

Struggle to Strength

Fife Voluntary Action

Evaluation Report

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**Matter
of Focus**

Executive Summary

Background and approach

Fife Voluntary Action's (FVA) two-year Struggle to Strength programme (2021 – 2023) was an ambitious programme of activity to promote collaboration and improve services for those experiencing poverty or trauma through the voices of those with lived experience. Delivered by FVA's Employability Team and two interlinked communities, the Lived Experience Team (LET) and Peer Support Network (PSN), its core aims were to:

- Build networks, skills and access to opportunities for people with lived experience.
- Build the capacity of people working in the design and delivery of employability and mental health services within Fife, and to create opportunities for peer support work and ensure decisions are informed by lived experience perspectives.

As evaluation partner for this work, Matter of Focus have supported the delivery team through cycles of self-evaluation using our outcome mapping approach and software tool OutNav. This report builds on the two interim reports developed by FVA, drawing in additional qualitative evidence captured by Matter of Focus to inform its key findings.

Key findings

Struggle to Strength has largely achieved what it set out to do across both of its core aims. The LET and PSN have been nurtured and grown into established communities and their members describe significant personal benefits to involvement including confidence, skills and access to opportunities that would not exist elsewhere. The programme has facilitated large numbers of opportunities for the LET and PSN to meaningfully impact the design and delivery of services within Fife. As a centre for expertise on co-production the programme has empowered professionals working within services with the skills and understanding they have needed to do this work well.

This has been challenging and complex work, requiring careful investment of time and skill in building relationships and in navigating opportunities as they emerge and shift. The FVA team have also invested in comprehensive self-evaluation to capture their learning and reflections.

The programme has avoided common pitfalls of co-production; both participants and stakeholders have consistently pointed to the accessibility and safety they have experienced and the genuine decision-making opportunities that have been opened up. This success has been enabled by three core themes of *how* this work was delivered that this report explores:

- The foundations this programme was built on, enabling and influencing leadership from both the internal team and partners, and the careful time and skill brought to relationship building.
- Embedding a values-based approach to co-production that enables participants to understand each other's perspectives, roles, and to develop shared aims.
- A recognition and welcoming of the inherent discomfort and difficulty of co-production, which asks participants to think differently about power and risk.

Introduction and Background

About this work

Fife Voluntary Action (FVA) is the Third Sector Interface for Fife; supporting, developing and representing community groups, voluntary organisations, social enterprises and volunteering. Struggle to Strength is a two-year programme delivered by Fife Voluntary Action's speciality Employability Team since 2021 and supported through a combination of funding from the Robertson Trust, Agnes Hunter Trust, and Fife Council No One Left Behind funding and Fife Health & Social Care Partnership. This work was informed by FVA's recognition of the importance of promoting collaboration and improving services for those experiencing poverty or trauma through the voices of those with lived experience.

The overall aims of the programme were focused in two areas:

- The impact on people engaging from a lived experience perspective, enabling the building of networks, skills, and access to opportunities.
- Impact on the design and delivery of employability and mental health services within Fife, including building the capacity of professionals, opportunities for peer support work and ensuring decisions are informed by lived experience perspectives.

The Struggle to Strength programme of work has been delivered by two interlinked and complementary strands of activity: the Lived Experience Team (LET), and the Peer Support Network (PSN). The programme was managed by the FVA Employability Development Manager with support from the LET and PSN Co-ordinators. It has also been guided and supported by a Steering Group including representation from Fife Health & Social Care Partnership, Fife College, Scottish Recovery Network, Fife Employment Access Trust, Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) and project participants.

Context

There has been a growing interest and understanding of peer support and lived experience engagement at both local and national levels which has influenced how this work has been designed and delivered.

At a national level, the Scottish Approach to Service Design and the Health and Social Care Patient Voice models place increased expectations on public services to demonstrate that they are meaningfully engaging with service users in the design and delivery of supports. The Local Outcome Improvement Plan, the Plan 4 Fife, also commits to meaningful community engagement across all policy areas and Health Boards have a statutory responsibility to engage with the public in relation to service change. Co-production goes beyond engagement in that it requires people, regardless of their power or decision-making ability, to act together to make change that is meaningfully informed by all relevant perspectives, in particular by those of people most affected by the challenge being addressed.

There has been a significant shift in the policy, funding and service delivery environment for employability services through the Scottish Government's No One Left Behind policy and the UK

Shared Prosperity Fund, and through a Scottish Government commitment to redesign mental health and wellbeing services in community settings. This policy context has enabled the creation of opportunities for Struggle to Strength to work with organisations and services, a sense of mutual interest in co-production, and a willingness to test and adapt to new ways of working.

The pace of change and increasing pressures of front-line service delivery can limit these opportunities as time and capacity are stretched. There can be uncertainty within organisations and services about how to do this work well. There is a concern that without careful consideration and planning, ideas originally intended to disrupt and change the existing system simply get co-opted by them. Projects and processes may be described as peer-led or 'co-produced' without actual insight into the core values which should underpin them or leading to any meaningful change.

Fife Voluntary Action brings experience and expertise in peer support and lived experience work built through two previous co-production projects, Delivering Differently (2017-2019) and No One Left Behind (2019-2021). Both of these pieces of work were supported by the Lived Experience Team and have been significant catalysts for the development of Struggle to Strength. This work has enabled continuity of co-production expertise through the Employability Development Manager and the Team and in the relationships and networks already developed.

Methodology

Matter of Focus is a purpose-led company that specialises in supporting public service organisations to work meaningfully with outcomes and impacts. Our evaluation approach, based on contribution analysis, enables organisations to map out and use theories of change as practical and iterative frameworks, and to use their data and evidence to track their progress towards impact. Matter of Focus have worked with Fife Voluntary Action as evaluation partner on the Struggle to Strength programme since February 2022. We have combined a tailored programme of consultancy alongside our award-winning software tool, OutNav, to support the team through cycles of outcome mapping, data auditing and analysis, which have supported their self-evaluation practices and their development of two interim reports.

In addition to a review of the two interim reports ([year 1 report](#), [year 2 report](#)) produced by the team, Matter of Focus have undertaken additional qualitative data collection activities as evaluation partner which inform this report's key findings. Data collection has focused both on the programme's 'insiders' – those engaged from a lived experience perspective or acting in a peer support capacity – and key external stakeholders they have aimed to influence working within services. This process included:

- Focus groups sessions with the Lived Experience Team and the Peer Support Network.
- Interviews with stakeholders working within relevant services.
- A findings validation event with members of the Struggle to Strength Steering Group, which included project staff, LET and PSN members, and people working within relevant services.

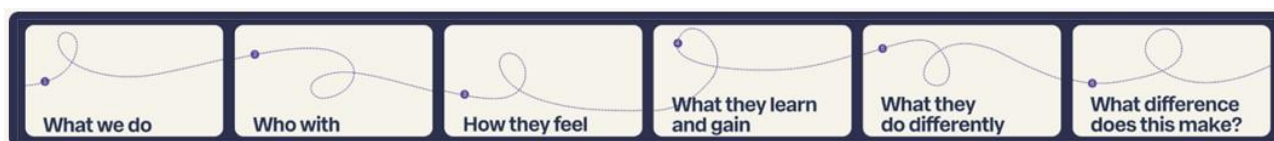
Matter of Focus have built considerable expertise in the field of lived experience and peer support evaluation and learning, which we also bring to this evaluation. This enables us to draw on learning from the wider policy and practice context.

Findings

We present findings in three parts. Firstly, we present our review of learning derived from the self-evaluation and interim reports produced by FVA. These findings are supplemented with evidence derived from our external evaluation activities. We then present additional discussion of findings from our external evaluation. Finally, we draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the overall evaluation.

Part one

The Struggle to Strength project team have undertaken comprehensive self-evaluation using the Matter of Focus approach throughout the two years of this work. During this time they created two interim reports. Learning from these reports is summarised below and presented under the evaluation headings used in the Matter of Focus approach¹ to evaluation:



Findings in this section are supplemented with some additional learning derived from the external evaluation activities undertaken by Matter of Focus.

What they did

Across both years of the programme, significant time and planning was invested in growing and building the capacity of the LET and PSN communities. Recruitment of new members and raising awareness of this work has involved engagement with community groups, social media campaigns and in-person presence.

A diverse range of capacity-building support has been delivered including mentoring, peer support, and access to training and development opportunities for members, with the team adapting to emerging needs as the work developed. The team have reflected that the time and care this work has required is complex and often 'hidden' due to the changing circumstances, needs, and availability of members.

The programme has used a dual delivery model comprising the LET and PSN communities. They are complementary and interconnected, underpinned by shared core principles of valuing lived experience (figure one). They offer different models of engagement to meet different

¹ See: <https://www.matter-of-focus.com/our-approach/>

interests and skills, with the LET having a greater focus on service design, and the PSN on the growth of peer practice in service delivery.



Figure 1: Two different but complementary communities

Building the capacity of people working within services and creating opportunities for co-production activity and peer support roles have required similar hidden, yet considerable, investments of time and energy. This means the programme team have offered a diverse range of support, from one-off advice to intensive and long-term projects, but awareness about this support and the willingness to engage with it has been established through careful relationship building with strategic partners. This has often required initial investment of time in being physically present in and confident to contribute to decision-making spaces where it is unclear what will emerge. Individual follow-up has often been critical to transforming opportunities into actions.

Who with

A significant achievement of this work has been the growth and increased stability of the LET and PSN. Both communities are now in positions where they can actively and meaningfully engage with a range of opportunities and can draw on a broad range of skills and experiences of their members. The team have reflected that they have recruited slightly fewer members for each than they had initially anticipated and that there is more work to be done in ensuring that they are representative of all sections of their community. This will be an ongoing priority focus for the team and they have set out steps for continual learning and improvement on widening engagement.

The programme has had a wide reach across organisations and services operating within Fife, in the public and third sectors, and including both front-line delivery roles as well as people working at strategic and leadership levels. As described above, these relationships have included both short and long-term engagement.

How they felt

As a centre for expertise, the values and practical approach embedded in the Lived Experience Team and Peer Support Network have acted as a best practice example of *doing* co-production and peer support work ‘the right way’. There is strong evidence across both years of activity that efforts made by the team to ensure these communities are values-led, safe and welcoming environments for participants are working well. It is also clear that the team are continuing to reflect and learn on how to do this better. This includes the commitment to better understand the needs of those not currently engaged.

A core shared principle across this work has been the valuing of lived experience. LET and PSN members reflected that they were motivated to get involved by the opportunity to use their experience to benefit others through direct delivery and the improvement in design of services and supports, and also recognised that this work can strengthen their own recovery or wellbeing.

“ Being part of this was lifechanging – becoming a volunteer and seeing how my experience could be useful to others, it has a use and makes you feel you are making something amazing out of something that was horrific”

- LET focus group respondent

Professionals were generally motivated by the recognition that peer and lived experience work is something they *needed* to do, as well as valuing it as the *right* thing to do. They often approached the programme with a specific opportunity or project in mind.

What they learned and gained

The Struggle to Strength programme has created a centre for expertise on co-production and peer support bringing clarity, and a plan for how to move forward for both individuals who want to use their lived experience to help others, and people working within services. In particular, the Co-production drop-in sessions delivered throughout the programme have enabled the evolution of a community of practice for both individuals with lived experience and professionals.

By firmly establishing and articulating the value of lived experience and the skills and attitudes which make this way of working genuine and meaningful, the programme has been able to hold a metaphorical line. This has helped reduce the risk of concepts being unhelpfully co-opted by systems to reproduce old working patterns. Whilst the programme team have resisted producing a rigid blueprint for co-production and peer support it is clear they have been able to offer a vision of how to do this well.

Both the LET and PSN members described how these interconnected communities have developed into strong centres for connecting people, opportunities and learning, and enabled them to build skills and confidence to do co-production and deliver peer support. Alongside formal skills, members also explained that the communities have supported them through the challenges and frustrations which can lead to disengagement, which was described as a risk

given the sometimes slow pace of progress.

“ the Peer Support Network brings people of like mind together and gives them this sense of belonging. Gives them space to speak about experiences.”

- PSN focus group participant

People working in services have benefitted from the advice and guidance from the programme team alongside the connections with the LET and PSN. They have described how this has made their work more achievable, overcoming barriers of recruitment and giving them the skills and confidence to plan and deliver a wide range of engagement work.

People working in services described gaining credibility from their connections with Struggle to Strength programme, which is also reflected in the team’s careful choice over which opportunities they engage with and a commitment not just to say yes to everything that has been presented.

“ [Struggle to Strength has] been a conduit from me to embed peer involvement in our work and reach out to the experts.”

– stakeholder interview

What they did differently

The work to carefully build the capacity of everyone engaged, and to plan and draw in expertise on how to do this work well, has contributed towards a growth in meaningful opportunities for co-production within Fife. Across both years of the project there have been a large and diverse number of engagement opportunities which the LET and PSN have taken up in both employability and mental health. This has included both local and national opportunities and an increase in peer paid roles.

“ Finally our voices are being listened to and heard and acted upon – that’s a miracle”

- LET focus group participant

Individuals involved in each community have described significant personal changes as a result of confidence and skills built through the programme. New opportunities taken up as a result of being part of the programme included gaining employment and volunteering positions.

Professionals engaged in this work have described how their practice improved as a result of learning and opportunities from the programme. This has included the approach to planning work, the language used by people working in services, and a renewed focus on the widest possible engagement from diverse voices.

“ [I now] take time to 'build the conditions' when delivering collaborative sessions so that both staff and lived experience voices feel safe and can speak openly”

- stakeholder interviewee

The team have identified that growing this work will require strong connections between organisations to scale opportunities, and that they should be alert to the risk of becoming siloed within Fife Voluntary Action. It will be important to share examples of how this works that do not alienate professionals or people with lived experience, but present examples of how change happens through lived experience approaches.

What difference this made

There is evidence that through this work lived experience learning was made more visible and valued in Fife. This has contributed towards a genuine approach to this way of working becoming more routine within service development and improvement. The LET now hold a number of formal positions at a strategic level within implementation, oversight and governance groups.

A specific highlight of this work has been in embedding peer practitioners within Community Mental Health Teams which has been enabled through a close working partnership with the PSN over its two-year trial. The learning gathered through this work should be of interest to other mental health redesign projects. This progress has required careful support from the programme team to ensure this work feels possible, to calm concerns with professionals, and to ensure a values base is held strongly.

“ the shift in focus to understand how we deliver being as important as what we deliver is a strong change in how we build provision with the client at heart”

- Steering Group member

The careful work to support and grow the LET and PSN ensures that there is now a growing movement within Fife for organisations and services to engage with. That this exists is a significant achievement of the programme. Whilst beyond the scope of this evaluation, there is a clear logical assumption that where services and supports are designed with the voices of diverse lived experiences at their heart they will better serve the needs of their communities. For these benefits to be felt by people experiencing services, it will be important that this approach is sustained over the long term, and is embedded with a system-wide focus to become the ‘norm’.

Part two

Here we present our additional discussion of findings from our external and independent evaluation.

None of the core concepts of this work are necessarily new. ‘Co-production’, ‘lived experience engagement’ and ‘peer support’ are reasonably established concepts. They draw on long histories of development and are visible across policy making and service delivery. So why then does the implementation of these concepts and principles still require investment and support? Individuals and groups who represent a lived experience perspective consistently highlight that there are still too few opportunities to have a seat at the decision-making table. Those opportunities that do exist are often difficult to engage with, and their impact on decisions made can be marginal and might more readily be described as ‘involvement’ and not genuine co-production. Peer work as a delivery model is growing but focus group members describe how this is applied in a spectrum of ways of working, and that there is a need to clarify and establish it as a practice.

“ people think they are doing co-production but they aren’t!”
- event with Steering Group

With most people-based change work, *how* the work is done is generally as important as *what* is planned and delivered. Evidence from this evaluation highlights that this is very much the case for lived experience and peer working. The Struggle to Strength programme’s internal interim reports demonstrate that they have largely avoided the pitfalls above and have been able to foster and develop co-production activities that have been felt to be genuine and powerful by stakeholders. Additional data collected and analysed in this evaluation has highlighted some specific and transferrable learning about the *how*, which is laid out in the section below.

Foundations, leadership and relationships

It is important to recognise that the success of this work over a two-year period did not start from scratch in 2021, and the previous work that this built on (set out in the context section) has been an important enabling factor in its success.

This programme has benefitted from **enabling leadership** from external sources at different levels. In order for any of this work to happen it has required commitment and bravery from its funders to invest resources in this way of working. Securing funding for this work has enabled a long-term mindset for the programme as a whole, as well as offering stability and security for people with lived experience moving into paid roles. Leaders within the system in Fife have enabled the programme by opening doors for new opportunities to do work and with investment of time and resources. These leaders have also had the confidence to step back from a position of power and control over the outputs of the work.

The Struggle to Strength programme has itself become a leader in co-production and peer support for services and communities in Fife, acting as a ‘go to’ source of information and best

practice and by being the driving force in bringing together diverse groups of people towards a common aim. Programme members, and in particular the Development Manager, have had strong **'influencing' leadership** roles which has required understanding and expertise on how to address and work sensitively with power imbalances and to steer groups through challenging conversations.

In both core areas of this work (building the LET and PSN, and influencing professionals working in the system) the key mechanism for delivering the programme has been the development and nurturing of relationships and networks. These relationships don't just happen; they have required persistence from the team and an ability to be led by opportunities as they emerge. This is also challenging to track and quantify compared to more tangible project activity, as it is not always clear how individual engagements lead to longer term opportunities.

The relationships developed through this programme, both those sustained from existing work or built through new connections in the past two years, have required significant investment of time from the team. It's often challenging when working in services that key team members leave, meaning that these relationships have to start again from scratch, and there is a concern that, without the influential leadership the programme has relied on, this could happen.

A values-based approach to co-production

Across all strands of this work there has been a fundamental shared recognition of the value of lived experience. Whilst this may seem uncontroversial, the Steering Group have expanded on this to give further insight into what this actually *looks* and *feels* like in practice and why in some instances that sense of genuineness has been lacking.

A core part of genuinely valuing lived experience is embedding a commitment to **authenticity** and **honesty** from all those who participate in this work. It can be easy for those involved in a professional capacity to want to present their work in a good light, which creates a barrier between the different perspectives in a room. We heard how where everyone comes to a space with **humility**, an ability to respond with **curiosity** (rather than defensiveness) and an **openness** to learning and improvement then this work is more powerful. Stakeholders who have engaged with the programme have often come to this work with shared aims which may make them more open to embodying these values.

The Steering Group also highlighted that it is artificial and potentially stigmatising to make a binary distinction between 'professionals' on one side, and 'people with lived experience' on another. For professional peer support roles both descriptions are true, but also many professionals engaging in service design and delivery may be bringing their own lived experience, whether they choose to communicate this or not. The Steering Group highlighted that what is more important is to hold clarity on which perspective an individual is there specifically to represent for this purpose. In co-production work there is a risk that if this is not clearly understood then the need for wide participation from diverse voices could be downplayed, with professionals feeling confident they have considered what a person experiencing the service would want.

A further, and more practical, application of a values-based approach is to ensure that the perspective of lived experience is ingrained right from the beginning of a piece of work, for example in early-stage planning groups. If this isn't done from the beginning it is easy, despite the best of intentions, for work to default to previous approaches. The Steering Group shared examples where even short-term pauses in support had led to a reversion to old ways of working. Support for this kind of values-based approach needs to be sustained and supported and built into service design process by coming back regularly to the shared rules and values of the project.

If it's not difficult we aren't doing it right

A core principle for this programme has been the recognition that it is not just people coming from a lived experience perspective who need to feel safe in doing this work; professionals engaging need to feel safe too. This, however, can at times feel at odds with the requirement for humility and a learning mindset set out above. We heard that one barrier to engagement for professionals to co-produced and peer approaches is fear and discomfort. For example, some feel there is a risk of re-traumatisation for people with lived experience inherent in such approaches. While such positions are no doubt well-intentioned they are also potentially paternalistic. However, we heard that such fears can be expressed among people with lived experience, making the case for the careful selection and support for people who do wish to get involved. We also heard of structural barriers that can get in the way of engagement, or there is a perception that they will do so.

“ Psychologists in the group would have been quite hands on and risk averse. FVA helped us to meet in the middle”

- Stakeholder interviewee

For these reasons, this already complex work brings an additional layer of complexity for all working in this space and may go some way to explaining the urge within services to revert to more traditional and lighter touch models of consultation. The Steering Group reflected that while it was important to communicate that some degree of discomfort was likely when adopting these approaches, there was a need for sensitivity and to not communicate in a way which put people off altogether. The key message highlighted here however was that for co-production to be truly genuine and meaningful, it is important that these fears, complexities, and barriers are explored and worked through. This can be difficult and sensitive work, therefore any process which does not encounter these challenges has been “doing something wrong” and is likely to be stuck in old models of thinking which produce tokenistic consultation.

The leadership, relationships, and values base that the Struggle to Strength programme has built on and developed over the past two years have demonstrated an approach which can take on this difficulty without getting stuck, the ‘how’ described above. Whilst it has evidenced great progress towards its two aims, the team have reflected that what has emerged is a growing but fragile movement in Fife. Should one or more parts of this model fall away or take a different

direction, the underlying assumptions of future progress are unlikely to hold. Ongoing investment and nurturing of this way of working will be required to build on its success and to navigate the complexities and nuance described above.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Struggle to Strength programme's two interim reports and additional evidence presented in this report tell a story of an ambitious project which has largely achieved what it set out to do. Across its two core aims of building the skills and capacities of people with lived experience and people working within services to do co-production and peer support in Fife, we saw clear progress, with significant high-quality opportunities emerging as part of a growing movement of lived experience practitioners and developments.

The team have committed to a significant and comprehensive approach to evaluation across the two years of this work. This is particularly challenging for organisations delivering this type of emergent and relational intervention where progress towards outcomes is difficult to track and predict. The team have been supported by a reflective mindset in which they routinely capture and act on what they are learning about their delivery, which has enabled the identification of the themes set out in this report.

The additional evidence captured by Matter of Focus and presented in this report has been more heavily weighted towards strategic co-production activity and learning compared to themes about development of peer support practice. This may be as a result of the challenge of tracking the emergence of new peer support roles directly to this programme as well as the significant learning generated from strategic work.

At the end of the two years of the programme there is an energised but fragile movement in Fife committed to the value of lived experience. The energy is derived from an increased appetite and capacity from LET and PSN members and from people working within services to build on this work. There is a risk, however, that these approaches are vulnerable due to the complex power shifts required and the discomfort and uncertainty this can cause for all involved in doing this work. The movement is fragile as it would be easy for many of the areas where progress has been made to revert back to old ways of working without the care and persistence of a team committed to working through discomfort and challenge.

Recommendations

- That the team continue to build on their existing evaluation practice by reviewing their current theory of change to integrate learning from this work and refine its focus. There is a need for even better ways to communicate the impact of this work which could include case studies and a focus on how this work is impacting the system as a whole.
- That funders appreciate the challenges raised about adaptive and relationship-focused work from this report, and support organisations through realism in relation to targets and outcomes, and investment in the core infrastructure of lived experience work.
- For local planners and those working to deliver services to continue to benefit from this centre for expertise there is a need to continue to invest in the structure that holds the work together, both through investment of resource and strategic support.
- That the programme team carefully plan their ongoing activity, considering the values base and conditions set out in this report as key enablers for change. When scaling this work it may be helpful to focus their efforts on opportunities where these enablers exist, to further build the strength and evidence base of their movement.