

LET Programme & Alliance: Research carried out

SOCIAL PRACTICE ENT

EARLY FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN WITH CONVICTIONS WITH EXPERIENCE OF TRUSTEESHIP

In 2020, Social Practice ENT was commissioned by Women in Prison to develop a trustee training programme for women with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

The aim of the lived experience trustee training programme was to support a cohort of women with convictions onto criminal justice charity boards. The cohort would be comprised of fourteen women, of which at least 50% would be from Black and minoritised communities. This would help to ensure that the voices of women from Black and minoritised communities were adequately reflected, as they ‘are more than twice as likely to be arrested than white women, and more likely to receive a custodial sentence on conviction in the Crown Court’ (Prison Reform Trust). Over the period of six weeks, the trainee trustees would receive training on charity governance, charity finance – and hear from speakers with lived experience.

Given the limited data on lived experience on trustee boards in the UK, our work commenced researching the experience of women with lived experience of the criminal justice system in the UK. Our preliminary work included interviewing women with convictions who had previously served as trustees on charity boards, or who were currently serving as trustees, in order to understand their views. Granted, not all of the suggestions made by our interviewees may be actionable. For example, not all charities will have a training and development budget to provide all the suggested support. Furthermore, charity law may always override any specific individual needs, if they may breach the requirements. Four key themes emerged from our work:

I. POWER IMBALANCES (“THEM AND US”)

From our review we established that some women felt that they were not viewed as real equals in their roles as trustees. They felt as if they were “token” trustees recruited specifically to boost the profile of the charity for purposes such as comms and funding applications. Additionally, in some instances the assumption was made that they had very little education due to their lived experience, resulting in infantilisation. This included the assumption that they “could not string together a sentence”, as cited by one of the interviewees.



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All of the women that we interviewed had been approached informally to become trustees and as a result, in some instances they were not adequately prepared or supported to assume the role of a trustee. On the other end of the spectrum was the assumption made prematurely by some charities that these women had adequate knowledge of charity governance, despite having recruited them informally and not provided any further support. In addition to this, there was an expectation that the women would be the “voice of the community” – being called upon to advise on every issue regarding lived experience of the criminal justice system.

The tension between the two ends of the spectrum i.e. on one end of the spectrum assuming that one has adequate knowledge of governance and trusteeship and on the other end of the spectrum, assuming that the individual lacks any knowledge whatsoever, may be resolved firstly by ensuring that lived experience trustees are interviewed and recruited in a similar manner as other trustees joining the board. Secondly, it may be resolved by ensuring that individuals receive adequate training and support once they are on the board. Any barriers to recruitment can be reduced by streamlining the application process and adjusting interviews – thus making it trusteeship accessible to a wider range of individuals. Similarly, board papers may also be made more accessible by streamlining them – focusing on both the quality and quantity of information presented to the board. Readability can also be improved by running board papers through online software (readability objectively measures the ease with which one can read through detailed text).

Cultural dominance was also raised as an area of concern. Some of the women felt isolated and cited that their boards were dominated by “well meaning White middle class women”, and as such, there was an expectation that the women would assimilate and become “one of them”.

Some women expressed sentiments of feeling isolated on the board as the sole trustee with lived experience. In addition to this, in some instances the recruiting charities, having recruited informally, had not given enough thought and consideration into what is needed to support someone coming from a different background, with a history of offending.

Finally, the issue of “othering” was raised. This being the feeling of isolation experienced by individuals with lived experience on the board, resulting in the women feeling excluded.

II. ACCESS TO TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The second area of concern identified was access to adequate training and development opportunities once the women had joined the board. Board development is an essential facet of good governance in any instance, including when supporting women with convictions onto boards. However, many of the women interviewed cited not being properly inducted – having received a standard induction that did not include training. This resulted in the women feeling lost during meetings– and in turn, working hard to prove that they had something to say or contribute. In addition to this, some of the women cited not having a named person that they could speak to who could make them feel comfortable in their role – resulting in feelings of isolation.



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III. MENTAL WELLBEING (RE-LIVING TRAUMA)

The third area of concern was the feeling of “taking it all on” and “reliving trauma”. This had an adverse impact on the mental wellbeing of the women. Some of the women cited the need for wellbeing support as part of the trustee training and development budget.

In addition to this, the issue of “stigma” attached to being a trustee with lived experience was also raised. This was particularly with regards to being linked to a charity that supports “ex-offenders” and the likelihood that by deduction it could be established that the women had convictions.

An important concern around full disclosure and transparency was raised. Some of the women cited that it is important for individuals with lived experience to be prepared in advance for what they may face as a new trustee. This includes the responsibilities, re-traumatisation and stigma, as previously outlined. One of the women interviewed specifically raised the issue of “privacy” and the need for anonymity on the board. The interviewee strongly expressed that no other trustees on the board, apart from the Chair, should know that an individual has lived experience of the criminal justice system – restricting the disclosure process to a need to know basis.

IV. OTHER

The women were asked what other support they would have found beneficial in their roles as new trustees. The following support measures were noted (including those that tie into the issues identified above).

- Digital skills training (fundamentals of using IT equipment – PDF’s, voice notes, scanning and attaching, e-signing etc.)
- Being provided during the pandemic with digital equipment to access board papers and other charity information
- Travel expenses, digital expenses (i.e. internet costs) and childcare reimbursements. This also included a straight forward process for claiming back expenses, as well as having someone at the charity who is responsible for proactively following up on expense claims and thus removing the stigma from the claimant.
- Being able to network and build contacts with other trustees on the board so that they could receive further support.
- Receiving training in advance (i.e. introduction to governance and finance)
- Access to counselling and wellbeing support
- Access to a buddy or mentor

The interviewees who took part in our scoping research were women who experienced multiple disadvantages and in some instances had never worked in a professional environment. As such, more support was required to onboard them as new trustees. The experiences, skills and backgrounds of women with convictions serving on boards will differ, from one individual to the next. As such, it is important to ensure that any support provided is tailored towards the specific needs of the individual joining the board.



EARLY FINDINGS: LET CANDIDATE INTERVIEWS

In addition to the pre-programme interviews, further insights were gathered from the fifteen applicants who were short listed to take part in the training programme and invited to an interview. Insights that emerged from our candidate interviews helped us to identify that approximately 60% of the women had specific learning differences, primarily ADHD and dyslexia. In addition to this, confidence levels were in some instances very low due to constant set backs faced by the women. Training material and the classes were therefore adjusted to take this into consideration. No other barriers to participation were disclosed by interviewees.

Our preliminary work which included both the research interviews and candidate interviews helped to shape our “ask” – a set of three commitments shared with charities looking to recruit from our programme. These included:

1. The provision of a mentor/buddy if the graduate requested one
2. The provision of a full induction, including governance and finance training
3. A commitment to anti oppression practices, to help create a welcoming culture

You can learn more about our lived experience trustees training programme developed in partnership with Women in Prison and find out how to place one of our lived experience graduates on your board via our website

<https://www.socialpracticeacademy.org/letprogramme>

