



From Lived Experience to Leadership: How JCWI Will Foster and Amplify the Voices of People with Lived Experience

Introduction by the Lived Experience Advisory Board

The UK is built on immigration. Its colonial history and neo-colonial present have created a nation that would not exist without migration. The message is clear: we are here because you were there.

Yet the UK have made the environment for people who move across borders exceedingly hostile. Every day, we face restrictions to our freedoms and dignity, violent rhetoric from those in power and the impacts of that rhetoric on our communities.

We need to change this environment – because our voices and struggles aren't being heard, within mainstream politics and within the migrant rights sector itself. But we, migrants, are everywhere, and we are powerful. There's a long way to go to change the hostile policies, but on the way, we can be part of changing the environment too.

'Lived experience' means so much to so many people. Though we have different experiences, the pain we have lived through and continue to live through has the same source, of being subject to the UK's racist and violent immigration policies and control.

It's hard for people who haven't been through this experience to comprehend that pain, to understand the struggles that people who move go through, or the amazing things they achieve once they are out on the other side. Communicating that, building empathy and understanding and enabling positive action, is key to making a change – and it must be led by people who have lived through what they're talking about.

We, migrants with lived experience, continue living in an environment that encourages hate against logic and reason. We can only transform this toxicity - and win - by being bold, brave and positive, and crucially, by building our voices - the voices of people with lived experience.

Everyone who has crossed a border will be impacted by the government's negative policies, and by harmful rhetoric. When we look to build leadership among people with lived experience, we should focus on those who have experienced the sharpest end of border violence - people who have lived through the adverse effects of the hostile environment, people who face racism, classism and other forms of oppression, and those who have been most impacted by the UK's border system. These are the people who truly understand what is happening right now, and what a fairer, more compassionate immigration system would look like.

What lived experience means

With regards to this strategy, 'lived experience' means experience going through the UK's asylum and immigration system, which provides someone with knowledge of what it means to go through the system, and what someone going through that system might need. We recognise that there is a wide and complex range of diversity of experiences with the system: for example, a Black or brown person from a former British colony will have a different experience to a white European. Lived experience will also differ based on what status you hold – indeed if you have status at all – and immigration route, for example, someone seeking asylum, someone on the 10-year route to settlement, a student, a worker, or a family member. We further understand that lived experience is not static but an embodied process, shaped by intersecting oppression across race, class, and other realities, that create different degrees and hierarchies of power, inclusion and exclusion from socioeconomic support, as well as legal rights and protections. We want our definition of lived experience to be as inclusive as possible. At the same time, in line with JCWI's values of upholding justice and equity, we especially prioritise the lived experience of people who are particularly targeted by the system and have experienced the sharpest harm to their lives, their families, and communities. These are the people who we must seek to work in solidarity with.

What leadership means

We use the term 'leadership' not to reinforce the Western concept of individualised leadership but towards a vision of justice based on collective power. In the context of this strategy, lived experience leadership means resisting power hierarchies and unjust imbalances that exist in UK society, within the migrant justice movement, and in organisations that have excluded or marginalised migrants. In practice, it means platforming and foregrounding voices, narratives and knowledges of people who have gone through the asylum and immigration system. It also means, insofar as hierarchies exist within organisational and societal structures, ensuring that people with lived experience are taking positions of power. At the same time, we recognise that leadership takes many forms, and not always in the traditional sense of charity leadership, and that people can contribute to collective leadership regardless of whether they are a trustee, a manager, a volunteer, or a client of JCWI. It is vital that we do not treat lived experience leadership as a tick-box exercise but strive towards building genuine and meaningful power. In this context, power is setting the direction, making decisions and allocating resources.

What this strategy sets out to do

This 3-year strategy is a blueprint for how JCWI can and must work to build leadership among communities with lived experience. It looks at the organisation's campaigns, policy, communications and legal work, as well as how it can recruit people with lived experience into meaningful leadership positions at every level of the organisation. Recruiting, training, supporting, and mentoring migrants to become leaders does not just ensure that migrants have a say in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, but also demonstrates JCWI's commitment to and respect for migrants' agency and participation.

The objective of this strategy is also directly linked to JCWI's overall aims - to dismantle the hostile environment and bring about a world in which people can move across borders safely and in dignity, in which migration is celebrated. Movements function best when they are led

by people who truly understand what's at stake, because they have lived through it. Every part of JCWI's work can play a part in building this leadership.

This strategy lays out a clear plan for how an organisation like JCWI can win justice for all, not just in *what* it fights for, but also in *how* it fights.

Priorities for this work

The priorities when working with people with lived experience must be: **Building leadership; Co-production; Accountability**

Co-production means meaningfully involving people with lived experience in the work, respecting their views and preferences, and ensuring that they have a say in the decisions that affect them.

Building leadership means making sure that people who are going through or have been through the system are supported with the knowledge not just to access their rights, but also to tell their own stories, shed light on injustices, make their voices heard, and access paid roles in the sector. The starting point is making sure people have access to the right information when they need it, and are supported, respected, and safeguarded when working with JCWI, whether as campaigners or as paid staff.

Accountability means making sure that JCWI's communications, policy, and campaigns work is addressing the key issues for people with lived experience, especially those at the sharpest end of border violence, and doing it in the right, trauma-informed way. It also means being transparent and honest about our goals, actions and outcomes.

1. Strategic engagement and governance

This strategy proposes that JCWI embarks on an ambitious programme of outreach and engagement with people with lived experience, involving all parts of the organisation.

At the core of this work across the organisation will be the establishment of a permanent consultative panel for JCWI, run by and made up of people with lived experience of the UK immigration system. The consultative panel will be a peer support network, which will be supported to:

- Consult on JCWI's campaigns, policy recommendations and messaging
- Consult on JCWI's resources and publications, to ensure they are accessible and relevant to people with lived experience
- Consult on JCWI's recruitment policies and processes, to make sure they are accessible
- Receive support and training as identified as needed by the panel, including training in media and campaigning and be supported to act as ambassadors if they choose

The rest of this strategy looks in detail at JCWI's work, and how teams across the organisation can and must work to implement this programme, in order to achieve the aims of centring and building leadership among people with lived experience.

2. People

Recruiting people with lived experience is a way of advancing justice and equality. Going through the UK immigration system can set individuals back years or even decades. Hiring people with lived experience is a way to recognise and acknowledge that damage and violence, while appreciating the resilience and strength of the individual. People often talk about the fact that people with lived experience have important knowledge and expertise – but this is also about justice and rebalancing the scales for people who have been set back. It's part of resistance to the Home Office tactics of grinding people down, to offer **hope** and a **better future**.

JCWI should reflect the communities it exists to stand in solidarity with – this includes every part of the organisation, from entry level to senior leadership roles, and the board of trustees. We need to feel that there is representation at every level of the organisation, not just in terms of race or nationality, but also of experience and values. People with lived experience are in a better position to understand what the organisation is all about, what it's for and where funds should be channelled in order to be most useful to people going through the system.

This should include:

- Recruiting people with lived experience into paid roles at JCWI
- Recruiting people with lived experience into the board of trustees
- Supporting the wellbeing and career progression of JCWI staff, taking into account specific needs of staff members with lived experience

3. Legal

Legal advice for people going through the system is core to people's safety. But it means more than just the law – having the right support means being able to organise in the community, and having a bit of breathing space to look at your other needs, while you're struggling just to survive and get the papers you need.

Demand for good quality legal advice will always outstrip supply. JCWI's legal team can play a role by acknowledging this, supporting calls for improved legal aid and working to help people find lawyers, and put the right information out to the right people, so they are equipped with the knowledge they need to navigate the system themselves. To live up to its name, JCWI has a responsibility to look out for the welfare of migrants by providing good quality legal advice.

Many people with lived experience gain a huge amount of knowledge as they go through their journey within the system themselves. Supporting people with this experience into training and paid roles in the legal sector is a key way to counter the hostile environment and help people build a positive future.

This should include:

- Providing the resources for a sustainable legal department to increase the number of people who can secure our representation
- Developing resources and training to support the community to gain legal knowledge, and allow them to navigate the immigration system without a lawyer
- Supporting people to find other representation when JCWI cannot act
- Facilitating the employment of those with lived experience into roles in the legal department
- Working with the communications and advocacy teams to share more information about the cases run by the legal department

4. Communications

There is power in seeing other people talk about the issues that affect them directly. But at the moment, many people going through the immigration system are afraid to speak up. We are committed to creating an environment in which people feel safe sharing their stories, and trust that what they have shared will be respected.

To create this environment, we must be bold. We must be explicit about the racism of government policies and of borders. We must confront the historical colonial roots of borders and racism. We need to educate people – race is too often left out of conversations about asylum and migration. Across the organisation, support must be provided to spokespeople, campaigners and the communications team facing backlash for calling out racist government policies and other injustices.

This should include:

- Embedding lived-experience in the communications strategy and messaging, including through working with the consultative panel
- Improve meaningful participation of people with lived-experience in our communications work, including supporting development for people with lived-experience
- Ensuring JCWI's values are explicit across our public communications

5. Policy

People with lived experience often get forgotten in advocacy work. Their experiences are boiled down to a case study, and their real voices are lost. There are so many barriers for people with lived experience who might want to get involved in policy work – language barriers, fear of not knowing enough about the UK political system, and overall a lack of respect in the policy space for the knowledge that people with lived experience possess.

JCWI can be part of changing that, by creating a safer environment for people to share their experiences and expertise.

This should include:

- Embedding lived experience in the advocacy strategy, including through working with the consultative panel
- Integrating lived experience into our research and methodology
- Ensuring meaningful representation of lived experience in the policy space (e.g. at parliamentary events and MP briefings)
- Supporting policy and parliamentary capacity development for people with lived experience

6. Campaigns

Fighting for the rights of people who move is difficult – and the landscape we are working in is always shifting. But the more people we can bring onside, the more power we will have to make change happen. This can only be done by lifting up the voices of people with lived experience.

People with vulnerable status may be afraid to campaign – but we can help them to see that they are not alone, and that there are many ways to join the fight safely. Many people going through the system do not feel able to speak out about it, because they are just surviving as it is. But JCWI can help to support those who want to speak out.

This should include:

- Embedding lived experience in the advocacy strategy, including through working with the consultative panel
- Improving meaningful participation of people with lived experience in our campaigns
- Ensuring safeguarding for people with lived experience who participate in our campaigns
- Supporting campaigning capacity development for people with lived experience

Measuring our progress

These are some of the key questions and metrics that would help us develop more specific KPIs for this strategy as part of the implementation plan.

Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establishment of the lived experience consultative panel• Number of people with lived experience not in staff body who consult on JCWI's campaigns, policy and communications outputs
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much of the overall organisational income and staff FTE has been dedicated to the lived experience outreach programme
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of staff and trustees with lived experience • Retention of staff and trustees with lived experience • Wellbeing of all staff, including volunteers, consultative panel etc. a diverse workforce increases motivation, so measuring all staff's wellbeing is a measure of how diverse our team is. Do staff and volunteers with lived experience feel that their work is valuable and valued? • How many other organisations are taking part in learning sessions about lived experience organised by JCWI?
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have people with lived experience (inc clients) felt about their engagement with JCWI? • Number of direct referrals made (rather than people signposted)
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have people with lived experience (inc clients) felt about their engagement with JCWI? • How many people with lived experience are empowered to take action on their own behalf (e.g. media appearances, advocacy meetings)
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have people with lived experience felt about their engagement with JCWI's policy work? • How much of JCWI's policy output involved lived experience consultation and/or co-development? • How many people with lived experience have been involved in JCWI's policy advocacy (e.g. at parliamentary events)? • How successful have the organisation's campaigns been at changing government policy?
Campaigns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have people with lived experience felt about their engagement with JCWI's campaigns? • How much of JCWI's campaign actions are specifically geared for lived experience audience and engagement? • How many people with lived experience have taken action on their own behalf as part of JCWI's campaign actions? • How successful have the organisation's campaigns been at changing government policy?

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