Leading with Lived Experience
Who are the leaders with lived experience?

People like Clayton, Marie-Claire, Sunny and Sade.

Leaders with direct first-hand experience of social issues who are pioneering change all across the UK. We call them Leaders with Lived Experience (LLE).

When a person activates their lived experience to create positive change, we call this lived expertise.

A Big Injustice

Leadership in the social sector does not reflect the people it is set up to serve.

Although the social sector exists to stop injustice and do social good, it’s denying the people who have direct first-hand experience of social issues the opportunities to solve them.

We need leaders with lived and learned experience fighting alongside each other to stop social injustice.
Traditionally, learned expertise has had more recognition than lived expertise. Some of the perceptions and systemic barriers LLE face are:

- **Mindset** – people see lived experience as a barrier and not as valuable as learned experience
- **Assimilation** – LLE are expected to conform with the status quo
- **Imposter syndrome** – LLE feel that they don’t fit in and are going to be ‘outed’
- **Qualifications** – organisations value formal education and skills over lived experience
- **Trust** – LLE experience a lack of understanding and trust from decision makers
- **Language** – there is not a common language to discuss this challenge
- **Structures and processes** – rigid and non-inclusive structures and processes exclude LLE
- **Fear** – organisations are risk averse
- **Tokenism** – organisations’ opportunities for LLE to participate are superficial
- **Bias** – conscious and unconscious bias make this problem worse
- **Opportunities** – LLE lack access to equal and meaningful opportunities
- **Accountability** – there is limited transparency and accountability in decision making
- **Power** – LLE aren’t valued or resourced properly, limiting their ability to change any of this

How did we get here?

Enabling **positive social change together**

*The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change* report by Baljeet Sandhu has identified this injustice and built a movement of LLE across the country.

Following this, UnLtd and TSIP brought together a group of LLE in Birmingham and Bristol to address this challenge.

Funded by the Big Lottery Fund, this project aimed to close the gap between the people who experience social issues and those who solve them.

We want to share what we learned to push forward the conversation about how we tackle this together.

It’s time to move from mere lip service to level the playing field and truly value the expertise LLE bring.
Marie-Claire O’Brien

Marie-Claire founded The New Leaf Initiative in November 2014. Since its launch, she has supported hundreds of prisoners and youth offenders to change their lives around and make better choices. As an ex-prisoner, Marie-Claire says: “I help them to see that the many things offered in prison, such as treatment, education and counselling services should be utilised if they are to heal and lead a better life.” As prison to employment specialists, The New Leaf Initiative has created a linear model for prisoners and prisons to tap into, from motivational talks and employability courses delivered in-custody and out, through-the-gate support, community engagement and weekly drop-ins all the way through to employment opportunities.

Following the sessions, 97% of the prisoners who attended said they would recommend it to their peers, proving its effectiveness. 180+ people have been supported during intensive 1-2-1 mentoring sessions, with 56% of these people moving into education, training and, most importantly, employment through the growing number of employers. This includes Virgin trains, who recruit directly through New Leaf. Marie-Claire is now working to develop the New Leaf Network – a national referral network and consortium for people with lived expertise of the criminal justice system.

Sade Brown

Sade Brown is an award-winning social entrepreneur and the founder of Sour Lemons, which addresses the lack of diversity in leadership within the creative and cultural sectors. Her life motto is to turn sour lemons into lemonade; using challenging circumstances to create positive experiences for others.

Sade is a creative producer who specialises in nurturing diverse talent, partnership development and community engagement. She started her career as an apprentice at the Bush Theatre and has since then worked for The Lyric Hammersmith, Ogilvy & Mather and the Barbican Centre.

Throughout her career, Sade has used her life experiences to inspire positive action and has consistently worked with diverse communities to create inclusive cultural spaces. Her passion for proper representation and inclusive education has led her to give speeches at the House of Commons, City Hall and The Southbank Centre.

Sade is currently the Social Entrepreneur in Residence at UnLtd, a Red Bull Amaphiko Fellow, and a trustee for the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre. She has previously served as a trustee for the Tri-Borough Alternative Provision Trust (which includes a PRU she attended as a young person) and is a founding member of the Centrepoint Youth Parliament.

Sade has been recognised by Natwest WISE100 as a ‘Leading Woman in Social Business’, a Diversity Trailblazer and in 2015, she received an award from Prince William for ‘Turning Her Life Around’.

newleafcic.org

sourlemons.co.uk
What needs to change?

For anyone funding, supporting or delivering solutions for positive social change and justice, we recommend:

• Fund and deliver more projects that have lived expertise at the heart of solutions.

• Embed lived experience throughout: think about governance, leadership, delivery, grant managers, finances, communications. Lived experience shouldn’t be limited to focus groups and consultation.

• Remember that not everyone with lived experience wants to be involved in leadership in the same way: some don’t want or are not ready to take up a leadership position; others may simply want to help when they can (e.g. they may be happy to help time-limited projects or volunteer). Make sure you create pathways for those who wish to go the next level and actively lead positive change.

• Question the power and privilege in your hierarchy: keep asking yourself what perspectives you need to make decisions and how you can be more reflective of the issues you are trying to solve.
Baljeet was Founding Director of the Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit and children's rights adviser to government departments, the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, UN Agencies, and national/international NGOs and funders. In recognition of her work, she was awarded UK Young Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year in 2011 and the DVF International Woman Award at the UN in 2017. She is a fellow of the Vital Voices Female Global Leaders Partnership, a 2017 Yale World Fellow, and a Visiting Fellow of the Yale Law School's Information Society Project.

She’s an adviser, critical friend and mentor to our project, and as an LLE she simply says: “I’m not defined by my story, but by the positive change I hope I can create alongside all our communities in society.”

• Celebrate and share your impact but be mindful of ‘poster children’ and repeatedly asking someone to relive their ‘story’ or trauma they have faced. Ensure they own their power and story at all times.

• Place LLE at the heart of design and delivery: take away the barriers they might face trying to engage with you (including jargon) and support their aspirations.

• Don’t assume that someone has ‘lived’ their experience: some people are still ‘living’ it but that shouldn’t stop them from accessing opportunities. Work with LLE to make sure they are fully supported.

• Make adjustments to be inclusive of everyone’s needs, not just the majority. LLE should be treated as any other leader.

• Evidence the impact and learning from your work with LLE and shout about it to help other organisations understand its value and do the same.
Clayton Planter

Clayton Planter is the founder of Street2Boardroom, a Community Interest Company which helps people use their ‘street skills’ to get off the street and excel in the corporate world and wider society instead.

Clayton decided to start Street2Boardroom when he noticed that the current system did not allow these people to increase their full potential and find positive role models that they could relate to.

Clayton says: “the reason why I started Street2Boardroom was because some of my friends in the community were always getting on the wrong side of the law. However I’ve seen genius in these people. My experience of working in the council and working in the corporate world, showed me that my friends were taking more risks on the streets than I was in the corporate world, but that it was the same skills, and often the same motivations (profit, making money) just different vocabulary and methods!”

Now Street2Boardroom runs a four week course on learning the ‘legal hustle’ - i.e. how to make it big in business, the legit way. Clayton’s powerful TEDx talk will challenge all these unhelpful and damaging assumptions about men from the ‘street’ - their talents, aspirations and capabilities.

Sunny Dhadley

Sunny Dhadley is a social leader with lived experience of problematic drug addiction. After activating his lived experience and within a decade, Sunny has successfully developed a peer led model that is revered for its effectiveness, professionalism and integrity. Sunny received the Queens Award for Voluntary Service in 2014, and in 2018 was highlighted as a European Model of Best Practice on two separate occasions – one for working with older people who use drugs and secondly in supporting homeless communities that have been affected by drug and/or alcohol addiction.

Sunny is a Fellow of the RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) and part of the Windsor Leadership Alumni. Runner up at The 2018 Guardian Public Service Awards, in the category for ‘Public Servant of the Year’, Sunny has continued to push the boundaries in relation to practice and policy, particularly related to drug policy and social justice. He is a living example of the potential that lies within each person who is vulnerable and/or marginalised within society. He is now embarking on the next chapter of his journey as a freelance consultant, where he will be working with investors to maximise their social impact, offering keynote and motivational speaking, as well as leadership coaching.
Acknowledgments

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Get in touch

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