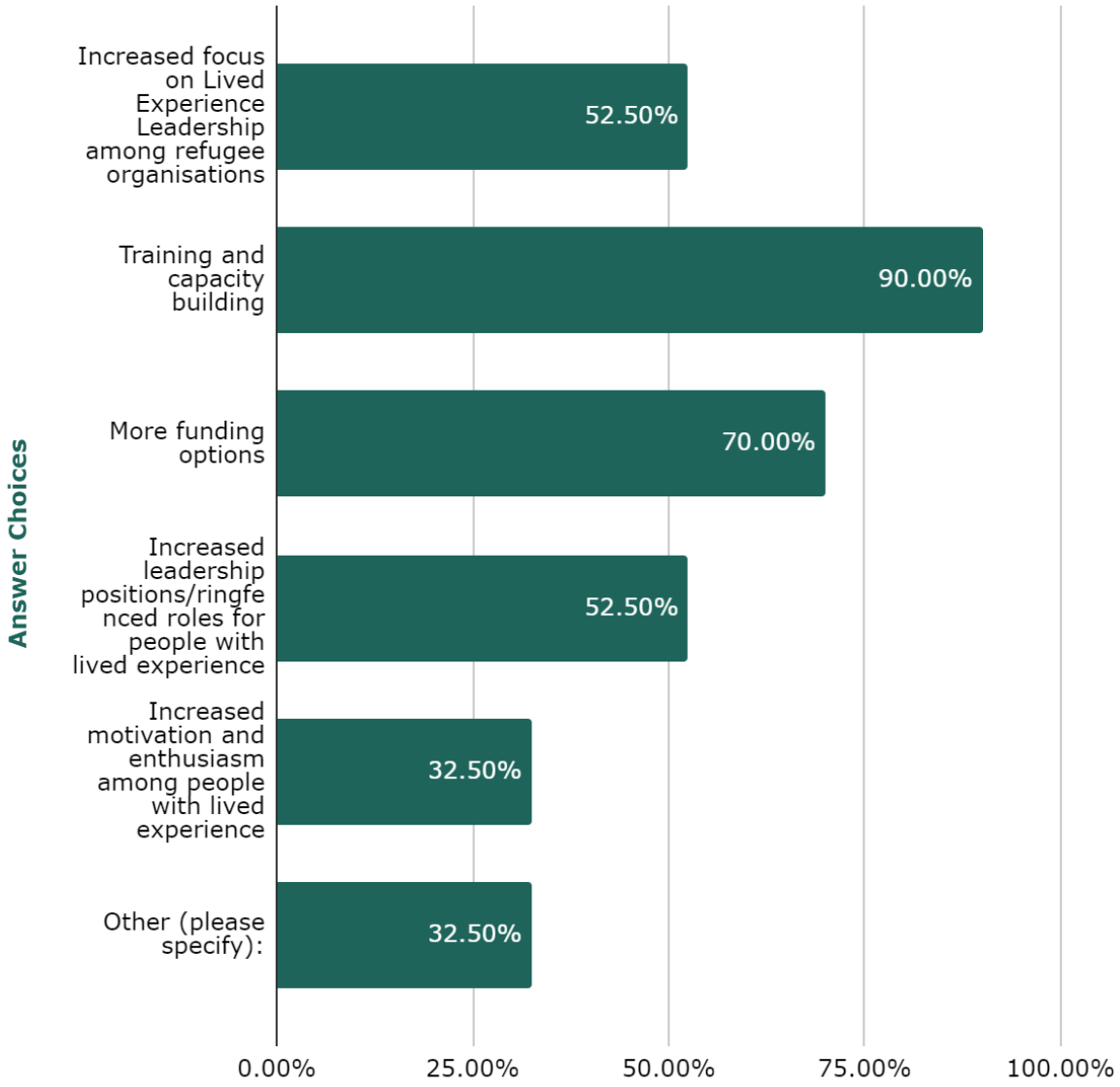


Figure 10 – Bar chart showing strategies needed to advance Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights movement with an emphasis on campaigns according to people with lived experience



Other:

More collaborative working between partners and more communication

Figure 11 – Bar chart showing strategies needed to advance Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights movement with an emphasis on campaigns according to stakeholders without lived experience.

Help build long-term trust and space to advance Lived Experience Leadership

Stakeholders with lived experience expressed that TWR and OSV should play an essential role in creating a culture in which lived experience is acknowledged, valued, and leveraged for systemic change. In this regard, one of the fundamental roles of TWR and OSV is to foster safe and inclusive environments where people with lived experience can share challenges and barriers they face, build trust, and collaborate to advance Lived Experience Leadership. It is important to ensure these spaces are culturally and linguistically accessible to address barriers to participation, such as language differences, cultural background, and lived experiences.

Consultations with people with lived experience showed that there is a disconnect between UK national refugee charity organisations and grassroots organisations. Similarly, stakeholders without lived experience emphasised that TWR and OSV should play a significant role in creating partnerships between national and grassroots organisations/groups/ led by people with lived experience, given that their membership spans both national and grassroots groups.

We think OSV has an opportunity to bring together people with lived experience and networks. OSV has already organised two lived experience convening events, between July and September 2024 to discuss **"Common Campaigns Messaging"**. We attended both events and found that people with lived experience were open and honest about their challenges, and priorities, and provided constructive feedback on the UK refugee rights sector. We believe that OSV should expand its efforts to create more spaces for people with lived experience, such as by organising conferences, closed discussions, and networking opportunities.

During this research, we observed a degree of mistrust and lack of communication, especially in campaigns and advocacy work between national refugee charities and those grassroots organisations which are predominantly led by people with lived experience. TWR and OSV unite multiple organisations (national and grassroots) to ensure strategic collaboration between their members. Therefore, we believe TWR and OSV have a role in addressing the issue of mistrust and disconnect by initiating and facilitating open dialogue between the parties to build trust and increase future collaboration in campaigns and advocacy. Being a network of networks with lived experience, OSV should serve as the link between grassroots and national organisations to communicate the priorities and expectations of people with lived experience.

We think the initiative, The London Refugee Advocacy Forum by Refugee Council which is by one of TWR's member organisations, is a good model to consider during this process. The initiative supports refugee groups and refugee community organisations in London through specialist advice, quality resources and training. The programme also provides networking and facilitates collaboration among RCOs and with other stakeholders.

1

Recommendations:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should promote and create inclusive and safe spaces for people with lived experience to discuss opportunities, challenges, and gaps they face during their leadership journeys.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should improve the connection and trust between national refugee and grassroots organisations to increase collaboration and build trust.

Address tokenism and promote true representation of people with lived experience

The research showed that TWR and OSV should play a critical role in ensuring people with lived experience are not simply symbolically included in campaigns and advocacy but are empowered and able to influence decision-making and shape those campaigns and advocacy activities. By promoting true representation of people with lived experience, TWR and OSV will also assist the process of achieving a cultural shift within the wider UK refugee rights sector around the importance of Lived Experience Leadership.

As part of promoting the involvement of people with lived experience TWR and OSV established a collaboration model where representatives from OSV are part of the ARI Governance Group and Campaigns Directors Group. This is to ensure lived experience representation at decision-making and governance levels happens with the direct involvement of people with lived experience who set agendas based on their lived realities and experiences.

As a result, there was an early shift from an initial use of a lived experience advisory group model to ensuring people with lived experience were part of the core ARI and TWR decision-making structures. The ARI Governance Group was expanded in 2022, this marked a shift to ensuring half its members were of refugee or migrant heritage, and both the co-chairs were of refugee background.

To ensure refugees shape coalition campaigns, people with lived experience have been actively involved in the development of campaigns. OSV representative at ARI Campaigns Directors group is part of all strategic discussion about shaping campaigns and advocacy works and is involved in a decision-making process. An example of TWR's work on involving people with lived experience in developing campaigns work is a Creative Council of lived experience people advising on the work to develop the messaging and creative framing of the current Together With Refugees 'Fair Begins Here' campaign.

To ensure meaningful involvement, TWR and OSV are also working on amplifying the voices of people with lived experience by providing platforms for storytelling, public testimony and advocacy. By establishing more media and communication channels that give visibility to the achievements and challenges of people with lived experience, TWR and OSV could influence public perception and policy.

While TWR and OSV have taken the above-mentioned positive steps, the research also showed that more people with lived experience could be represented in these platforms which would have a positive impact on addressing power dynamics and ensure more meaningful participation. We are aware that TWR and OSV are planning to create a joint strategy in the coming months. We think this is another opportunity for both parties to further expand the lived experience representation at various levels of TWR.

We suggest OSV and TWR collaborate with organisations such as **IMIX**, **New Economic Organisers Network** and **Sounddelivery Media** to train a pool of media spokespeople with refugee backgrounds. OSV is in an appropriate position to identify a pool of people with lived experience who are interested in becoming and who have the potential to become spokespeople with lived experience.

While people with lived experience must be meaningfully involved in decision-making, consultations showed that creating systemic change in the UK refugee rights sector requires both lived experience and professional expertise. People with lived experience provide expertise and invaluable insight into the challenges they face, while other stakeholders without lived experience also offer a range of legal, organisational, strategic knowledge and allyship. TWR and OSV must promote this collaboration, creating more inclusive, informed approaches to policy reform and community

support, ensuring that solutions are grounded in practical needs and expert knowledge.

Additionally, to support the process of tacking tokenism and supporting true representation, it is crucial to consider the issue of the absence of clear guidelines on remuneration for people with live experience. While uncertainty or reluctance to remunerate people with lived experience fairly is exacerbated by the current regulations around immigration status and the right to work, TWR and OSV can develop a remuneration strategy that could become a shared practice within the wider refugee rights sector.

To create guidelines on remuneration for people with lived experience, we suggest OSV build up on their existing guidance and join the ongoing initiative on this issue coordinated by Refugee Council, Refugee Action, Modern Slavery PEC, AVID Detention, Safe Passage, ASAP Project, Scottish Refugee Council, Nottingham Refugee Forum and ATLEU.

2

Recommendations:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should challenge tokenism by upscaling and further expanding meaningful involvement and representation of people with lived experience in campaign activities, governance, decision-making and team make-up and team make-up.

Together With Refugees, along with the wider refugee rights sector, should recognise the value of both lived and learned experiences in achieving systemic change.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should amplify the voices of people with lived experience to lead as spokespeople on campaigns and influence public and media narratives through focused support, training, and development.

One Strong Voice should collaborate with existing sector initiatives to ensure clear guidelines for the compensation of people with lived experience in the campaign work of TWR and the wider refugee rights sector.

Challenge and address racism, biases and structural barriers

During the consultations, racism, bias, and structural barriers were identified as the main obstacles to advancing Lived Experience Leadership. Both stakeholders with and without lived experience recognised reluctance to share power with people with lived experience as one of the main barriers to advance Lived Experience Leadership. In order to advance Lived Experience Leadership, stakeholders without lived experience need more support and awareness about lived experience and power-sharing.

Another common theme from the consultations and existing evidence base was that leadership structures in the UK refugee rights sector often preserve colonial power dynamics and structures and decide whose voices are more important. These highlighted the need for TWR and OSV to increase collaboration with existing initiatives and participate in discussions about racism, tokenism, and colonial power dynamics in the refugee rights sector.

Both stakeholders with and without lived experience suggested that TWR and OSV should facilitate ongoing conversations about anti-racism/institutional racism, tokenism, and power dynamics within the refugee rights sector. They emphasised that these conversations need to identify and challenge practices that may unintentionally undermine the role of people with lived experience.

There are already ongoing initiatives and discussions about racism and structural barriers, such as Refugee Action's "Asylum in the UK - a front line for racial justice" briefing and "Reclaiming Lived Experience Leadership Definition, power and opportunities" conference report. We suggest TWR and OSV utilise these effectively and continue the conversations about racism, discrimination and tokenism within the UK refugee rights sector.

3

Recommendations:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should promote the implementation of cultural change within the UK refugee rights sector to recognise lived experience is fundamental to achieve systemic change.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should collaborate with existing initiatives and discussions about anti-racism, tokenism, and structural barriers within the UK refugee rights sector.

Develop formal leadership pathways for people with lived experience

The consultations and existing evidence base showed that to facilitate leadership pathways, people with lived experience would benefit from training programmes and educational opportunities tailored to their specific needs. These programmes should prepare individuals to lead on campaigns by using and upscaling their transferable skills.

Considering the importance of providing educational opportunities and internships, TWR and OSV could partner with organisations that provide education for adults, young people, and adolescents. TWR and OSV should collaborate and promote more leadership training and mentoring programmes for people with lived experience. These could include executive courses, skill development, and leadership coaching tailored to their specific challenges. It will empower people to transform their experiences into strengths, foster their personal growth and enable them to become effective community advocates and leaders. At the same time, more funders should help resource such pathways to build leadership and professional skills for people with lived experience specifically in campaigns and advocacy work over the medium term. As part of a strategic shift to Lived Experience Leadership, funders should consider strategic partnerships with cross-sector campaign convenors, such as TWR and OSV.

Challenging the traditional leadership models that only consider formal education and work experience was highlighted during the consultation. The focus of training should be on leveraging the power of personal narratives as a leadership tool and building refugee confidence. The rationale behind this suggestion is to value resilience, courage and the lived experiences people bring.

OSV and TWR should advocate for more leadership roles focusing on campaigns for people with lived experience and ensuring they are not limited to entry-level positions. This process could involve encouraging leadership models that combine lived and professional experiences. While lived experience is crucial to leadership, it is recommended that it be balanced with professional skills and training.

There has been a positive trend in the UK refugee rights sector toward ring-fencing roles for people with lived experience. While some organisations adopt this approach, others, especially grassroots organisations, are uncertain and require guidance regarding the legal aspects of this practice. To address this challenge, TWR and OSV

should collaborate with wider stakeholders and employment lawyers to develop a toolkit or guide for organisations seeking to create ring-fenced roles.

TWR and OSV should call for creating ring-fenced leadership roles with an emphasis on campaigns which would enable people with lived experience to play active roles in the decision-making processes and governance of organisations. Encouraging sector organisations to restructure Boards of Trustees and leadership teams to include a certain number or a percentage of people with lived experience was another suggestion among stakeholders without lived experience.

TWR and OSV should build upon existing initiatives and gather learning and best practices from existing leadership and career development. Some of the initiatives we can suggest are listed below:

- Refugee Council's Developing career pathways and progression for staff and volunteers with lived experience of the refugee protection system research report
- Expert by Experience Employment Initiative
- Migration Exchange's 'Equity Catalysts' Community of Practice – Transforming Leadership in the UK Refugee and Migration Sector
- Refugee Education UK

4

Recommendations:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should work with the sector stakeholders to help create better formal leadership pathways, training and mentoring for people with lived experience, particularly in campaigns and advocacy.

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should call for more ring-fenced leadership roles for people with lived experience within TWR membership organisations and collaborate with the relevant stakeholders to develop a guide for organisations seeking to create ring-fenced roles.

One Strong Voice should build upon existing initiatives about redefining traditional leadership to recognise Lived Experience Leadership. OSV should prioritise redefining traditional leadership as part of their ongoing lived experience convening events.

Promote mental health support and well-being for people with lived experience

The research showed that carrying the burden of personal trauma can be a common challenge for people with lived experience. Ongoing asylum applications, family separation, and potential threats to their safety are some of the many challenges many refugees and people seeking asylum face. Firsthand experiences often act as barrier for people during pursuing Lived Experience Leadership and lack of safe platforms to discuss their issues and experiences further exacerbates it.

To mitigate burnout and re-traumatisation of people with lived experience, especially during campaigns activities, TWR and OSV could play a role with regard to mental health and well-being, highlighting the need for more comprehensive support systems. It could entail collaboration with mental health professionals, clinical supervisors, mentors, and well-being practitioners to promote trauma-informed leadership programmes that are aimed at mitigating burnout and re-traumatisation among people with lived experience. This includes creating resources and toolkits for TWR membership organisations and promoting ongoing psychological support.

TWR and OSV can play a vital role in facilitating forums and support networks to address particular challenges people with lived experience face. This approach will also enable grassroots organisations to promote mental health and emotional well-being, recognising that these elements are essential for effective leadership.

To promote trauma-informed leadership programmes, TWR and OSV can build upon existing practices such as the approach followed by Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) which is based upon an understanding of the harmful effects of traumatic experiences together with fundamental principles of compassion and respect. Any form of professional communication with people with lived experience should be treated as an opportunity to help them to progress towards a long-term situation of safety, stability, and well-being.

For more details, please refer to the HBF **Trauma-Informed Code of Conduct**

5

Recommendations:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should promote mental health and trauma-informed initiatives and support for people with lived experience.

Build stronger networks and promote cross-sector collaboration and knowledge-sharing

The existing evidence base and the consultations showed numerous important Lived Experience Leadership initiatives within TWR and the wider refugee rights sector, and they have been successful on various fronts. Currently, TWR has more than 650 organisations. The coalition membership development has sought to ensure a range of organisations led by and for refugees are active within the campaign coalition and its mobilisation and campaign action at both national and local levels. Some examples include lived experience activists who played a key part in the high-profile Rwanda bus protest in Westminster, as well as in the delegation to lobby MPs in the House of Commons.

However, considering that there is not a joint sector strategy, these initiatives and strategies are often scattered and fragmented. TWR and OSV could play a fundamental role in facilitating the process of developing a sector-wide strategy for advancing Lived Experience Leadership. This would entail key stakeholders working together to develop a shared vision and an action plan for the whole sector on Lived Experience Leadership. A shared strategy would support the process of unifying different lived experience networks, leaders with lived experience, and leadership programmes and initiatives which would help consolidation and coordination and avoid duplication, replication, or repetition.

OSV and TWR could serve as hubs for sharing good practices, strategies, and initiatives to advance Lived Experience Leadership. To support this process, it is crucial to reach an agreement on key priorities for people with lived experience and their expectations from the UK refugee rights sector.

Almost all the Lived Experience Leadership initiatives identified throughout this research are developed by TWR member organisations. (**Please refer to the Appendix 1**)**.** However, as mentioned earlier they are often fragmented, and many people are unaware of them.

While TWR has an opportunity to take away this learning and think of practical ways to consolidate existing initiatives, OSV should play a key role in identifying priorities for Lived Experience Leadership they expect to see during cross-sector collaboration

processes and knowledge-sharing platforms. However, if OSV and TWR are to take on this role, they also need to be resourced to do this work.

6

Recommendations:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should work with the sector stakeholders to help facilitate the process of developing a joint sector strategy on Lived Experience Leadership and so bring together current fragmented initiatives, promoting collaboration and learning across the membership of Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice.

One Strong Voice should significantly expand its membership to represent the wider voices and views of people with lived experience in the refugee rights movement.

Call for more funding to build capacity and support

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the research was the lack of funding and resources to advance Lived Experience Leadership initiatives. Overhead funding for sector organisations, including grassroots organisations led by people with lived experience, will help them hire more staff and reduce workloads which can cause burnout.

While the services delivered by charity organisations are crucial, participants with lived experience highlighted the need to focus on creating systemic change and the importance of community organising and campaigning to address underlying injustices. Many of the Lived Experience Leadership initiatives identified in this research were developed by TWR member organisations, including OSV. It is crucial that funders support these existing and evolving initiatives over a sustainable period, as well as other initiatives within the refugee rights sector. This will help to nurture people's skills and talents for them to ultimately lead systemic change efforts.

TWR and OSV must collaborate with funders and encourage them to consider this as a vital component of grant-making. They could create a joint position paper pointing to

successful examples to demonstrate the importance of supporting Lived Experience Leadership initiatives.

7

Recommendations:

Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice should advocate for increased funding for Lived Experience Leadership initiatives and grassroots organisations led by people with lived experience to address capacity and resource gaps across the sector.

Funders should consider strategic partnerships with cross-sector campaign convenors such as Together With Refugees and One Strong Voice to support the strategic shift to Lived Experience Leadership required in this area.

Appendix 1

In addition to conducting extensive research on Lived Experience Leadership within the refugee rights sector, A&M compiled a list of current initiatives and strategies led by various organisations in this field. We also distributed an online form to encourage refugee sector organisations to share details of their initiatives. The following list highlights prominent Lived Experience Leadership programs identified through our research and organisational contributions via the circulated form. Please note this list is not exhaustive.

Breaking Barriers

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Internal support for staff with lived experience

Breaking Barriers
Meaningful employment for refugees

adapted leave, sickness, and hours policies for people with lived experience. Working on providing well-being support such as regular therapeutic sessions for staff to support trauma recovery and improved well-being.

Supporting internal progression of individuals with lived experience, making a pipeline of talent to senior roles by implementing inclusive recruitment practices and provide training opportunities.

Establishing the Lived Experience Consultancy Panel, which consists of seven members who have lived experience, are currently receiving support from BB, or were former clients of BB. The aim of the Panel is to embed a client- and data-led approach at the core of the organisation's work.

More information: https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/

British Red Cross

Description of the initiative/strategy:

The VOICES Network is a group of experts by experience in migration and displacement, supported by but independent from the British Red Cross. The Network works to amplify the voices of people with lived experience to change minds, policy, and practice.

More information: https://thevoicesnetwork.home.blog/

Twitter: https://x.com/VOICESNetworkUK

Caritas Shrewsbury

Description of the initiative/strategy:

The organisation runs two projects under the overarching **Well Project**, which supports refugees and people seeking asylum and ensures that the voices of people living in hotel accommodations are heard in local decision-making.

Women of Wythenshawe is another project where women are trained and given opportunities to speak up about gendered poverty. The project creates opportunities for participants to design and lead weekly conversational English language sessions and the weekly women's group. They also have media opportunities, which support people to take part in sharing their stories and perspectives.

More information:

https://www.caritasshrewsbury.org.uk/services/refugee-project/the-well-project/

City of Sanctuary

Description of the initiative/Strategy:
Sanctuary In Politics courses

To give people with lived experience an overview of how the UK's political system works and the levers of change. Graduates of this course are then encouraged to become Sanctuary Ambassadors.

Ambassadors support the Sanctuary Awards programme, giving meaningful feedback to mainstream organs like schools/unis/councils, etc., on how they can better support/empower/involve people with lived experience. Ambassadors also help with our comms/campaigns work. Ambassadors have the opportunity to join our Operational Advisory Group, which supports the management team in all operational/strategic decisions.

More information: https://ambassadors.cityofsanctuary.org/sanctuary-in-politics

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Displaced People in Action (DPIA)

Description of the initiative/strategy:
The asylum seeker and refugee advocacy forum is a space for refugees and people seeking asylum living in Wales to come together, have conversations about different topics with relevant professionals and advocate for change.

The organisation also runs awareness training on asylum in Wales, with volunteers with lived experience speaking to attendees about this subject.

More information:
https://www.dpia.org.uk/refugee-asylum-seeker-advocacy-forum/

Experts by Experience Employment Initiative

Description of the initiative/strategy:

The initiative supports lived experience experts in their job application and raises awareness among refugee charities about equitable recruitment to create pathways to lived experience leadership.

More information: https://www.ebeemployment.org.uk/

European Network on Statelessness (ENS)

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Hosting monthly Community Group for individuals with lived experience of statelessness. This is open for anyone to join.

More information: https://www.statelessness.eu/community

Evesham Vale Welcomes Refugees

Description of the initiative/strategy: Evesham Vale Welcomes Refugees is a group of people from Evesham and the surrounding area aiming to encourage and support the resettlement of refugees in their local area, providing assistance and creating a culture of welcome.

They also support people seeking asylum placed in the area by the Home Office.

The organisation works to set up an advisory panel in 2025.

More information: https://evwr.wordpress.com/

Freedom from Torture

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Survivor Speak Out and the Young Survivor Networks.

The national network of people who have survived torture. They use expert voices to raise awareness about the impact of torture and advocate for policy change.
Main aims:

- Promote survivors' active engagement on issues that impact our daily lives
- Raise awareness of the issues facing survivors of torture in the UK and around the world
- Advocate against torture and for awareness of its harmful impacts
- Campaign in support of rehabilitation for survivors and for the development of survivor networks worldwide
- Be the voice of survivors who have been silenced.

More information: https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/what-we-do

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Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

Description of the initiative/strategy:
Staff members and Trustees. Self-Advocacy Group: Made up of people with lived experience of detention. They are an advisory group for the charity and meet people of influence.

Walk With Us: Monthly day walks across the country with a supportive community of walkers, alongside people with lived experience.

Lived experience steering groups in various aspects of our work.

More information: https://www.gdwg.org.uk/

Greater Together Manchester

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Focus on creating roles for people with lived experience.

The Lived Experience Coordinator role is designed to include Lived Experience in strategic discussion to influence decision-making.

More information: https://crm.greatertogethermanchester.org/

Good Chance

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Stage Door programme has been a pioneering scheme for refugees and people seeking asylum to gain part-time, flexible, paid work experience at Good Chance.

It aims to nurture the next generation of theatre professionals worldwide. The initiative offers opportunities throughout all the projects and productions at Good Chance, but this is the most definitive scheme for those with lived experience to gain leadership and other skills.

Stage Door is a bespoke, one-to-one programme lasting three to six months. Through our partnership with Nimax Theatres, the organisation created the Backstage Door programme to offer a placement with the crew across all backstage departments—lighting, sound, set, stage management, and costume—at the Apollo Theatre in London's West End.

In addition, in partnership with the Academy award-winning Slick Films, they created the Behind the Scenes programme to offer trainee positions on the set for Largo, a new short film.

More information:

https://www.goodchance.org.uk/stagedoor

THE HARBOUR PROJECT

Description of the initiative/strategy:
They have recently created a Lived Experience (LEX) Panel to incorporate the voices of the people they support and adapt their service delivery to their needs.

The Harbour Project expects an initial 6-month commitment from panel members to ensure continuity of discussion and decision-making.

More information:

https://harbourproject.org.uk/

Haringey Migrant Support Centre

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Visitor's Group (Working group of visitors of HMSC who have lived experience of UK's hostile immigration system)

HMSC
HARINGEY MIGRANT SUPPORT CENTRE

More information: https://haringeymsc.org/

Helen Bamber Foundation

Description of the initiative/strategy:
Ambassadors For Change: Utilising their lived experience to do activist & advocacy work.

Client Voices Forum: Service Design: Group for clients to collaborate with HBF in the development and evaluation of the Foundation's services.
Board Observers: Two individuals with lived experience of the asylum system are part of the board. Whilst they are not trustees, they sit on the board for a three-year term

Client Interview Panellists: Clients from our Voices Forum are invited to sit on the interview panel for new positions at HBF.
Research Committee: Two experts by experience attend the Research Committee on a quarterly basis, and who support the Committee's discussions about proposed research projects and oversight of existing research projects.
Alumni Network: Monthly newsletter emailed to graduated clients of HBF with EBE opportunities, trainings, and activities to do in London.

More information: https://www.helenbamber.org/

Hope at Home

Description of the initiative/strategy:
Safe homes for survivors of slavery
Guest Voices Group - steering group inputting into organisational strategy, planning, delivery, staff recruitment and training.

The group meets online twelve times a year (once a month).

Whilst the group are equal partners with Hope at Home, it is facilitated by a member of the Hope at Home team and all group members have been assigned an individual

from Hope at Home SLT who will keep in touch with the group member outside of meetings as well as offering a wellbeing check in before and after meetings if required.

In addition to payment for their time and expertise, the group will also receive training to provide them with the confidence and skills to fulfil the role.

More information: https://www.hopeathome.org.uk/

Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group

Description of the initiative/strategy:

The organisation provides a Buddy system in their group. Selected members are trained (in safeguarding, boundaries, and mentoring) to be buddies to other members.

This involves checking in on them, offering befriending, and signposting them to sources of support. The Buddies, in turn, are supervised and mentored by Journey volunteers.

The Journey Group is restructuring. The organisation is forming a steering group so that members can take an active part in decision-making. As part of this, Buddies will have an opportunity to participate and involvement in leadership.

More information: https://journeylgbtasylumgroup.co.uk/

Mental Health Foundation

Description of the initiative/strategy: Bridges to Belonging

The organisation collaborates with community organisations to train peer leaders with lived experience to facilitate community conversations.

The Bridges to Belonging project aims to increase access to quality mental health and well-being support for people seeking asylum and refugees.

More information:
https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/programmes/refugee-programmes/bridges-belonging

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Migration Yorkshire

Description of the initiative/strategy: Advisory groups in Yorkshire and Humber region comprise around 20 members in each panel.

The groups are Hong Kong Advisory Panel for people who moved to the region under British National Oversees visa route.

Ukraine Advisory Panel for individuals arriving in Yorkshire and Humber communities, via the Ukraine Visa Schemes. And the Refugee Advisory Group in partnership with the British Refugee Council, for individuals arriving via the different resettlement schemes.

Each group meets six times a year to discuss thematic integration issues, meeting agendas and discussion topics are decided by the groups which are reviewed on a yearly basis. Panel members take part in various other activities, such as events, thematic workshops consultations, project valuations, public speaking, and coproduction activities.

More information:

Hong Kong Hub:
https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/hong-kong-hub/about-hong-kong-hub

Ukrainian Hub: https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/ukraine-hub

Migration Exchange - Leadership Development Community of Practice - Equity Catalysts

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Equity Catalysts is a Community of Practice designed to foster connections, spark conversations, and drive change in the leadership development landscape of the refugee and migration sector in the UK.

The mission of the programme is to make leadership opportunities more accessible, equitable, and impactful. By nurturing existing connections and forging new ones, the programme aims to bring about systemic change.

More information:
https://global-dialogue.org/news-equity-catalysts-transforming-leadership-in-the-uk-refugee-and-migration-sector-community-of-practice-kicks-off/

Nottingham Refugee Forum

The Communities of Identity Project (CoI) is a consortium of 14 organisations that deliver a range of activities and services that help refugees and people seeking asylum access information, advice, and guidance and provide skills and confidence-building activities, including intergenerational work and youth activities, to enable them to become active citizens. The project is funded by Nottingham City Council.

Experts by Experience Communications Team—The Dream Team—This team has lived through forced migration and media, including journalists, social media creatives, and marketing.

The organisation is in the process of building a Lived Experience advisory/research group to lead the organisation on structural change, research, and client voices. They have a particular focus on equitable employment for people with lived experience in their organisation by simplifying the application process and offering extra support around interview experiences.

More information: https://www.nottsrefugeeforum.org.uk/

One to One Children's Fund

Description of the initiative/strategy:

One to One Children's Fund runs an online leadership programme for refugees, people seeking asylum, and refugee mothers in the UK called Future Leaders Programme. Its community has 150 people who have completed the programme so far. The organisation also holds in-person leadership intensives, trainings, and events.

More information:
https://www.onetoonechildrensfund.org/future-leaders-programme

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Description of the initiative/strategy:

Praxis has four groups:
WINGS (women and children)
Brighter Futures (youth group)
GIANTS (men's groups)
NRPF Action Group (campaigners)
All of the groups serve as different purposes, some with aims to campaign, build skills, and others more leaning towards wellbeing and community

More information:
https://www.praxis.org.uk/

REDRESS

Ending torture, seeking justice for survivors

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Since 2022, they have been facilitating a network of UK-based survivors of torture, known as the **Survivor Advisory Group**, whose main priorities are protecting the absolute prohibition of torture and putting survivors' voices at the centre of domestic legislative and policy proposals.

More information:
https://redress.org/help-for-survivors/survivor-advisory-group/

Revive CIO

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Revive, a community charity based in Greater Manchester, offers several initiatives and support mechanisms focused on Lived Experience Leadership for refugees and people seeking asylum.

These initiatives empower individuals by using their experiences to drive change and support others in similar situations. Here are some key aspects.

Revive provides:

Lived Experience Leadership programmes: involving refugees and people seeking asylum in the design and delivery of services.

Advocacy and policy influence: supporting refugees in speaking up about issues that matter to them, helping to influence policy and raising awareness.

Holistic support services: Revive offers practical support, services, and advocacy to help refugees integrate and participate in their new community.
The initiatives provide essential support and ensure that the voices of those with lived experience are heard and valued.

More information: https://www.revive-uk.org/

Refugee Action

Description of the initiative/strategy and useful links:

Removing barriers to power central in RA strategy
https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/2023-2030-strategy/

Strategies and initiatives focusing on racial justice in the UK asylum system.
https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/racism/

The organisation supports other organisations in thinking about what meaningful engagement with people with lived experience looks like and how to embed it in their organisations.

Explore adapt renew programmes:

https://www.ragp.org.uk/programmes/explore-adapt-renew/shifting-power

EBE Guidance - Trustees
https://www.ragp.org.uk/guidance/experts-by-experience/trustees

EBE Guidance - Facilitating Groups
https://www.ragp.org.uk/guidance/experts-by-experience/groups
EBE Project Planning Toolkit -
https://www.ragp.org.uk/programmes/expert-by-experience-project-pilot

EBE X Coproduction Network (join meetup group or Slack channel for notification of event).
https://www.meetup.com/good-practice-get-togethers/

Facilitation courses for people to feel more confident leading group work.

Emerging Leaders Course

The EBE Connective Hub

Leadership training/ coaching
https://www.ragp.org.uk/blog/the-tree-of-life-an-approach-to-support-the-wellbeing-of-lived-experience-groups

Refugee Council

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Developing career pathways and progression for staff and volunteers with lived experience pilot.

The project has four phases and is due to be completed and launched by October 2024 as part of phase three, which includes launching and testing the pilot project. The project aims to pilot initiatives designed to ensure people with lived experience can achieve their full potential, with all the positive impacts this would entail for individuals, the refugee and migration sector and society more widely. Refugee Council is committed to ensuring these pilots are grounded in evidence and they would be tackling key barriers to development.

More information:
https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/lived-experience-career-development-research-findings/

Refugee Advocacy Forum

The London Refugee Advocacy Forum was established in 2018 by the Refugee Council with funding from the City Bridge Foundation. The forum is dedicated to supporting refugee community organisations (RCOs) to champion the needs of refugee communities in London.

It now brings together 45 London-based RCOs and supports them to develop their skills and use their reach, insight, and evidence to engage with and influence decision-makers and achieve positive change for refugee communities in the Greater London area.

Building the advocacy and influencing capacity of members and delivering annual campaigns on selected issues is one of the initiative's main objectives.

As part of the recently developed a new refugee community organisation (RCO) strategy for 2024-26, they will develop and deliver capacity building training programmes and tools tailored to the needs of RCOs, taking into account recent developments in the sector including the introduction of new technologies and digital tools. These include the Refugee Council Funding tool which is ready for RCOs to use.

Going forward, they plan to expand support to RCOs outside London to the East of England, and Yorkshire and Humberside, where the Refugee Council delivers most of its services, but will also develop resources that can be accessed by RCOs across England. They also plan to develop a new **RCO directory**, which will be hosted online.

More information:
https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/get-support/support-for-rcos/london-rco-advocacy-forum/

Refugee Advocacy Forum website: https://refugeeadvocacyforum.london/

Refugee Education UK

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Invests in young leaders from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds through their values-based Youth Leadership course.

This course aims to help young people develop a strong sense of their own value and to grow their confidence as leaders.

The course covers topics around four key values which we believe are foundational to becoming and growing as a leader:

1. Our lives have value
2. We have good things to offer the world
3. There is purpose for our lives
4. There is hope for the future

The course is interactive and use a combination of presentation, discussion, reflection, and journaling. It provides space to find out who you are: the good things you bring to the world, your uniqueness, and the specific role there is for you to play.

More information: https://www.reuk.org/leadership

Safe Passage International

Description of the initiative/strategy:
Young Leaders programme - including pastoral support, and some reward/remuneration.

Young Leaders Group (aged 16-25) that engage in campaigns, advocacy, youth activities, and organisational participation.
Young Leaders join recruitment panels, focus group discussions, staff away days, and decision-making forums.

Expert by Experience Consultants programme (paid roles) recruited from Young Leaders, paid on a Consultancy basis, working 5 hours a week.
EBE Consultants work with teams across SPI to help develop strategies, policies, and procedures; feed into decision-making at all levels of the organisation; provide feedback on ways of working and approaches.

Focus on creating roles for people with lived experience

More information: https://www.safepassage.org.uk/young-leaders

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Say It Loud Club

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Say It Loud Club is a community of LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers in the UK.

It was founded in 2010 by one of the first people to obtain refugee status in the UK on the grounds of sexual orientation. SILC is member-led, with lived experience at the heart of the organisation.

At Say It Loud Club, they believe in the power of lived experience to drive meaningful change. They offer leadership initiatives that empower LGBTQ+ refugees to share their stories, advocate for their rights, and take on leadership roles within their community.

Guided by their lived experience, the organisation helps members develop the skills and confidence to lead through workshops, mentorship, and public speaking opportunities.

More information:

https://sayitloudclub.org/

Routes Collective's Reverse Mentoring Programme; an opportunity for alumni mentees to develop their professional leadership skills, by becoming a mentor to a senior leader from Routes Collective's partner UBS.

Scottish Refugee Council

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Refugee Voice current initiatives

The New Scots Leadership Programme, run by the Scottish Refugee Council and the Social Enterprise Academy, empowers refugees and people seeking asylum to develop their leadership potential. Each programme supports 16 people from a refugee background over six months.
The new Scots Leadership programme also promotes opportunities for leaders to use or build on their skills and networks. This has included a mentoring programme with the Scottish Government.

Ukraine Collective-Supporting Ukrainian communities in Scotland - Scottish Refugee Council

The Ukrainian Collective was established in January 2023 based on an innovative concept generated by Scottish Refugee Council, which has supported and facilitated its development. The Collective represents a concerted effort to empower and support displaced Ukrainians across Scotland. Comprising 30 individuals with lived experience, diverse backgrounds, and expertise, the Collective focuses on addressing critical integration challenges in housing, employment, and language & culture.

Young People's Voices Group

YPV is a diverse group of young people fighting for the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in Scotland and is amplifying their voices to those in power. The group members meet in Glasgow but live in various local authorities across Scotland.

To contribute refugee voice to the development of the New Scots Delivery Plan, Scottish Refugee Council supports Lived Experience Involvement in the New Scots Strategy.
People with lived experience will be involved in the strategy's delivery and governance. The Scottish Refugee Council is producing guidance to support involving refugees in delivering their actions. The organisation is recruiting members for the strategy's key governance group.

Scottish Refugee Council focuses on fostering and supporting the development of refugee-led (and refugee-supporting) organisations to support and represent their communities.

More information:
https://scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/

Shpresa

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Breaking the Chains is a partnership project developed by Shpresa Programme and MiCLU, the Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit at Islington Law Centre.

The programme works closely with barristers at Garden Court Chambers and with Albanian children and young people seeking asylum. At the heart of the Breaking the Chains project is a group of children and young people trained as Immigration Champions. They advocate for their peers, train lawyers, and speak at high-profile public events where they describe their lived experience of being trafficked and fleeing violence and abuse.

Breaking the Chains is founded on the principle that children and young people need to be listened to – and this should inform every aspect of the policy and practice issues that affect their lives.

More information: https://shpresaprogramme.org/breaking-the-chains/

STAR (Student Action for Refugees)

Description of the initiative/strategy: Network of university student societies with several groups with lived experience leaders.

Equal Access Activist group (18 people) - who are all current students or graduates who have struggled to access university as a result of their immigration status and live across the UK - they work with the staff team to help lead the work we do improving access to university for people seeking asylum and refugees. They meet regularly and are provided with training, e.g., public speaking and working with the media. They are also provided with expenses/gift cards for attending meetings and for speaking at events etc.

More information: https://star-network.org.uk/

SOHTIS (Survivors of Human Trafficking in Scotland)

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Survivors of human trafficking in Scotland are key in defending human rights and influencing human trafficking and other national policies which impact human trafficking. The organisation provides:

- One-to-one and group opportunities for peer-led, lived experience consulting, service development, policy influencing
- Facilitation of sharing lived experience with policy makers, legislators, and media
- Peer support
- Trauma-informed internal training and support mechanisms including psychological interventions by qualified art therapist
- External therapeutic support
- Strong governance around contracts, remuneration, etc. informed by participation on the MS PEC Lived Experience Working Group for developing the Remuneration Toolkit for Modern Slavery Lived Experience Consultants.

More information: https://www.sohtis.org/

The RETAS Volunteer Academy

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Intentionally structured as a pathway for career development and progression for volunteers, most of whom are asylum seekers and refugees.

Three quarters of the current RETAS workforce 'graduated' from its volunteer academy and most of them are people with lived experience of the asylum. and refugee system.

More information: https://retasleeds.org.uk/about-us/

Women for Refugee Women

Description of the initiative/strategy:

Lived Experience Leadership Initiative

The organisation delivers The Introduction to Campaigns course, which shares campaigning theory and strategy with women in its network.

This will best enable them to engage and partake in campaigns meaningfully across all stages at WRW and elsewhere.

Spokesperson network supports women in enhancing their skills and confidence in public speaking, media opportunities, and people in positions of influence e.g. MPs ensuring the voices of people with lived experience are front and centre in a safe and comfortable way.

The organisation currently works with eight researchers from its network who have lived experience to conduct peer-led research into the ways in which the asylum system restricts women's liberty. Members are supported via a research grant.

The fundraising group teaches women with lived experience about different fundraising types and enables people to practice these new skills.

Focus on creating roles for people with lived experience

More information: https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk

Worthing 4 Refugees

Description of the initiative/strategy: Focus on creating roles for people with lived experience.

The organisation runs drop-in sessions led and hosted by refugees. It is also currently working on organising food and cooking events and invites refugees to lead them so that they can share their culture with those who have been supporting them. This approach empowers refugees by hosting the events.

More information: https://worthing4refugees.org.uk/

Welcome Churches

Description of the initiative/strategy: Focus on creating roles for people with lived experience, refugee integration and leadership across their network.

More information: https://welcomechurches.org/

Appendix 2

References

Sources that contributed to this report's desk-based research include:

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