



LIVED EXPERIENCE. STRONGER DECISIONS. BETTER OUTCOMES.

The impact of a lived experience voice in strategic decision-making to improve public health responses to substance use.

“ It’s not just about the drug. It’s about the impact on every part of your life. ”



BACKGROUND

Engaging people with lived experience in strategic decision-making is essential to improving public health responses to substance use.

This poster reflects on the impact of a person with lived experience of substance use speaking at a meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board.

Their powerful first-hand account shared the physical, psychological and social harms of substance use.



WHAT WE DID



Supported a person with lived experience to prepare and share their story at the Health and Wellbeing Board.



Created a safe, respectful space for open listening and dialogue with Board members.



Ensured the testimony informed strategic discussions on drug treatment and recovery services.



Followed up to capture learning and consider how insights could shape policy and service priorities.



OUR WHY

To ensure that the realities of people affected by substance use are at the heart of decisions that shape services, support, recovery and save lives.

THE IMPACT

Hearing directly from someone with lived experience had a powerful impact on Board members and the quality of strategic discussions.



GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Board members gained a deeper appreciation of the physical, psychological and social harms of substance use and the complexities of recovery.



HUMANISED THE ISSUE

Personal testimony moved the conversation beyond data and metrics, creating empathy and connection.



REDUCED STIGMA

Challenged stereotypes about drug use and helped reduce stigma among decision-makers.



INFORMED STRATEGY

Highlighted the importance of accessible, non-judgemental services and early intervention, informing more compassionate and person-centred policy discussions.



BETTER DECISIONS

Ensured strategic priorities and commissioning consider the realities of those directly affected by substance use.



WHAT WAS SHARED

- The escalation of substance use and loss of control
- Physical harms: impact on health, energy and daily life
- Psychological impacts: anxiety, depression, paranoia, loss of confidence
- Social impacts: isolation, relationship breakdown, loss of employment and housing
- The turning point: reaching out for help
- The importance of non-judgemental support and early intervention



KEY LEARNING

- ✓ Lived experience adds essential insight that data alone cannot provide.
- ✓ Meaningful engagement reduces stigma and builds empathy.
- ✓ Strategic forums are more effective when they reflect the voices of those with lived experience.
- ✓ Preparation, support and a safe space are key to successful engagement.
- ✓ Lived experience should be embedded in governance, not tokenistic.



WHAT THIS WORK ADDRESSES

This work contributes to:

- Improved understanding of substance use among senior leaders
- Reduced stigma and more compassionate policy discussions
- Greater consideration of accessible, non-judgemental treatment services and early intervention
- Stronger alignment of services with the needs of people who use drug treatment services
- Meaningful engagement of lived experience in governance and decision-making

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS HIGHLIGHTED



MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Building trust, preparing and supporting individuals with lived experience to share their story safely.



FACILITATION & INCLUSION

Creating inclusive spaces where all voices are heard and respected.



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Working collaboratively with partners, services and communities.



INFLUENCING DECISIONS

Using experiential knowledge to influence policy, planning and commissioning.



SYSTEM THINKING

Connecting personal experience to wider public health priorities and outcomes.

KEY TAKEAWAY



Including lived experience at the highest level leads to stronger understanding, reduced stigma, and more compassionate, person-centred public health responses to substance use.



Nothing about us, without us.
Lived experience is not just important – it is essential.



Better conversations. Better decisions.
Better outcomes for our communities.