People's Voice Media

ANNUAL LEARNING REPORT

2022/23

http://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk

It really helped broaden my horizons and reflections on our work - it's given me good ideas for the future

Participant reflecting on a co-production workshop

About People's Voice Media

People's Voice Media is a civil society organisation established in 1995, that uses storytelling as a tool for social change in the UK and across Europe. As a team we:

- Learn and adapt
- Work collaboratively and equitably
- Act authentically and with integrity
- Come with optimism and joy

Our Board, team, and network of freelancers are a diverse group of people committed to working in this way to achieve our vision.

In 2007 we launched the Community Reporting methodology and began to build the Community Reporter Network. Community Reporting is a digital storytelling approach that supports people's participation in research, policy-making, service development, and decision-making processes. We know we cannot achieve our ambitions alone. The Community Reporter Network now spans the UK and Europe. It has 50+ active partner organisations from different sectors in the arenas of policy, research and services, and has trained over 2,000 Community Reporters.

The core objectives of our work are to:

1. Enable people's lived experience to be heard, and provide platforms for marginalised voices
2. Support people, communities and organisations to use lived experience to address inequalities and injustices
3. Inform and influence services and policies so that they better meet people's needs and enable people to live well

Our work will put lived experience at the heart of service improvement, policy development, and research practices.

Find out more at: https://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk

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Introduction

We live in an unequal world. These inequalities are pervasive throughout society - from health to education, employment to housing, access to democracy, to social status.

Recent interconnected issues of global significance such as the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-inequality crisis have exacerbated these issues further. The gap between those who have access to the power and resources they need to live fulfilling lives, and those who do not, is widening. This is unfair. This is unjust. **Things need to change.**

Stories - whether visual, written or spoken - are important learning tools. They help us to make sense of our world, understand different perspectives, and provide nuanced insights into social issues. We believe that people's authentic stories can play a vital role in helping society address the challenges it faces and tackle deep-rooted inequalities.

People's Voice Media are on a mission to use lived experience to inform services, research, and policy, and to change institutions, systems, and society for the better. **We want to create a just world in which people's lived experience is heard, valued, and has influence.**

So, where are we now? Working on a project-to-project basis, we equip communities across the UK and Europe with the skills to both be heard and be agents of change. This work matters because it:

- Enables people to develop capacities and skills they can utilise in their communities to address the challenges they face
- Drives forward people-led change in service delivery, creating effective, relevant services
- Changes power dynamics, supporting institutions to develop 'bottom-up' processes for working with communities

This annual learning report reflects on what we have learned from undertaking this mission between April 2022 and March 2023 and sets out our direction of travel for the coming year. But first, let's take a look at how we've implemented the insights from our 2021/22 annual learning report.

Our Learning: The story so far

Strategic Goal	Changes we've made based on our 2021 - 2022 Annual Learning Report
Enhance Community Reporting's position as a research tool, and lived experience stories as a form of evidence	Reviewed the resource section of the Community Reporter website and are currently streamlining and opening-up access to our resources and training materials.
	Development of new partnerships with UK Universities and the strengthening of our Board's academic expertise.
Embed Community Reporting and lived experience into service development and improvement	Started development of a 'Working with Us' package which orientates organisations to working with lived experience stories and supports them to embed the learning from our work into their wider context
	Redesigned project proposal and overview templates to foreground social change objectives of our work to provide clarity for all project partners on the underpinning mission and vision behind our activities.
Use learning from the Community Reporter network to influence and inform local, regional and national policy change	Enhancing our focus on securing core funding for the Community Reporter network to support ongoing learning and change making, and legacy funding for key thematic strands.
	Implementing 6 and 12 months follow-up conversations with project partners to assess longer term impact and determine post-project support and legacy opportunities.
Be actively anti-racist and uses this as a lens through which we address structural inequalities	Developed individual, organisational and societal milestones for our anti-racism work
	Secured funding to develop Community Reporting as an anti-racist practice.

Method: How has this report been compiled?

To compile this report we have largely use Community Reporting techniques. Throughout the year we have gathered 19 reflective dialogue interviews with people involved in our activities, people who have commissioned them, partners and our own team. We have applied our approach to story curation to identify the key themes and learning in them. In addition, we have:

Conducted 6 and 12-month reviews of projects
Collected feedback forms for specific activities
Gathered snapshots of feedback from emails, social media etc.

The findings from the analysis of these interviews and pieces of supplementary evidence form the report that you find here. So, grab a brew and settle in for an insight into People's Voice Media's learning from 2022 - 2023, and how we will translate this into actionable change.

OUR IMPACT

Impact Snapshot

Organised and hosted
1 annual conference

Started **9** new social
change projects in
communities across the
UK and Europe

Reached **149,010** people
as unique users on the
Community Reporter
website, as an online
sharing platform for lived
experience

**Between April 2022 and
March 2023 we have...**

Trained **11** new
Community Reporter
Trainers who are
developing Community
Reporter groups in their
areas

Engaged with **1,278**
people across all of our
activities, training and
events.

Gathered **164** lived
experience stories on
topics such as disability,
employment, COVID-19,
racism, health inequalities,
women's issues and much
more.

Trained **114** new
Community Reporters who
are sharing their stories
and supporting their peers
to share their stories

Type of Impact	How We Have Acted On Learnings From 2021/22
Individual	• Creating opportunities for networking and connections with other individuals or organisations • Skills development (e.g., co-production, digital literacy, storytelling methods, research methods) • Developing people's curiosity and openness up to new ideas • Encouraging people to change their behaviour to be more welcoming and inclusive to others, and use more equitable and human language
Organisational	Services: • adopted more 'human' and relational ways to engage with people • created and recruited new roles to address issues raise in the Community Reporting work Public and Civil Society Organisations: • gained alternative perspectives and critical feedback through lived experience stories • secured new funding for their work • delivered further Community Reporter and/or co-creation projects - spreading the practice further • embedded story reflection activities in ongoing projects to support evaluation Research Institutions: • added Community Reporting to academic curriculums • addressing the power imbalance between sectors and also between services and researchers with the people they work with
Societal	• Addressed the power imbalance between sectors and also between services and researchers with the people they work with • Influenced the policy directive of an EU Committee • Opened dialogue channels between young people, civil society and local politicians to actualise policy recommendations based on lived experience • Widened participation via the use of financial support mechanisms to our work

Compared to the normal interview situation, the positions are completely different. You have two equals doing the interviews and I think the material you get out of it is quite different than you would have with an expert interviewer interviewing. Then there is this power position but in this case [Community Reporting] it's rather different and I think that the material you get out of it can be even more in depth somehow. Some subjects are talked more openly when there is two equals doing the interview and the expert is only facilitating the process.

Researcher reflecting on the Community Reporting methodology

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Pushing for Long-Term Systemic Change

"How do we ensure the people who shared their stories don't feel their time was wasted?" - Project Partner

A key reflection point in our work is how do we achieve longer-term systemic change? Some of our projects show signs that this is started to happen and is achievable through our work. On a previous European research project that looked at co-creation in public services, People's Voice Media embedded Community Reporting as a tool for co-creation in various pilot services across European. Based on the recommendations of this project, the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) accepted at its General Assembly that the co-creation of services was of general interest as a contribution to a more participative democracy in the EU. This means that the EESC will continue to implement co-creation in its work, seeing the voices of people across Europe included in the creation of services that directly affect them. This is a great example of the ways in which our work has influenced policy directive and is helping to create systemic change.

Another project we have worked on which is showing promise of wider impact is an Erasmus+ project, which saw a consortium of eight NGO – including People's Voice Media – research the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people across Europe. During this project, Community Reporting provided young people with the skills to tell their stories. This was combined with other research to co-create local social actions as well as local and pan-European policy recommendations. In the UK strand of this project, we collaborated with young people at a youth arts service in Greater Manchester. We have kept an open dialogue with the service since the project reached its conclusion last April and have been pleased to see the ways in which it and its young people have been building on the project for longer-term change. They have been directly working with their local MP and local councillors to create more conversations between them and young people in Trafford, as well as to create more safe spaces for young people in the area. The project has also created a direct link for them with the Deputy Mayor for Greater Manchester (a local MP at the time of the project), which is a useful connection for them to have as her connections *"meant that we [the youth arts service] could open up conversations with big cultural organisations that we are sometimes overshadowed by such as Manchester United,"* to discuss issues with safe spaces. This meeting has since resulted in the beginnings of work with the club to restore these spaces. Young people have been directly involved with these meetings.

The policy recommendations produced by the project gave the young people an opportunity to decide on what their priorities are and what they would like to work on. The format of the recommendations also gave it "extra oomph" as it "couldn't be ignored" by policy-makers. Part of the project included social media training and, as a direct result of seeing the benefits of that, the service has also created a social media role within the organisation so that they can continue to use it strategically. We will keep in touch with them over the coming year to see how these seeds for systemic change grow and come to fruition.

While it is great that our work is creating systemic change with these bigger European projects, we have noticed that our national and local work does not always have the same effect. Changes and the impact of the work seem to be more contained with their immediate context, rather than rippling outwards. This could demonstrate that more needs to be done to acquire 'buy-in' from senior leadership teams, decision-makers and policy-makers to encourage them to see the value in our projects and take the learnings further. Furthermore, it highlights the need for People's Voice Media to connect learning from across projects to make a more substantial case for wider change.

In a catch-up with our partners on a project exploring the issue of Long COVID, it was hard to hear their experience of a feedback session:

It was a group feedback session with health professionals and the storytellers - asking for feedback on the actions taken since and I was surprised at the 'siloed' thinking of the professionals. Storytellers' ideas and insights were met either directly or indirectly with 'that's not in the remit of our service'. They did budge from this a bit in the... but it wasn't a fundamental shift and I left feeling a little disheartened.

We and our partners are concerned with how the people who had shared their stories might feel about this.

I picked up on a feeling of frustration that things weren't happening quick enough… Expectations might be high for their involvement in this and they want to see results. And how do we manage this? We were open about the challenges we were facing… that's the reality of the NHS at the moment… How do we ensure the people who shared their stories don't feel their time was wasted – that was why the feedback session was so important. At least we were being open, transparent and honest with them.

This sentiment is highlighted again in a smaller, more recent project we undertook delivering Community Reporter training in Cumbria in order to embed lived experience storytelling in the work of local charities and support services. This work has been positively received:

It fitted really well with where we are going and where we are at. It's been a real boost for the project to be able to get that training delivered locally through yourselves.

They went on to tell us it would be good for them to embed Community Reporting into their work as it is a really good way to capture people's experiences and views and to do things differently, but there needs to be a 'buy in' and investment from the organisation to implement it properly.

In our work as a learning partner for a civil society organisation, we found individuals really saw the value in lived experience, telling us, *"For me it's a fundamental part of what we need to do. As a movement if we want to grow… you need to listen to the folk on the ground doing it."* However, the probing questions that our work raises or the different perspectives raised by our stories are sometimes (or at least initially) difficult for organisations and leadership to hear. In this specific project, this tension has been worked through and the value of the learning that divergent perspectives provide has been embraced.

These experiences demonstrate really clearly to us the need to have 'buy-in' at all levels of partner organisations and that organisations are prepared for working responsibly with lived experience. In response to this, we have are already working on a 'Working With Us' package that will support partners to develop the conditions for working with lived experience prior to a project commencing and after its completion. We are also looking at other options for how we can support our partners to take forward the insights and ideas from people's lived experiences in their context.

Reaching people who have barriers to accessing services

"We haven't found a human way to do this." - Learning Partner
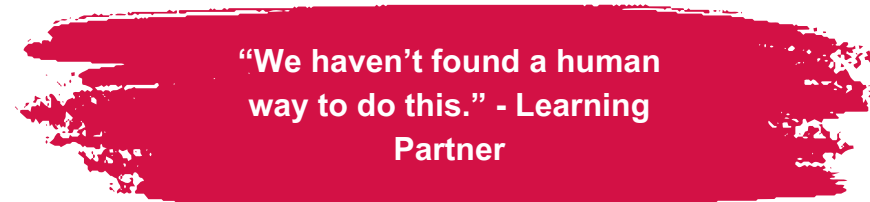
Several of our recent projects have raised the question of how you reach people whose voices are not typically included in lived experience storytelling projects. There is always a danger with lived experience projects that you hear from the same people; the people who are highly engaged with services, and those who have the means to participate. This is not an equitable way of working, so how do you include the voices of people who wish to be included but who face barriers to participation?

This is a finding that emerged during our Erasmus+ project on young people and COVID when it was revealed that some young people dropped *"off the radar"* entirely during lockdown when education and services moved online. In many cases, young people retreated and disengaged until they were entirely out of the purview of services and schools who were then, because of restrictions, unable to take further steps to rebuild those connections. All current conversations around support for young people, then, do not include these particular young people – arguably those who are most in need of support.
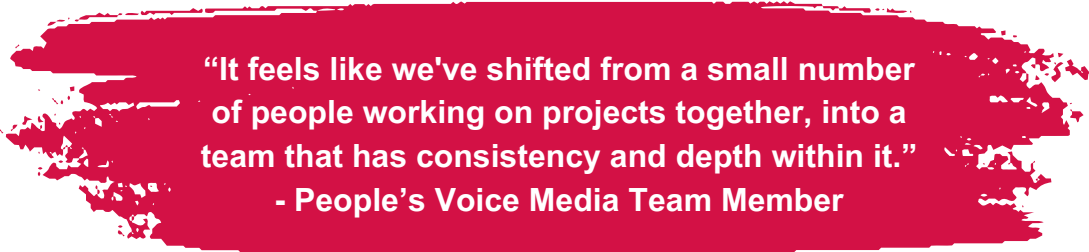
It's also been flagged in our learning partner work with the civil society organisation mentioned earlier. They've managed to reach a lot of people who organise the activities but a challenge has been in reaching the people who attend the activities. They feel that more in-person gathering and visiting/popping up in these spaces is how they can achieve this, but it is not necessarily something that can be easily measured: *"We haven't found a human way to do this."*

We started to look at ways we can address these issues in our work, including applying for core funding to support pop-up storytelling sessions outside of project work and expanding our numbers of Community Reporters in more rural communities. We have also sought to bring more people into our Community Reporter Network through our conference, by inviting people from outside of our network, and by making funded places available for people who may face financial barriers to inclusion, with one attendee stating:

I was really pleased that fact that it could be funded [for us] to come over. … That was good because as a community organization we don't fund ourselves in lots of ways. Like, we put on workshops on the weekends, but we don't pay ourselves. We pay the people who come to do the workshop. So, it was good 'cos I know a lot of sectors are already being paid to go to the conference through their organizations and the paid for what they do on that day.

The Spaces and Networks we are creating

"It feels like we've shifted from a small number of people working on projects together, into a team that has consistency and depth within it."
- People's Voice Media Team Member

We strive to create spaces that enable people to share their stories by helping them to feel safe, in control, and included in an equitable way. We bring together different people from different arenas to make connections and aim to provide space for reflection and support. We're pleased that, from our conversations with partners, this has carried through and been recognised. One partner working on a co-production project had this to say:

It's been first class working with People's Voice Media, friendly, welcoming, a down to earth bunch of people and inclusive, very welcoming and focused on what they do. It's a very well put together organisation, and it's been easy to join in with activities. … The relaxed atmosphere of People's Voice Media meetings can be quite contagious, and you realise it's a very good way of working because when people are relaxed, they can be themselves and the more that they are themselves, the better the ideas and contributions they will make to any meeting.

Feedback like this not only makes us very joyful, but it also shows us that we're heading in the right direction – not saying one thing and doing another. We want to create spaces where stories and ideas can be shared and where ideas for equitable futures can be envisioned. Comments from partners and participants on a different co-production project show similar reflections. One participant told us the work had *"really helped broaden my horizons and reflections on our work - it's given me good ideas for the future. It's opened my mind to different ideas we could try out,"* while another told us that *"this programme has helped me make links to other organisations who are directly working with the people we want to reach. It's helped me make those connections and provide that support."* Another participant commented that it was a true *"peer learning space"* and allowed them to help people in a more *"bespoke"* way after drawing on the knowledge of others.

These thoughts have been echoed regarding our annual conference, which was described by an attendee as a *"safe space,"* and also on our current Horizon project, looking at participatory democracy. On speaking to partners who used Community Reporting methodologies to find out about people's participation on democratic processes, we were told:

Compared to the normal interview situation, the positions are completely different. You have two equals doing the interviews and I think the material you get out of it is quite different than you would have with an expert interviewer interviewing. Then there is this power position but in this case [Community Reporting] it's rather different and I think that the material you get out of it can be even more in depth somehow. Some subjects are talked more openly when there is two equals doing the interview and the expert is only facilitating the process.

We were particularly proud of this as it showed we were not just creating those spaces in places where we were physically present, but also in spaces where people we had trained were using our methods.

One area where we could do more to create these kinds of reflective spaces is within the People's Voice Media team. When reflecting on the year gone by, we hold conversations with the core team to gather our individual and collective thoughts and findings on both our projects and working for People's Voice Media in general.

It feels like we've shifted from a small number of people working on projects together, into a team that has consistency and depth within it. ... We need to find a bit of a better flow so that it doesn't feel like we are always at capacity. It would be good to feel that we had the space for reflection and development - although we have started to do this with learning team days and the work done on becoming actively anti-racist. … As our work is quite unpredictable it's hard to manage workflows in traditional senses. We therefore needed to have 'slack' in our schedules to allow for when things don't go plan - as this is quite common in our work.

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All that being said, the People's Voice Media team is generally happy. *"The organisational culture's very good here in that it encourages you to try things,"* says one team member, while another says, *"It's felt like I've developed quite a lot. My confidence in feeling able to deliver things and make decisions on the spot and get on with things."* This is all positive and shows us that we are heading in the right direction. We do need to bear in mind though that as a team we are often juggling several projects at once and slips in schedules – which aren't always within our control – can have impact on the overall workload and leave people feeling as if they are constantly reacting. We are working towards having 'slack' – as described above – in our workflows to accommodate changes and to ensure we have a reflective, active learning culture within our organisation.

THE FUTURE

Putting Learning Into Practice: The road ahead

The insights contained in this report have identified three key development areas for our work in order to help us to achieve our strategic goals:

- **Longer-Term Change:** Ensuring that the insights and learning from our work are used to catalyse change beyond the lifespan of a project
- **Access and Inclusion:** Widening access to and inclusion in lived experience storytelling
- **Working Culture:** Enhancing our own time for reflection and learning

The table on the next page identifies the concrete actions we plan to take in these areas and how they connect to our strategic goals.

Development Area	Actions
Longer-Term Change	• Complete the development of the 'Working with Us' package to embed into our projects • Complete the review and update of the Resources section of the Community Reporter website to support others to use our materials • Strategically develop our communications to focus on influencing change • Secure core and legacy funding to enable use to deepen and widen the impact of our work
Access and Inclusion	• Deliver a 'method hack' event on Community Reporting and produce relevant resources to support people who are neurodivergent and people who do not use verbal communication to better engage • Identify non-Western centric methods and anti-racist practices that can be incorporated into Community Reporting and how our organisation works • Attendance of our team and Board members at an anti-racist summit, with learning shared throughout the organisation • Trialling new recruitment and engagement methods on our projects, with a renewed emphasis on peer-to-peer approaches • Review and update our communication tools and core standards so that they are more inclusive • Ensure that financial support for access and inclusion is embedded in all project budgets
Working Culture	• Delivery calendar and workflow management informal training sessions and peer learning activities in team working days • Trial new approaches to workflow management such as 'meeting free' weeks etc. • Continue to deliver 4 learning days per year, reviewing and reflecting on their structure and content and encourage staff to utilise allocated time for their continued professional development in a range of ways • Revisit team working day agenda structures to enable more time for discussion and reflection on our work

Appendix:
Projects we've worked on in 2022/23

Project Title	Description	Partners/Funder	Location	Duration
Not Another Co-Production Project	A programme of work seeking to transform co-production from a buzz word into an embedded practice in communities in Greater Manchester, West Midlands and Greater London.	Ideas Alliance, Curators of Change, Big Lottery Fund	Greater Manchester, West Midlands and Greater London.	3 years
EUARENAS	Horizon 2020 funded project that explores cities as arenas of political innovation in the strengthening of deliberative and participatory democracy.	Horizon 2020, University of Eastern Finland, LUISS, SWPS, CRN, University of Gdańsk, Development Centre of Võru County, Eutropian, City of Gdańsk, Municipality of Reggio Emilia	Pan-European	3 years

| Project Title	Description	Partners/Funder	Location	Duration
Value of CoPro	UKRI funded research project focusing on the question – What is the value of co-production? The research involved literature review, surveys and lived experience storytelling.	Co-Production Collective, Curators of Change, Gobby, UKRI	UK-Wide	8 months
Gordon Moody	As part of their 50-year celebration, the Gordon Moody Association gathered 50 stories from people who have experienced their therapeutic support.	Gordon Moody	UK-Wide	12 months
CONCRIT	Investigating community narrations and digital literacies across Europe and creating training materials.	Erasmus+, CRN, MOPS Gdynia, Stand 129, Labos, City of Berlin	Pan-European	3 years

Project Title	Description	Partners/Funder	Location	Duration
CONTINUE	Supporting young people experiencing social exclusion to tackle the specific challenges of post-COVID times in terms of staying connected and integrated into European communities.	Erasmus+, Gorse Hill Studios (UK delivery partners), CRN, Artemisszió, Active Youth, YES, Crossing Borders, Per Esempio	Pan-European	2 years
UNICORN	Exploring methods that improve business development for small, non-profit adult education organisations. People's Voice Media are leading a work package on the delivery of training in this arena.	Erasmus+, CRN, Crossing Borders, Changemaker, VENSENYA, Mine Vaganti NGO	Pan-European	2.5 years

Project Title	Description	Partners/Funder	Location	Duration
Oral Histories	Gathering oral histories of mental health services and creating an online museum experience.	South West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, Creative Minds, Mental Health Museum, Wakefield	South West Yorkshire	12 months
Long COVID	Partnership developing approaches to supporting people with Long COVID, informed by people's lived experiences.	AQUA, NHS Trafford	Trafford	6 months
Disability Rights UK	Partnership to bring together voices and experiences of Deaf and Disabled people to the current COVID inquiry.	Disability Rights UK, Disrupt Fund	UK-Wide	12 months

Project Title	Description	Partners/Funder	Location	Duration
HOME?	Heritage Lottery funded project which focuses on exploring the recent lived experiences of migrants in Northern England via stories and archive research.	Heritage Lottery Fund, Global Link Development Education Centre, Lancaster, Refugee Women Connect, Liverpool Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network Leeds The No Accommodation Network (NACCOM) Northumbria Methodist Asylum Project ("MAP") Middlesbrough The Dragons Voice, Manchester	Lancaster, Liverpool, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Leeds	2 years
CAPE	Research project examining whether exposure to adverse childhood experiences contributes to higher levels of chronic pain in adults.	Consortium Against Pain Inequalities (Dundee University), UKRI	UK-Wide	12 months

Project Title	Description	Partners/Funder	Location	Duration
Changing Futures	Community Reporter training for groups of people from across Greater Manchester - with a focus on gathering stories of people's lived experiences of multiple disadvantage.	Greater Manchester Combined Authority	Greater Manchester	6 months
Bedrock Project	Training programme for organisations from the public sector in West Cumbria on how to use Community Reporting in their work.	Cumbria CVS	West Cumbria	2 months
Narratives of Impact	European partnership project that investigates storytelling as a tool for creating social change and as a tool for measuring the impact.	Erasmus+, CRN, COSV, INTRAS, SNDE	Pan-European	3 years

Project Title	Description	Partners/Funder	Location	Duration
Camerados	Learning partner work to support a social movement to use the lived experiences of its members to inform the direction and development of the movement.	Camerados	UK-Wide	1 year
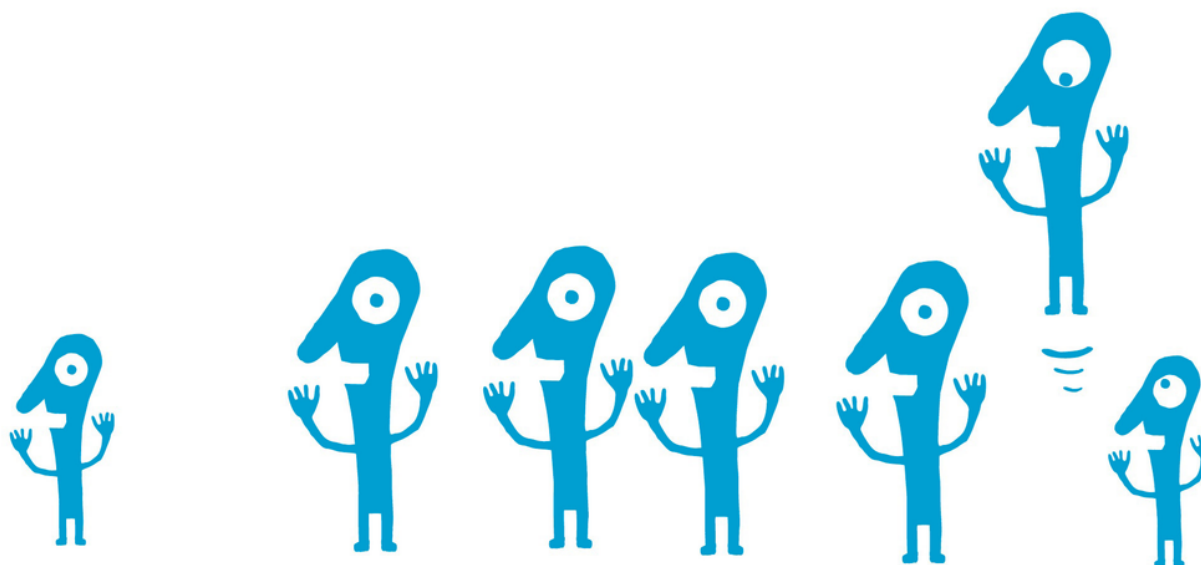
Get Involved

If you would like to offer any feedback on our Annual Learnings Report, or if you would like to find out more about what we do, please email us at **enquiries@peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk** or visit our website: **peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk**

People's Voice Media
Connecting Communities