

# Placing lived experience at the heart of all we do and amplifying survivor voices.

## A guide to developing survivor voice.

### Why survivor voice is so important:

At SafeLives we are committed to ending domestic abuse and if you are reading this guide, we expect you are too. Involving survivors (adults and children) and engaging their expertise is vital to ensuring we get this right and above all do no harm. Working together, we can aggregate and amplify survivors' voices and interweave authenticity and independence throughout all our work. Survivors are best placed to speak on the issues that affect them and will have unique insight into what systems work and which do not in the response to domestic abuse. They can speak from their individual and intersecting experiences that have formed their experience of abuse, and the support they have received, or not, in response to this. By listening and responding to views that are different to our own, professionals and survivors can critically assess and address challenges together, and ensure services are designed and commissioned to fully meet all their needs.

When working directly with survivors be clear about their role and agree how they want to be referred to. Some people may not identify with commonly used terms such as victim or survivor and feel that these do not encapsulate the wealth of knowledge, experience and strength that they have developed through their lived experience. At SafeLives, the term that survivors have chosen to identify themselves is Pioneer, in reflection of the pioneering work they are doing to affect change across the sector. In this document we refer to survivors as a general term to include anyone who has been impacted by domestic abuse either directly or indirectly.

### Why our approach is different



## Benefits for Local Government:

We are aware that Local Government has limited funds allocated to critical social issues, such as domestic abuse. Survivor voice is essential to optimise the benefit of public spending. Meaningfully including survivor voice will ensure early intervention will be impactful and will help minimise the cost to the public purse.

*One of my favourite quotes is if you are doing the wrong thing then doing it better makes you wronger, not righter. If you start doing the right thing wrong, then every step in the right direction is a step to improve...What we need to start with is the people who need [the services].<sup>1</sup>*

- Kathy Evans, Chief Executive of Children England

It is important to spend time reflecting on what you are doing to proactively foster survivor voice, by reviewing your organisational and multi-agency structures. Some initial areas to consider are how survivor voice is included, or not, in your funding and commissioning policies, in strategic priorities, through public messaging, through public health and community safety campaigns. The voice of domestic abuse survivors should be considered not just in relation to domestic abuse provision, but in all aspects of your public service delivery, whether that is in relation to housing, children's services, debt or financial advice, transport planning, health and wellbeing and community involvement.

Once you have completed this review, we recommend developing a charter or pledge to embed survivor voice into your approach and ensure this is prioritised going forwards. It is important that this charter is considered a dynamic document marking a commitment to meaningful action, including at a minimum systems of accountability whereby survivors are involved in assessing progress.

## Prioritising safety and wellbeing:

Before involving survivors in your work, it is important to ensure you have appropriate frameworks for managing safety and support, or that you have identified a partner agency who you can work alongside who can provide this.

It is important to consider safety first and foremost when working with survivors. If a survivor is currently in a high-risk situation of domestic abuse, for example, it may jeopardise their safety to contact them with an enquiry about lived experience. You should use tools to assess the survivor's current risk and determine what support networks they have around them before starting this work. It is important that risk assessment is survivor-led, in the knowledge that survivors are the experts in their experience and therefore best placed to advise on the level of risk they face. Recovery is not a linear process; it is important to have regular reviews and check-ins with survivors about their situation.

Using lived experience as a tool for change is personal and can have an emotional impact on the person sharing this. It is important there are structures for support before, during and after an event or consultation. If you are setting up a survivor group or will be working with survivors in the longer term, we recommend you consider support structures such as clinical supervision, access to an Employee Assistance Programme or counselling service and to have a named person within your organisation, or in your partner organisation, who holds regular check in and/or support and supervision with the survivor. They must always be given permission to accompany a survivor to events or consultations where they are using their lived experience, to be available and alert to the survivor's support needs.

As well as professional support it is essential to consider the importance of peer support. Being the only known survivor in a room with professionals can be an isolating experience and even be traumatic in and of itself. To redress this power imbalance, it is important to view survivors not only as individuals, but as groups of peers who can support each other, initiate research and empower one another to speak out. Always prioritise creating peer support spaces and involving more than one survivor in your engagement plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Evans, Chief Executive of Children England, speaking out about the Dec 2020 Green Paper on public procurement  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/943946/Transforming\\_public\\_procurement.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/943946/Transforming_public_procurement.pdf)

## Consent and confidentiality:

You must provide clear information regarding confidentiality, consent and safeguarding responsibilities and the boundaries of professionals in the context of this work. For example, you may need to specify that you will listen to concerns but will be unable to provide specific interventions in relation to these. However, it is important that you are aware of local service pathways so that you are able to signpost survivors for further support. It is important to communicate at the earliest opportunity that they have no obligation to participate in the process and that they can withdraw from it at any point.

Whenever a survivor is involved in a project, event, or piece of work they must be clear what is expected of them and how their input will be used. It is vital to obtain consent before starting your work with them. This consent can be obtained by using a signed consent form, which must be tailored to your work with the survivor and include at a minimum a project or event brief and details of how they are happy for their information to be used and stored. It is important to get explicit consent from a survivor if they wish to have anonymous participation or not, whether they consent to being video or audio recorded and options or information on how to withdraw their consent.

More details of how to gain appropriate consent can be found in the General Data Protection Act (GDPR) 2018 guidelines.

## Key considerations:

**Expert by Experience:** Survivors are experts who hold a wealth of experience and insight that is invaluable to the mission to end domestic abuse. In acknowledgment of their expertise, it is important to consider payment or other forms of compensation for their time and input.

**Equality and diversity:** We know that anyone can be affected by domestic abuse, regardless of socio-economic status, age, ethnicity, race, disability, sexual orientation, or gender. We recognise that people live intersectional lives and that people's experience of abuse will differ depending on their individual identity. The structural inequality and exclusion that people experience presents significant barriers to accessing platforms to speak and be heard. It is critical to always consider whether you are reaching the voice of people from a range of backgrounds and experiences. To do this, you must reach in to specialist, 'by and for' and community organisations in your local area.

The work must be inclusive so that all survivors feel able to take part. At a minimum, this includes making work accessible for those who speak different languages, are deaf, have a visual impairment or have disabilities, childcare and generally considering the requirements of different groups of survivors who face greater barriers to having their voice heard.

**Heart and start:** Survivors should be at the heart of the domestic abuse response and the beginning of any new project. When you are bringing survivor voice into decision making, this should be done from the beginning at the conceptual stage of any piece of work, including in the design of a consultation process as survivors can ensure that any questions asked are asked in a trauma-informed way, and in plain language as well as adapting materials for those who speak other languages or have a hearing or visual impairment. When scoping survivor voice you must consider that some voices are privileged over others and review what you can do to ensure you are reaching voices that are less privileged.

**Unmediated voice:** It is essential that the voices of survivors are heard truthfully. Survivors should be provided with a safe environment to freely share their opinions, with no fear that this might impact on them negatively. They should never be expected to become the spokesperson for your organisation or agenda. A key way to create a safe space for survivors to do this is to set clear boundaries for the group and create a group agreement or charter of how you will work together.

It is essential to review what voices you are not hearing and why, considering the barriers or power dynamics that might exist to prevent this. Many survivor consultations focus mainly on those who are accessing or who have accessed services. However, we know most survivors do not access services or may find that services with specialisms to match their specific needs do not exist and therefore they remain 'unseen'. See SafeLives' Spotlights' series for more information<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://safelives.org.uk/knowledge-hub/spotlights>

**Reflective practice and self-care:** As this work is personal and may trigger trauma symptoms, it is essential that there are structures available for support. It is important that the survivor has a choice over what type of support they receive, for it to be most meaningful to them.

**Do no harm:** It is essential to always consider the principle “do no harm” when working with survivors. Harm can have a variety of meanings, including the impact of having policies that do not adequately address survivor needs or promises for change that are not upheld. It is also important to consider clear boundaries and expectations in your work with survivors as a principle of trauma-informed practice; this is particularly important in work with survivors where boundaries are likely to have been breached during their experience of abuse.

**For further specialist information and advice, we champion the following:**

**By and for organisations:**

- Survivor Voices: <https://survivorsvoices.org/>
- IMKAAN: <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/>
- London VAWG Consortium: <https://www.wrc.org.uk/london-vawg-consortium-members>
- Change People: <https://www.changepeople.org/>
- Stay Safe East: <http://staysafe-east.org.uk/>
- galop: <http://www.galop.org.uk/>
- Mermaids UK: <https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/about-us/>

**Resources:**

- The Charter for Engaging Survivors: <https://survivorsvoices.org/charter/>
- Voices of Experience: Best Practice in Service User Involvement for Women Facing Multiple Disadvantage: <https://avaproject.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Experts-by-Experience-Seminar-Event-Summary.pdf>
- LGBT Commissioning Guidance: <http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/LGBT-Commissioning-Guidance-final.pdf>
- A Commissioner’s Guide to Developing and Sustaining User-Led Organisations: <https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide36/>
- Unequal Regard, Unequal Protection: Public Authority Responses to Violence Against BME Women in England: <https://www.sistersforchange.org.uk/2017/11/20/unequal-regard-unequal-protection/>

Please note, this list is not exhaustive but we hope will provide a starting point for further learning.