



## Executive Summary:

# 'LIFE AS WE KNOW IT'

### A Participatory Evaluation and Peer Research Project

Briege Nugent, Liam Docherty, Roxsanne McGowan, Jordan Lee, Chloe Williams, Shaun Glowa, Iain Shaw



MEDIA EDUCATION

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# THE VALUE OF PEER RESEARCH AND THE POWER OF THE ARTS AS A TOOL FOR ENGAGEMENT.

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## Introduction and Overview

The 'Life As We Know It' project was funded by the Life Changes Trust (the Trust) and delivered by Media Education and Briege Nugent. The original intention for the project, which began in December 2019, was to conduct Participatory Evaluations with young people with care experience who are taking part in projects funded by the Trust. The Trust commissioned a range of independent evaluators to review the work of its funded initiatives, and was keen that young people themselves could be part of this evaluative process (e.g. defining research questions, developing creative engagement opportunities and conducting interviews). In late 2019 a group of Peer Researchers were recruited to the 'Life As We Know It' project, with the aim of supporting and informing some of the Trust's commissioned evaluations. This report is an exploratory study of participatory evaluation and peer research, with the goal of increasing understanding and sharing learning around what it means to carry out participatory evaluation.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 virus led to a nationwide lockdown in the UK. Due to the impact of the pandemic, both the offer of involvement from the commissioned evaluations and the ability of the Peer Researchers to participate changed, and what had been envisaged from the outset for this project shifted significantly. Young people from the project have still been able to take part in some aspects of the evaluation work of Trust-funded projects, but this involvement has been more limited than originally envisaged. The Trust and Media Education/Briege Nugent therefore agreed that the 'Life As We Know It' project would adapt and consider two elements:

- the four Peer Researchers'<sup>1</sup> reflections of their own journey as Peer Researchers (primarily through 'in house' arts-based opportunities)
- engagement with independent evaluations commissioned by the Trust and carried out by Research Scotland and The Lines Between.

All of the participants, regardless of their engagement with the commissioned evaluations, were trained as Peer Researchers. The training focused on ethics, exploring the idea of informed consent, confidentiality, their role as a Peer Researcher and the importance of self-care. Throughout the process the Peer Researchers were invited to share their ideas.

This research was underpinned by an ethics of care, which means that the team considered the barriers and enablers for engagement at each stage and promoted inclusivity, exercising empathy and sensitivity.

For the first element of the project, Media Education/Briege Nugent used participatory video methods, Zines (which are self-published booklets), music and creative writing. After careful consideration and reflection, all the Peer Researchers have chosen to be named in the report as co-authors, as they are proud of what they have achieved in this project.

Their main motivation for joining the project as Peer Researchers was to help create positive changes to the care system, to meet others with similar lived experiences and to share their stories, and they have explored these desires through the arts-based opportunities mentioned above. These reflections did not always align with the 'peer research' remit of the project, so all of the stakeholders have collectively agreed to the wider reflections of the Peer Researchers being given a platform via an online gallery. This gallery can be viewed as a companion piece to the Summary and Full Report of 'Life As We Know It', and the creative work can be viewed here:

<https://artspaces.kunstmatrix.com/en/node/7634697>

The remainder of this summary, as well as the full report, focuses on the findings and learnings from the second element of the project: supporting those with lived experience of the care system to participate in evaluation as Peer Researchers.



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<sup>1</sup> In an academic context, the term 'peer research' has a very specific meaning denoting the Peer Researcher being involved in all aspects of the research, which is not the case for the participatory evaluation which took place in this project. However, a conscious decision was made to refer to the Peer Researchers as such, because this was the term they felt most comfortable and familiar with.

# Key Findings

The learning from this study underscores the importance of practicing an ethics of care which promotes inclusion and flexibility, the value of peer research and the power of the arts as a tool for engagement.

## Ethics of Care and Inclusion

Supporting the involvement of people with lived experience needs to be done ethically and with an eye to inclusion. Media Education / Briege Nugent found that it was vital to work on promoting enablers to engagement while mitigating potential barriers (see 'Steps to Enable Peer Research' for specific examples). This project also reinforced the value of communicating with the Peer Researcher's trusted support networks, maintaining regular contact with them (regardless of the level of involvement in the project) and communicating the way the person wants to communicate.

The involvement of people with lived experience in evaluations remains rare, but this study shows that peer research does not need to adopt an 'all or nothing' approach. Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation offers a useful way of thinking about the different levels or 'rungs' of participation that can be achieved. The aspiration should always be to reach those upper rungs, which in the context of evaluation would translate to full co-design of all elements from the initial evaluation brief right through to the final outputs. However, organisations should aim to start at a step on the ladder which aligns with their ability to do this work in a way that is not tokenistic.

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## Value

As well as being an ethical and 'nice thing' to do, this project has shown that involving those with lived experience has real benefits to research enquiry. This practice helps to flatten power disparities between those doing research and those being researched, leads to the creation of thoughtful research tools, enhances engagement, increases levels of reflection and inspires innovative thinking. For funders, it increases the likelihood of getting in-depth, meaningful insights and learning. For the Peer Researchers themselves, when properly supported, it can be an opportunity to not only learn new skills but also can facilitate their understanding of their own journey and create a new identity as a 'researcher'.

## Power of Arts

For particular groups of people who may experience barriers to having their voices heard, the arts - although not a panacea - offers a creative and fun way to allow people to articulate their stories and have a platform to be heard. We have found that the use of creative approaches (i.e. visual arts, music, creative writing, etc.) helps support broad and inclusive engagement with people with lived experience.

# Recommendations

- Adopt an ethics of care, inclusive, and flexible approach to the concept of peer research as opposed to an “all or nothing” approach. Create a variety of opportunities to be involved and meet people where they are.
- Design evaluations to be as fun as possible!
- Ensure there is sufficient time for Peer Researchers to settle, discover their own sense of the role, make authentic connections to peers and colleagues and understand appropriate boundaries.
- Be aware of the Peer Researchers’ wider context and consider what safeguards should be in place prior to starting the work. This may include trauma-awareness training for staff or agreeing procedures for supporting Peer Researchers with potentially triggering topics.
- Be realistic about your role as professionals or researchers and clear about the boundaries of the relationships with Peer Researchers. Where appropriate, discuss those boundaries with the Peer Researchers.
- Provide appropriate support and connect with others who play a supportive role in the lives of the Peer Researchers. People with lived experience should be supported throughout and beyond the project and have a clear path for their own journey going forward.
- Use creative approaches (e.g. visual arts, music, creative writing) to support broad and inclusive engagement with people with lived experience.



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# FLATTEN POWER DISPARITIES BETWEEN THOSE DOING RESEARCH AND THOSE BEING RESEARCHED.

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## Benefits of Peer Research

The involvement of Peer Researchers can:

- Lead to a more engaging experience for the interviewees in evaluation projects, allowing them to feel more at ease due to the tone and content of the questions. This in turn can lead to higher quality interviews, which contributes to higher quality data and learning.
- Focus the researcher more on the needs of their participants, spurring them to more carefully consider how they engage, what they are asking, and how they are asking it.
- Make it more likely that the interviewees' practical needs are well considered; for example, barriers to engagement may be more easily identified.
- Help inform the creation of ethical and well-considered research tools, analysis and 'real life' recommendations.
- Increase the level of insight and meaningfulness of analysis, through more thoughtful reflection and the opportunity to 'sense-check' your analysis – even if the Peer Researchers are not directly involved in the original analysis themselves.
- Benefit the Peer Researchers themselves, supporting them on a journey from being passive observers to active learners and advocates in their own right.



# Steps to Make Peer Research Possible

## Budgeting

- Budget appropriately for the level and types of Peer Researcher engagement anticipated.
- Give Peer Researchers a monthly wage - at least at living wage - so they can budget and have clear expectations of time they should give.

## Enabling Factors/Scaffolding

- Recruit for positions through trusted networks and establish a good flow of communication.
- Be realistic and clear about levels of involvement and responsibilities of Peer Researchers. Follow through on what you said you were going to do at each stage, and do not over-promise.
- Address potential barriers to engagement; for example, travel expenses, access to devices, or childcare.
- Refer to and treat Peer Researchers as colleagues throughout.
- Provide training to establish both the importance of ethical research and the fact that Peer Researchers are employed as experts with lived experience. There should be no pressure on them to ever tell their story, but instead to draw on their experience to help inform the research.
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- Bring trauma awareness to this work, recognising that engagement may be triggering for Peer Researchers. Work alongside trusted networks to think through what other support can be offered.
- Use the arts as a way of helping people to engage, share their views, learn new skills and have fun.



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# RECOGNISE THE BENEFITS OF BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER THAT HAVE SHARED EXPERIENCE.

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## Relationships

- Be prepared to really listen to what the Peer Researchers have to say and take their advice on board.
- Strive to achieve the upper rungs on the participation ladder, and ideally support the Peer Researchers to take on ownership of the project.<sup>2</sup>
- Be flexible, presenting different stages of involvement as choices.
- Recognise the benefits of bringing people together that have shared experience.
- Be empathetic and responsive to change, prioritising inclusivity.
- End contact sensitively, firstly ensuring that outputs are fully agreed and engagement is reduced incrementally, ideally with further opportunities outlined. Peer Researcher involvement should be viewed as a stepping-stone to the next destination, not the end of a journey.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-childrens-participation/>

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