



2021-2022

# ANNUAL LEARNING REPORT

PEOPLE'S VOICE MEDIA



<https://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk>



**"Our work supports people to improve their own world, and the world around them"**

## INTRODUCTION

Hello! Many of you reading this will already be familiar with our work, but for those who aren't, let us introduce ourselves. People's Voice Media is a social change charity that is committed to changing the world, one story at a time. Our vision is to create a just world in which people's lived experience is heard, valued and has influence.

We use lived experience storytelling - or as we call it, Community Reporting - as a tool for social change. Our work supports people to improve their own world, and the world around them, by using their experiences to address inequalities and achieve social justice. We work with people's stories to inform services, research and policy and seek to change institutions, systems and society for the better.

This is our annual learning report. It's based on a series of reflective

interviews carried out with the people we've worked with on 17 social change projects in the last 12 months, and our own team. In these interviews - or, rather, conversations - we chat about our work and the changes we are seeing because of it. These conversations help us identify the impact we are making, as well as how we can improve what we do. The report will look at:

- Individual impact and learning - the effect our work has on people's lives
- Organisational impact and learning - how what we do affects communities, services and institutions
- Systemic impact and learning - how we are contributing to larger waves of change
- Internal impact and learning - how we are developing as an organisation

**"It does give truth to power for people who don't get heard in other ways."**

**“To have everyone in a room and to give me these amazing bites of their knowledge and experience ... was absolutely amazing for me.”**

## **INDIVIDUAL IMPACT & LEARNING**

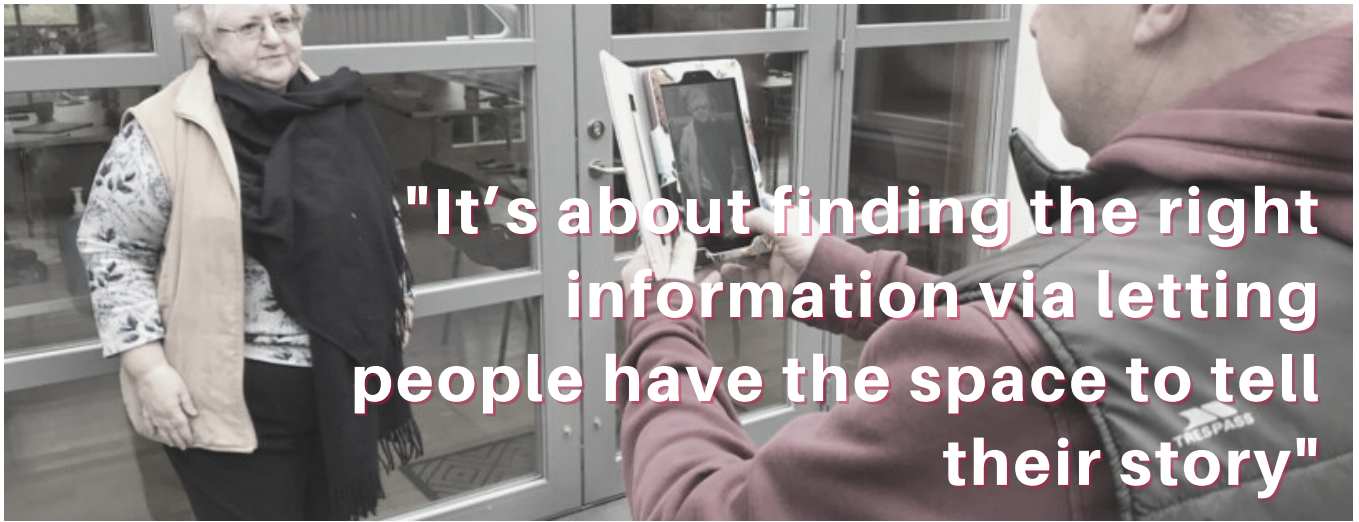
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It's really warmed our hearts to hear that **our work has helped some partners get to know the people they work with better and has helped strengthen those relationships.** This is particularly true in the case of Gorse Hill Studios in Greater Manchester. They have been partnering with us on the CONTINUE project to bring youth voice into COVID recovery plans. One of Gorse Hill's youth workers spoke to us about how hearing the young people opening up about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic helped him to get to know them better – especially as he was new to his role at the start of the project. He also discusses how one young person involved with CONTINUE has now gone on to be involved with other projects at Gorse Hill, demonstrating how the project has helped Gorse Hill's relationship with the young people it works with. Commenting on the Conversation of Change event we ran – which saw the young people discuss project findings with stakeholders (including local MPs, councillors and youth workers) – the youth worker saw **a noticeable growth in the young people's confidence** as the event went on.

Other events that we have hosted have seen



**"We gave plenty of space to just reflect and share"**



similar confidence boosts granted to people and practitioners who work with lived experiences storytelling. One person who attended the Community Reporter Network Annual Conference (held online in 2021 due to continued COVID restrictions) said:

*I think for me everything was useful because I was literally right at the very beginning of exploring the whole concept and the whole environment. So to have everyone in a room and to give me these amazing bites of their knowledge and experience ... was absolutely amazing for me.*

We're really pleased with comments such as this one as it tells us that not only are we **reassuring people in their practice**, but we're also gathering together a great group of practitioners to share their knowledge and experience. Spaces such as this **gives individual practitioners food for thought** in order to help develop a best practice when it comes to working with lived experience stories and in social change arenas.

Another learning which applies to pretty much all aspects of our work is that giving people space to open up and talk without agenda, is an act of handing over or shifting power. This is something we are passionate about at People's Voice Media and we're delighted to see it reflected in people's discussions of our impact. One of the facilitators working on the Long COVID project – a partnership


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with Greater Manchester NHS and AQuA – told how the storytelling session “was very emotional for people and powerful, we gave plenty of space to just reflect and share.”

In our project with CatStrand, an arts and community centre in Dumfries & Galloway, it was fed back to us by one of our partners who was new to Community Reporting that: “The initial concept I thought was great because it does give truth to power for people who don’t get heard in other ways.” This person also told us he will continue to use Community Reporting in the future. For him, it’s important to stay connected, especially because of where he lives which in a rural area. As well as posting his own stories he is interested in listening to other people’s stories. Another partner added: “It’s about finding the right information via letting people have the space to tell their story and then whittling things down through ethical questioning.”

Creating spaces for people to share experiences and helping people challenge top-down power structures, are key purposes of the Community Reporter network. That shift in power can start with people taking back their own power through sharing their story without agenda, which can be a **cathartic experience**. So, it’s great to see that recognised, reflected and revealed as an impact for individuals who we work with.

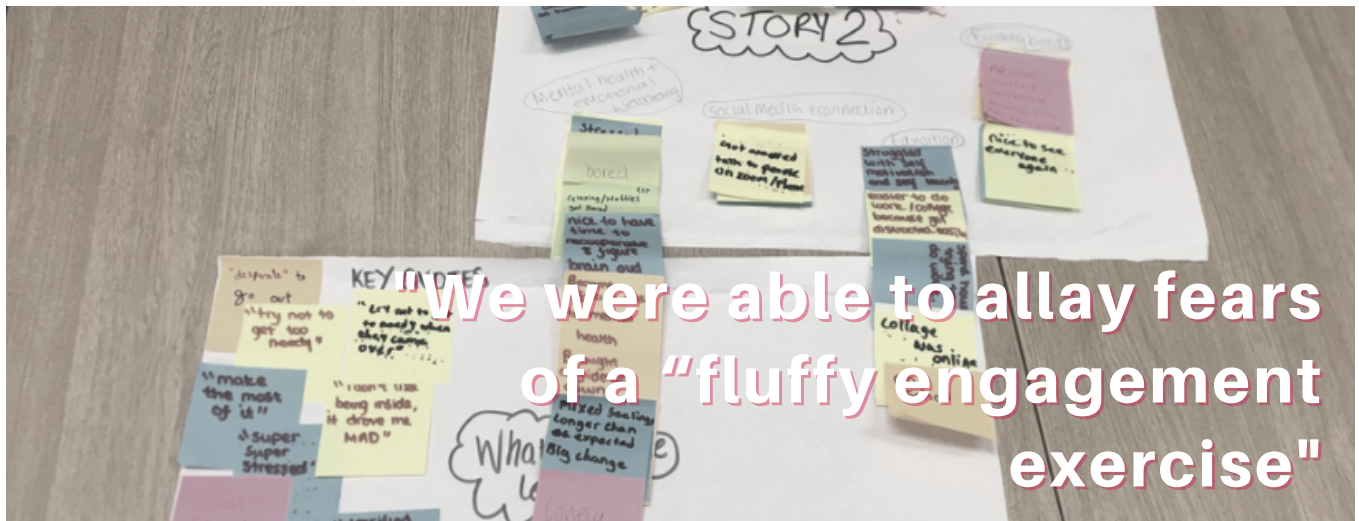
Within people’s reflections, we’ve also learned about the areas of our work that we can improve. For instance, much of our work tends to be in towns and cities, but we have begun to engage with people and organisations in more rural settings. It’s clear that we need to think more about how **people in rural settings face barriers to inclusion in our work**. This was clear from a story gathering project we did in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University and addiction recovery service, We Are With You in Cornwall. A support worker at We Are With You, explained to us how one of the challenges of the project was the logistics of getting people all in one room together. In a rural area like Cornwall where there are limited bus services and at peak holiday times a “20-minute journey can take an hour and a half”. This made getting people together as a group in one location difficult.



For some of the project, we spoke to people individually and visited them on an individual basis. This worked well as it negated the travel issue but this approach also created some problems. As the support worker stated, “the people didn’t get the education of the introductory session like they would have done if they came into the [group session].” This resulted in people not having much of an understanding of the context of why they were telling their story: “I don't think we gave a good enough overview of actually what the whole thing was about” He explained that “our clients tell their stories all the time” to different support services and self-help groups and that it can get confusing around the context and reason why they are telling their story. One support worker on the project, suggested that “what could have helped is if people received a bit more information prior to it... so maybe we could have posted them out a pack about what People’s Voice Media was about.”. Good, simple suggestion - we love it!

We also found that, on projects where we take a lead of story gathering, the skills development of participants isn’t as strong, such as on the Camden Disability Action project. The positive in this case is that the interviews were carried out with 'empathy' but the downside is that individuals don't get a chance to develop skills for sustainability/future usages. One of the partners on the project felt that: “there wasn’t a strong emphasis on being reporters throughout the project and the title Community Reporters became less and less relevant as the project went on.” The learning here is that we need to take care to include partners and participants at every step and not neglect skills development in areas where we are taking the lead.

Over-consultation is definitely an issue in the field of lived experience storytelling. We’ve had people share their experiences of past projects with other organisations where they feel that they had given their story time and time again but **without anything every being done with it**. People taking part in the Long COVID sessions, in particular, “expressed concerns that this was a ‘fluffy engagement’ exercise. A few had shared their stories and nothing had come of it, also they continually share their stories when seeking support, often to be told we can’t help you.” These experiences were of



We were able to allay fears of a “fluffy engagement exercise”

previous encounters with healthcare services and, in this specific project we were able to allay fears of a “fluffy engagement exercise” and advise the people taking part how their story would be used and the impact we were working towards.

#### The key differences our work has made:

- Enabled people to set their own agendas and changed the power dynamic
- Strengthened relationships between people, and people and services
- Developed people’s confidence, skills and capacities
- Shared knowledge between people

#### What we learned:

- It is important to be clear about how people’s stories will be used and realistic about the change we hope to create with stories
- Feedback loops with storytellers demonstrate that we value their contributions and they are aware of the impact that their stories have had
- We need to rethink and improve how we work in rural areas to ensure that we open up access to people AND that that experience is one of value.

**“More people can be involved in the actual conversation.”**

## **ORGANISATIONAL IMPACT & LEARNING**

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We're now moving onto the parts of our work that branches out from individuals, and reaches communities, services and organisations. One such example City of Trees who we worked with on the Longford Park project, which sought to gain insights into how the people of Stretford, Greater Manchester use Longford Park in order to decide how the park should be developed in the future. City of Trees have previously used surveys and questionnaires to conduct this kind of research but they found **gathering stories using video to be much more engaging:**

*Collecting data via video is something we've never done before as an organisation as far as I'm aware, and that is really helpful as it means more people feel like they're involved in the data collection. Rather than reading a survey or things like that, it's like more people can be involved in the actual conversation that happens on site. I think that was one of the most valuable things that we found in the work that Cat [the facilitator] did.*

Seeing this increased engagement will hopefully lead to organisations such as City of Trees using







"It's like a 'pass-it-on' model. It's like a pyramid scheme without the money."

story gathering in the future over more static data-gathering methods such as surveys and, therefore, involving people much more in the process.

The organisations that we work with **find the feedback they get from stories to be very useful.** A partner on the Well Doncaster project said, "I think we've got some really good, useful information that's come from the stories." She cites an example that, as an organisation, they've learned not to categorise or judge people based on age and says that these learnings will be fed back and will help to inform how people are supported later in life by Well Doncaster, meaning this could develop into a systemic impact in the long-term. Similar feedback was had from We Are With You: "People who did take part in the project felt empowered. The feedback we got it was good. It will be good for the recovery support network people to tell their story and to link up with each other." Again, he sees a long-term impact for the network that will continue to have a benefit.

Speaking of long-term, **our Train the Trainer programme has also seen organisational impact that will have long-term positive effects due to its 'pass it on' model.** A support worker at We Are With You made us smile with his comment on Train the Trainer, which sees us train Community Reporters to become trainers themselves:

*Somebody gets interviewed, they get trained to*

do a few interview skills and they become a trainer themselves. It's like a 'pass-it-on' model. It's like a pyramid scheme without the money.

And while we might stop short at rebranding Train the Trainer as a pyramid scheme, we're glad to hear that organisations see how Community Reporting can benefit people in the long term.

We've been delighted to see so many organisations we work with **embracing bottom-up structures over top-down ones**. One such organisation is Well Doncaster, who told us that one of their most important learnings from the project was that changes that are made to services are evidence based from stories and experiences of the residents of Doncaster. However, we also realise we could do more to help our partners implement what they learn. One of our participants at CatStrand pointed out that she had attended the training because this style of story gathering will potentially be connected to her role in Community Development for various projects. This is, of course, great to hear. But we'd like to be sure we've done all we can for her to make those connections and implement Community Reporting fully into her role. We also heard from the Well Doncaster project that:

*A lesson learnt from me is to get members of the community to do it [Community Reporting] rather than staff members, and people who are interested in storytelling. It's hard to find people. It's finding people in the community who want to do it and would be willing to go out again and collect these stories.*

This highlights for us a question as to whether we're doing enough to equip partners with the skills to recruit people who want to train as Community Reporters. If not, then we may be leaving them without the support necessary to continue to embrace bottom-up structures. Of course, part of this is **making sure storytellers feel respected, protected, and part of the process** – something which some organisations find to be a challenge. One attendee of our conference, pointed out that it's not always easy to get away from storytellers feeling like a commodity. Stories should be part of a process, not just an add-on or a box-ticking exercise.

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This was a major talking-point at the conference; storytellers must feel valued, respected and know that they are sharing their story in order for it to be part of a changemaking process. As one attendee 'took away' the from the conference - lived experience can't just be an embellishment, it has to be woven throughout the process of your project.

### **The key differences our work has made:**

- Organisations are embracing bottom-up processes over top-down ones, and are changing traditional power dynamics in their settings
- Our train-the-trainer model provides organisations with the skills and scope to work with lived experience beyond one, initial project
- The insights in people's stories enable organisations to develop services and support communities

### **What we learned:**

- We need to do more to help partners to create the conditions in their organisations to make changes to their power structures
- We can strengthen how we support organisations to work with the learning they get from people's stories and how they implement them
- To be clearer on our Responsible Storytelling core principles and work with partners to ensure that the storytellers they work with feel respected, value and secure

# "There has to be a future for lived experience"

## SYSTEMIC IMPACT & LEARNING

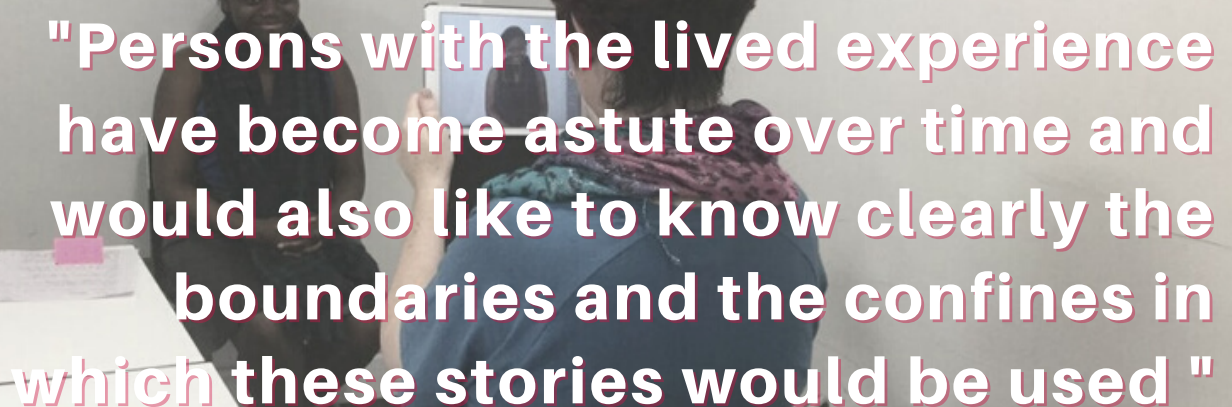
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Systemic impact refers to the wider impact our work has on actual, tangible social change in the long-term. While sometimes this isn't visible in 12 months, what this section does is highlight some of the seeds we've planted during that time that could contribute to wider change.

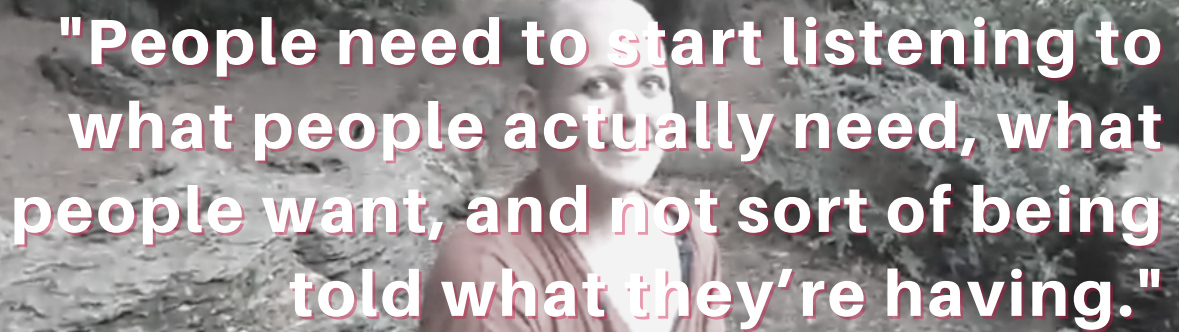
To start with, **our work is uncovering changes that need to be made on a wider scale.** Our project partner at Gorse Hill Studios, working with us on the CONTINUE Project pointed out that the work so far has demonstrated that "there is a need for something to be done [regarding the impact of COVID on young people's lives] and for something to come out of it," which the next stages of the project will aim to achieve.

At Well Doncaster, our partners found that Community Reporting helped them to see how people who access their services are stereotyped on a broader scale and that Community Reporting has shown them a need to get to know the people they work with as individuals:

*Sometimes statutory services people can be grouped into you know – oh, you're an older*



**"Persons with the lived experience have become astute over time and would also like to know clearly the boundaries and the confines in which these stories would be used"**



**"People need to start listening to what people actually need, what people want, and not sort of being told what they're having."**

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*person and you like bingo and doing this whereas actually people are like well no I don't like bingo or singing Vera Lyn. That was really good in finding out what people do like doing and what people are passionate about.*

In addition to this, they explained how the Community Reporting process has enabled issues which may not have otherwise come up in previously used methods to be explored and acknowledged. This was thanks to the concept of not going into conversations with an agenda, which has allowed for more space for people to talk about what matters to them. This allows them to address changes that need to be made to services that are evidence based from stories and experiences of the residents of Doncaster.

In the face of this, some partners, we were happy to discover, are committed to continuing with Community Reporting outside of the projects they worked on with us. When asked if she was continuing to use Community Reporting, one of the participants at CatStrand replied: "I haven't done so just yet, but I fully intend to and can see many different ways how Community Reporting can be used in my work/projects." She explained that she works in family services and alcohol and drugs support, and also in community development. Lots of these services and projects are evolving, so she suggests that Community Reporting could actually be used to find out what people want from these services.

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However, this transferability of Community Reporting is not seen by everyone we work with. While the final film produced whilst working with Camden Disability Action was seen as a positive and the Conversation of Change event pushed forward the co-production process, it was felt that the methodology was rooted into the project (i.e. via training and support for the organisation and participants) and they could not see the value of utilising it in the future. What this highlights is that we need to be careful not to 'takeover' projects and leave partners behind - our focus should remain firmly on embedding skills for the future and in looking more closely at how we support organisations to embed the methodology into their wider working practices, rather than being a one-off project.

One thing to strongly emerge from our conference in 2021, is that **there needs to be more collaboration and consensus on good practice in lived experience storytelling**. One of our partners at Africaniwa, who hosted a satellite workshop as part of the conference said:

*For many of us coming from backgrounds where we may describe ourselves as descendants of the oppressed, it is important that organisations working with us and our stories clearly define their intent. It's no surprise that we shy away from working with some of these situations and organisations who have constantly through significant historical data violated our trust. Monetary incentives such as vouchers and tokens to share my story is not enough and actually seems to be a joke in some circles now. Persons with the lived experience have become astute over time and would also like to know clearly the boundaries and the confines in which these stories would be used and we begin to question the outcomes if it brings out a true representation of the problem and not a misrepresentation or misinterpretation.*

This again comes back to treating storytellers with respect, valuing their lived experience and ensuring people are a part of making decisions about how their experiences are used. As an organisation working in the lived experience space, we must really hear the points made in this quote and not

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only ensure our work doesn't become part of the problem, but also support others to develop better practice and challenge bad practice wherever we see it.

Our work is contributing to a wider movement of people and organisations that are recognising that **lived experience is key to social change and addressing injustices that exist in society**. As a conference attendee stated:

*There has to be a future for lived experience because if we want to try and improve things like the services, making things more person-centred rather than just statistics and tick-boxes that need to be filled. People need to start listening to what people actually need, what people want, and not sort of being told what they're having. So, it's really important that people like yourselves are getting that message out there.*

We're proud to be a part of a crew that is trying to change the world, one story at a time but the space we work in has its 'dark sides'. As the conference attendee goes on to add, she thinks lived experience has become a "buzzword" and has lost some of its importance. This is definitely something we see and something we are trying to navigate as an organisation. The key message is that **we need to keep doing what we're doing**, as highlighted by another conference delegate:

*The power of people coming together who are on the same wavelength as you are. ... There needs to be more collaboration and more examples of good practice. ... I think the more opportunities we can have that are facilitated in a space where people feel empowered and feel energised and feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves as well, I think, the better really.*

As an organisation, it is not enough for us to be creating spaces in which lived experience catalyses change, we must also **use our platform to support others** in adopting this approach so that we can see wider systemic change.



"There needs to be more collaboration and more examples of good practice."

### **The key differences our work has made:**

- Partners and storytellers are often committed to continuing with Community Reporting outside of their work with us - this can lead to changes in working cultures and practices
- The insights in the stories are uncovering changes that need to be made on a wider scale
- This is pushing our partners to think about joined-up change and working in partnership to create it

### **What we learned:**

- We must always critically evaluate ourselves and our methods so that we do not become part of the problem - we should never strive to be 'best practice' and always be 'emergent practice' that is open to learning and change
- We should enhance how we use the Community Reporter network to establish connections between people, communities and organisations that can facilitate joined-up, systemic change



**“We do work here that is good and effective, and it changes things for people.”**

## **INTERNAL IMPACT & LEARNING**

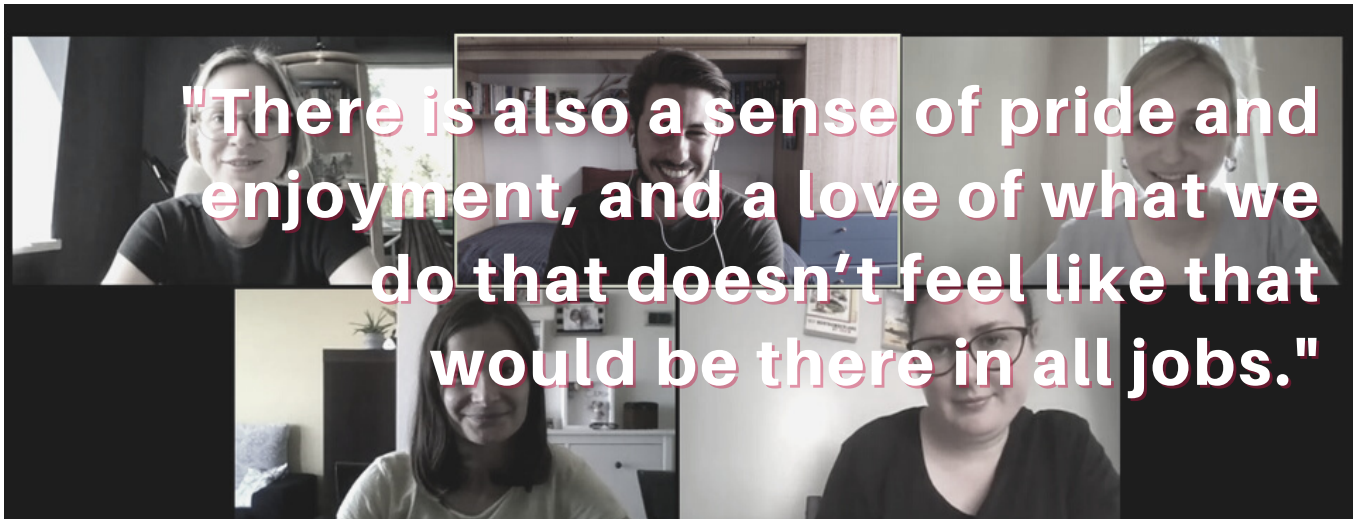
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So, having looked at what our work feels like from the people, communities and organisations we work with, we wanted to take a look at the year's learning and impact from the perspective of the team here at People's Voice Media. The first learning here is that **we are continuously learning how to be effective changemakers both as individuals and as an organisation**. In our conversations with each other, it emerged that we're all finding ways to be better at what we do, whether that's stepping up and doing more, or actively stepping back. For instance, one team member talks about trying to not focus on every little thing everyone does and letting people get on with their jobs. Knowing when to bother about something and when to intervene, or when to leave it, is something they are working on. Another team member, meanwhile, talks about learning to be more assertive with project partners, which she has achieved thanks to the leadership:

*What has helped [me to be more assertive] has been guidance... In previous roles, managers know the client may be 'wrong' but they go along with it anyway. The leadership at People's Voice Media gives the project managers more license - not to*



**"Big learning: I'm really proud of what I do here"**



*upset the people we work with - but to say 'no we can't do that' and say where we draw the line in the sand when we know what's being asked will have a negative effect on the aims of the work and the people we are working with.*

Working on ourselves in this way does mean **we're trying to "rewire" some of our own learned behaviours** so that we can truly reflect the changes we want to see. This is reflected in our anti-racism work and our core values. As one team member puts it: "We do live out our core values. We do operate with integrity. ... I'm really proud of the anti-racism work that we've started. Again, we're not perfectly actively anti-racist, but we're moving there." Over the last year, we have been reflecting on how People Voice Media (as individuals and as an organisation) can address systemic racism and be actively anti-racist. It is clear to us that simply not being racist is not enough. We have looked at the make-up of the people who work at and lead our organisation, the project partners we have, and who is generally involved in our work - and the numbers spoke for themselves. **People from racially marginalised communities were not always well represented.** We recognised that this needed to change and at team and board levels we've been working on addressing this. We've made some small, immediate changes (i.e., changes to marketing and training materials) and we've been making some longer-term changes (i.e., recruitment processes).

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Through blogging about this, we are approaching our learning on how to be actively anti-racist with visibility and accountability. This work is something the team are proud of - "I guess I've learned that we're probably braver, a bit more radical, than I thought we were." Of course, there are areas we can also improve on, such as **our understanding of neurodiversity**. One team member made a point that some of the digital tools we and our project partners use aren't inclusive for many neurodiverse people and that we should be a) finding alternatives for ourselves, and b) pushing back on partners when they use them.

It also emerged that **we have faith in each other and the organisation**, as well as being extremely proud of what we do. This came up a lot, with one team member summing up her feelings by saying:

*Big learning: I'm really proud of what I do here... I think we are programmed to not like our jobs, they will just be what we do and we make money, and it's the bits outside that matter. I'm not always happy - but now when a project is not going well, instead of looking for other jobs, I now think 'I want to fix this'. I now want to make it better and work out a solution. This is because I feel like we do work here that is good and effective, and it changes things for people. Sometimes not for a while... but it helps to create that change.*

This pride often surprises the team:

*It surprises me - I don't know why it does - that when people talk at the AGMs, and when we talk about what People's Voice Media are doing, being actively anti-racist, or at team working days where we're talking through things or when people just off-the-cuff talk about working here, there is also a sense of pride and enjoyment, and a love of what we do that doesn't feel like that would be there in all jobs. I don't know why that surprises me, but each time someone says something it does, it does surprise me.*

Not to blow our own trumpet, but as a team **we are getting better at leaning into learning**. We know we don't have all the answers and we know we can



"I'm really proud of the anti-racism work that we've started"

be better... but then that's the point isn't it? We are to improve ourselves and our work each day. We're creating a working culture we are proud of. We're trying to stay curious and open to challenge. And fundamentally, we do this, because we all believe in what we do. Change is possible.

#### **The key differences our work has made:**

- Our team has developed a strong sense of pride in the work People's Voice Media does
- We are actively "rewiring" our own learned behaviours
- We are striving to be a wholly anti-racist organisation - although there is still work to do

#### **What we learned:**

- We need to do more to be fully inclusive, including strengthening our understanding of neurodiversity
- We must continue to lean into learning

# "I want to fix this. I now want to make it better and work out a solution."

## PUTTING LEARNING INTO PRACTICE: THE ROAD AHEAD

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Based on the learning in this report, we are making some commitments to shape People's Voice Media for the future. Over the next 12 months, we will:

Continue to:

- develop our anti-racism work
- be open to learn and to change
- provide a platform for different voices to be heard

Improve our:

- support, training and resources for the Community Reporter network
- communications and feedback loops with people involved in our projects
- how we equip partners with the skills to implement the insights from people's stories

Change the way we work by:

- enhancing accessibility and inclusion for specific groups
- spending more time preparing the 'right' conditions for our work to flourish
- joining-up the learning across people, partners and projects and actively pushing wider systemic change



**"Change is possible"**



Get in touch on:  
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