

WESTERN SYDNEY COMMUNITY FORUM

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
AND EMBEDDING LIVED
EXPERIENCE IN GOVERNANCE



EMBEDDING LIVED EXPERIENCE

TOOL

Acknowledgement of Country

Western Sydney Community Forum acknowledges First Nations peoples as the sovereign Traditional Owners and Custodians of the unceded lands and waters on which we work and live. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We respectfully recognise all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their cultures and their heritage. We acknowledge past and present injustices and commit to walking alongside First Nations peoples.

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What is community engagement?

Community engagement is an important part of building a person-centred service system which meets the needs of diverse communities and is representative of the people it is intended to support. It refers to an “intentional process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders, and communities to shape the decisions or actions of members of the community, stakeholders, or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity, or outcome” (Engagement Institute, 2025). In the context of the community services sector, this means that organisations are purposefully working with the people they support to shape their services, systems, and initiatives.

Engaging with the community and people with lived experience has several key aims. These include producing better outcomes for people and communities, contributing to realising a person’s right to participate in decision-making around issues that impact them, and legitimising or authorising policy processes (Lumby, 2024). During an engagement process, there are different levels of participation that may be involved. Participation levels may range from seeking consultation and feedback from those impacted, to placing final decision-making powers in their hands (IAP2, 2026). Although community engagement can be achieved through a wide range of mechanisms, there has been growing recognition of the importance of ensuring that community engagement is meaningful and not tokenistic (Lumby, 2024).

One approach to meaningful community engagement involves embedding lived experience in governance. Having lived experience means that an individual has either directly encountered a situation or challenge themselves, or they have first-hand experience supporting someone in their life in that context (Government of Victoria, 2025). When embedding this form of community engagement in governance, organisational cultures, practices and systems are guided by the perspectives and priorities of people with lived experience (Hodges et al., 2023). This includes ways of working, decision-making processes, and mechanisms of evaluation.

Embedding lived experience in governance in the community services sector is important because it supports the development of an integrated service system which recognises the knowledge and the expertise of the people who engage with it. This further facilitates an understanding of intersectionality, and the different ways that people may engage with services due to the overlapping factors associated with their unique identities, experiences, and vulnerabilities. This is particularly important in a region like Western Sydney, where the compounding impact of geographic, historic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors have a significant impact on community need and the way community engages with services.



“Engagement is an intentional process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders, and communities to shape the decisions or actions of members of the community, stakeholders, or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity, or outcome.”
– Engagement Institute

Purpose of this resource



The purpose of this resource is to provide a tool to support the integration of lived experience into the community services sector, highlighting practice examples of ways that community engagement and embedding lived experience have already been implemented in the Western Sydney context.

This has been informed by a range of community organisations and service providers operating across multiple areas of community services in the region. The aim is that the sector will be able to use these engagement and governance tools and strategies to embed lived experience at each stage of service delivery, whether it is related to understanding the needs and goals of a community, designing and delivering initiatives, or evaluating a

service's effectiveness and areas for improvement. This is vital to ensure that the service system is fit-for-purpose, with the perspectives, experiences, priorities, and lived realities of services users being considered throughout planning and decision-making processes.

Guiding principles

Accountability

Collaboration

Continuous Improvement

Empowerment

Partnership

Person-centredness

Respect

PRACTICE EXAMPLE



”

“People with lived experience of gambling harms feel heard and their voices are communicated widely in a variety of forums.”

Health Promotion Charity

Gambling Impact Society NSW

This organisation’s management committee is primarily comprised of people with lived experience of gambling harms, who work in partnership with professionals. They co-design and deliver professional skills training and community education programs, which are delivered by peer educators working with gambling treatment providers.

Approaches to community engagement and embedding lived Experience

There is no singular way to engage in the practice of community engagement and embedding lived experience in governance. The combination of practices that works best depends on the type of support an organisation provides, the context it operates in, and the priorities and perspectives of the people it supports. This table outlines a collection of approaches to community engagement and embedding lived experience utilised by different community service organisations in Western Sydney.

| APPROACH | CHARACTERISTICS |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Advisory Group / Committee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A group of stakeholders and people with lived experience appointed to provide advice, counsel and feedback • Provides guidance and makes recommendations • Allows organisations to hear directly from a target group • Does not have decision-making authority • Can shape organisational strategy, influence key decisions, and identify risks or opportunities • Facilitates an embedded process of structured, ongoing consultation |
| Board Members with Lived Experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with lived experience are appointed to the governing body or board of the organisation • Gives people with lived experience decision-making authority • The perspectives of people with lived experience are directly considered in strategic direction, governance and compliance, and risk management |
| Co-Design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies and procedures require the active participation of people with lived experience in strategic planning, service design, program development and policy development • People with lived experience are involved from the beginning of the process • People with lived experience are given genuine power, including an active role in decision-making • A collaborative and iterative process • Shared ownership |

Approaches to community engagement and embedding lived experience

| APPROACH | CHARACTERISTICS |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ethical Storytelling Processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting and sharing stories of lived experience • Purpose is to uplift the storyteller's voice, experience and power • Gives agency and control to the storyteller • Stories are collected and shared for a clear and specific purpose • Insights gained from storytelling are used to guide and inform organisational policies, practices and processes |
| Lived Experience Leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with lived experience are appointed to operational leadership or executive positions within the organisation • Gives people with lived experience decision-making authority • The perspectives of people with lived experience are directly considered in strategic direction, policies, processes, and program development • There are clear processes and procedures in place for recruiting and supporting people with lived experience in leadership positions |
| Peer Workers and Educators | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers with lived experience use their expertise to provide support and education • Feedback mechanisms provide peer workers and educators opportunities to influence the way the organisation functions • May be involved in decision-making at the project level • Contributes to fostering an organisational culture which amplifies the perspectives of people with lived experiences |
| Systematic Collection of Service User Feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational services, programs, policies and procedures are evaluated by service users • Feedback mechanisms consider accessibility requirements of service users • Service user feedback is used to inform the development of the organisation's systems, processes, initiatives, policies, and strategic direction • May be collected formally or informally • Drives continuous improvement |

Practice examples

Community Services Provider

CASS Care

The organisation's Board of Directors reflects the cultural diversity of the communities it serves, alongside representation from people with disability and across a range of ages. This ensures that these perspectives are captured in both governance and service oversight. Their aged care Consumer Advisory Body serves as a mechanism for the voices and experiences of service users to directly inform service planning and decision-making. Local Management Committees, made up of both staff members and volunteers from the population of people engaging with the service, further provide advice on the planning and delivery of programs and activities.

"Members [of the Consumer Advisory Body] actively contribute...Their feedback and lived experience help inform service improvements and support [us] to deliver care that is more responsive to the needs and preferences of older people and their carers."

"Centralising expertise in a disability led organisation ensures Australians who are blind or vision impaired receive effective and tailored support and strengthens systemic impact and efficiency for government."

Disability Representative Organisation

Blind Citizens Australia

Most staff and volunteers are blind or vision impaired. During recruitment, experience with vision impairment is highlighted as a highly valued asset and people with lived experience are encouraged to apply. The organisation's constitution states that appointment on the Board of Directors or as Chief Executive Officer requires full organisational membership. To become

a full member of the organisation, an individual must be vision impaired. This means that the organisation's governance is led by people with lived experience. Policies and position statements are also developed in consultation with members, under the guidance of a committee comprised of member representatives from states and territories and the board.

Considerations for embedding lived experience

When creating a plan to authentically embed lived experience governance in an organisation, it is critical to reflect on the current organisational landscape and examine how people with lived experience will be involved, encouraged, and supported to provide their expertise and perspectives. There are a number of key questions for organisations to reflect on before developing an action plan:

- *Whose voices, perspectives and experiences should be heard? Who is impacted by the organisation's decisions, policies and practices?*
- *How are people with lived experience currently encouraged to contribute to the organisation's planning, services, policies, processes, and practices?*
- *What barriers may prevent people with lived experience from engaging with the organisation? What power dynamics exist, and how can they be minimised?*
- *How would those impacted prefer to engage? Is it possible to integrate lived experience in multiple ways?*
- *How can the organisation ensure that engagement is meaningful?*
- *How will people with lived experience be compensated for their time? What resources are required to support the integration of lived experience in governance?*
- *What support is available for those who share their expertise with the organisation?*
- *What risks may emerge, and how could they be addressed?*
- *What accountability mechanisms does the organisation have?*
- *How will the organisation ensure that processes and policies support people with lived experience to contribute to planning, design, delivery and evaluation?*
- *What is the goal of embedding lived experience in organisational governance? How does this align with the organisation's vision?*
- *Who will be responsible? How does this flow onto the rest of the organisation?*

Common barriers and strategies for success



Common barriers

- Inconsistency across an organisation's understanding of the meaning, purpose and importance of lived experience
- Resource and capacity constraints preventing the development and delivery of engagement processes
- Lack of trust or capacity to engage by people with lived experience, particularly those who may have been let down or harmed by previous engagement
- Leadership focusing on other priorities

Strategies for success

- Clearly identify the organisation's individual purpose for engaging people with lived experience
- Develop processes and policies in collaboration with staff and people with lived experience
- Ensure that there is clear and ongoing commitment from leadership to prioritise lived experience and demonstrate an attitude that recognises its value
- Build in reflective practice and a variety of feedback mechanisms throughout the organisation for leadership, staff and people with lived experience to inform continuous improvement processes

Practice examples

Community Legal Support

Western Sydney Community Legal Centre

Community engagement is prioritised through formal and informal mechanisms including outreach, client surveys, debriefs and structured reflections from staff. Lived experience is intentionally embedded on the Board, as well as by valuing lived experience as a form of expertise during recruitment. Advisory groups and targeted consultations are used to inform program design, service accessibility and policy positions. These practices are reflected in governance, community engagement, and service delivery policies, which formally commit the organisation to valuing lived experience and community voice.



“Clients report feeling heard, respected, and understood, rather than treated as passive service recipients. Community partners are more willing to collaborate, knowing that decisions are informed by genuine community insight.”

Specialised Service

For people who have experienced institutional trauma

When establishing their service, this organisation had advisory committees with people with lived experience. After the service was set-up, these committees disbanded and two smaller groups emerged – an advocacy group led by people with lived experience, and a service provider and lived experience committee on specific sector practices. This highlights how embedding lived experience in governance also requires an organisation to evolve to meet its changing context and ensure that it remains responsive to the way people with lived experience feel that their engagement would be most meaningful.



“The people with lived experience often don't see... just how much they contribute and influence change.”

Relevant Western Sydney Community Forum resources

- Governance and Leadership eLearning modules
- Leadership Series for Emerging Leaders
- Cultural Safety and Responsiveness Workshops
- Customised In-House Facilitation and Training
- Microcredential - Evaluation for the Community Services Sector: Evidencing our Impact
- Support and Advisory Service
- UNSW ImpactMaker Research Collaboration

References

Department of Health. (2025). *Lived Experience*. Victoria State Government.

Engagement Institute. (2025). *From IAP2 Australasia to the Engagement Institute*.

Hodges, E., Leditschke, A., Solonsch, L., Singh, J. & Blazewicz, T. (2023). *A toolkit to authentically embed lived experience governance: Centring people, identity and human rights for the benefit of all*. Prepared by LELAN for the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum and the National PHN Mental Health Lived Experience Engagement Network. Mental Health Australia.

International Association for Public Participation (2026). *Public participation pillars: Helping you design and implement effective public participation programs*.

Lumby, C. (2024). Lived experience engagement and participation: Current approaches and emerging practice developments in the public sector. *National Mental Health Commission*.

Appendix A - Template: Action Plan

| Consideration | Action <i>What steps will you take?</i> | Responsibility <i>Who is responsible for planning, implementing and evaluating this action?</i> | Timeframe <i>When will this action be implemented? Is it short-term, medium-term, or long-term?</i> | Evaluation Mechanism <i>How will you track your progress and measure success?</i> |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Accountability | | | | |
| Collaboration | | | | |
| Continuous Improvement | | | | |
| Empowerment | | | | |
| Partnership | | | | |
| Person-centredness | | | | |
| Respect | | | | |

Appendix B - Template: Paid Community Participation Policy

Primary Responsibility: *[Insert position name]*

Policy Statement:

At *[insert organisation name]*, we believe the greatest asset of our organisation is its people. Ensuring the community and service users are part of the conversation is central to *[insert organisation name]*'s governance and operations. It is this belief that influences our approach to working towards thriving and inclusive communities with and for our clients.

We recognise that clients, service users and the community strengthen the work and governance of *[insert organisation name]* in critical ways. People with lived experience (PWLE) validate our research and policy positions, making our work more meaningfully aligned to the needs, strengths and aspirations of the clients and communities we represent and service.

[Insert organisation name] offers *[insert, e.g. an honorarium]* to clients, service users and community members to acknowledge the labour, time, and intellectual property that people with lived experience contribute to our organisation.

Definitions:

[Insert definition or description]

Benefits of Paid Community Participation:

[Insert organisation name] recognises that people with lived experience have the right to contribute to policies and decision-making that affects their lives. Paid community participation strengthens *[insert organisation name]*'s work and contributes to our governance, operations and services. People with lived experience have expertise that contributes an essential part of the work of *[insert organisation name]*. Supporting people with lived experience to contribute their expertise to our research, policy, services and projects addresses the circumstances that prevent people from participating in social and economic life. Importantly, it underpins an approach that integrates policy and practice.

Scope of the Policy:

Paid participation is defined as an activity whereby a person with lived experience is personally invited by *[insert organisation name]* to participate in an activity through which the organisation will receive a benefit that assists it in fulfilling its functions under the Constitution and/or Strategic Plan.

Payment of participation fees will be made when individuals:

- *[Insert list of activities, e.g. participate in research or consultation sessions.]*

The payment of participation fees will not be made under the following circumstances:

- *[Insert list of exceptions, e.g. where the person with lived experience specifically requests that payment is not made.]*

Where payment for participation is intended to be made by *[insert organisation name]*, it will be discussed with the participant in advance of any activity that may be considered eligible for payment.

A Commitment to Diversity:

The process for choosing candidates should include, where possible, a demonstrated commitment to support community members with lived experience who fall into the categories below:

- Residents of the greater Western Sydney region
- IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, People of Colour)
- Women, LGBTIQ+ people, children and young people, people with disability, older people, people living with mental illness

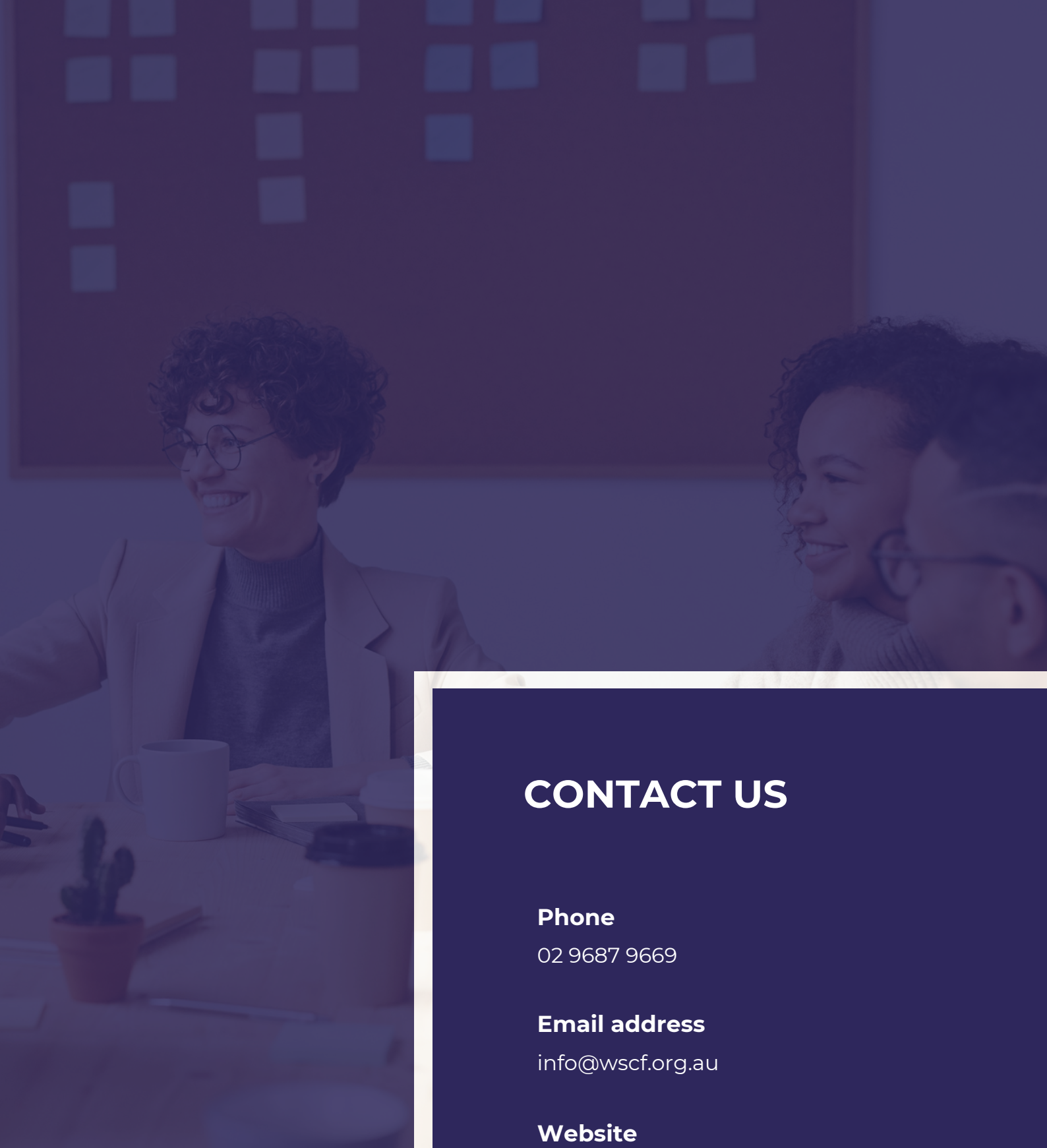
Procedures:

- Walking Alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: *[Insert organisation name]* is committed to walking alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and works with First Nations communities in a variety of contexts. This commitment extends to ensuring that First Nations peoples are always offered payment in the form of an honorarium and/or other support when sharing their lived experience. In the case where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not wish to receive payment, *[insert organisation name]* commits to donating an agreed payment to an Aboriginal-owned not-for-profit entity that the person chooses.
- Payment Options:
 - *[Insert payment options, e.g. an invoice quoting ABN or a Statement by Supplier Form.]*
- Declaring Income: People with lived experience may receive a Disability Support Pension or other income and may need to declare the honorarium as income. It is recommended that people seek independent financial advice regarding impacts on their specific financial circumstances.
- Cultural Safety: Engaging people with lived experience has the potential to re-traumatise people who experience the cumulative effects of stress and systemic injustice. Good mental health and psycho-social wellbeing continue to be pressing challenges for communities. Mental and physical health issues intersect with other lived experiences for people. For people who experience racism, LGBTIQ+ people and others who experience inter-generational trauma, the effects are often greater. Offering a spectrum of supports to people with lived experience is critical to ensure that people with lived experience are not re-traumatised when they work with *[insert organisation name here]*. Offering a range of options for support means that people with lived experience can choose the right type of support that is most suitable for them.

[Insert organisation name here] offers the following options for people with lived experience:

- *[Insert list of supports offered, e.g. Employee Assistance Program or Lifeline service.]*

- Payment Guidelines: To inform *[insert organisation name]*'s approach, guidelines set by *[insert guideline, e.g. Health Consumers NSW or other body]* are used. Notwithstanding the *[insert name of payment schedule]*, the *[insert position here]* may from time to time approve an alternate payment structure for extraordinary circumstances.



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