

# Learning to Listen Again:

## Deepening our understanding of how to amplify seldom heard voices through positive listening



**CHANGING  
LIVES**



Centre for  
Public Impact  
A BCG FOUNDATION

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# Forewords

Over the past year, the UK has gone through three national lockdowns and a series of regional lockdowns. The full effect of these lockdowns and of Covid-19 is yet to be seen, but for some who were already experiencing complex challenges before the pandemic, life has become even more difficult.

People experiencing multiple disadvantages are some of those most affected by the pandemic, yet their voices are typically seldom heard in decisions that materially affect their lives. The pandemic has taught us that listening is more important than ever. By listening properly to their experiences we have heard a level of anger at the way things are, but also a great compassion for each other and gratitude for those people in their communities who have been there for them throughout everything. Too often, government and society have preconceived notions about the seldom heard as ‘in need’ of our help, rather than valuing everyone’s contribution and voice equally. We must open our eyes and adapt our mindsets to recognise the richness that so many seldom heard voices and perspectives can, and should, bring to public debate.

It is the moral duty of all in public service to elevate the voices of everyone. But we don’t need to speak for people – they do this very well themselves. It is important that we listen to what they say, and that we learn from their perspectives and stories and the challenges they are facing. People experiencing multiple disadvantages such as homelessness and poverty are already bringing about their own solutions and offering support to each other, though not always supported by those in government and the public sector. There is so much we can learn from their experiences, and we must urgently reconsider how we work with them, both as individual organisations and across wider society.

Many of us in the public, voluntary and community sectors need to step outside our comfort zones – we need to think and act differently about how to connect with people on a genuinely mutual level. Many people working across government and public services already see the need to do this; we just need to find the right systems, cultures and structures that will empower and elevate these voices and create a more equal society. If we are to rebuild a nation that serves everybody, we must close the democratic deficit and share power by making decisions as close as possible to those who are impacted by them.

For the past year, we at Changing Lives and the Centre for Public Impact have been on a journey to understand how to listen to seldom heard voices in our society. In particular, we have been exploring an approach to listening to groups experiencing multiple disadvantages in a way that is ongoing, that shares power between staff and those who participate in listening, and that can – over time – be delivered as part of standard practice. For years we have grappled with how to genuinely involve people using services into decision-making processes and service design, often described as coproduction or codesign. We are very excited by the potential this approach has for strengthening the voices of those who are less likely to participate in traditional consultation or decision-making processes, or to have their voices heard in policy debates.

It is our hope that, by building on this work, we can unlock change in power dynamics across public services, build collaborative spaces for learning across silos, foster sharing and learning between professionals and the public, and enable the seldom heard to be genuinely involved in democratic processes and decision-making. We can go even further by connecting to a more radical devolution agenda that challenges dislocation and divisions and builds community and social cohesion.

We are only beginning to understand how to listen to the seldom heard, and we need others to join us on this journey. This report is an open invitation to government, professionals, and civil society to join us in this exploration and make listening part of daily practice permanently. Only by hearing all voices can government truly have a positive public impact for people everywhere. Collectively, we can and must build back a Britain that enables everyone to thrive.

**Laura Seeböhm**  
**Executive Director, External Affairs at Changing Lives**

and

**Ruth Ball**  
**Senior Associate, Centre for Public Impact**

I wanted to get involved in this project as I could see some of my peers getting excluded and, in my eyes, “falling through the cracks” as Covid-19 really began to affect our lives. I felt angry when I could see how isolated they were getting, and I wanted those that were listening to realise that there were huge pockets of people who were being excluded. I wanted to make a difference – everyone should be listened to, and I hope that this piece of work will help give the voiceless a voice.

I felt involved throughout the project – I built a rapport with those that interviewed me and it was good to reflect with them in the sensemaking sessions. I felt important in a world where I’d stopped feeling important. I never thought I would be in a meeting with people working with government to create change.

But these things can take time and progress can be slow. There is a real need to react as our situations change, and listening and learning how to listen is very much an ongoing process. I could see the process grow, develop and work as we were listened to throughout this piece of work, becoming more inclusive as time went on.

I have learned just how disengaged communities are feeling from government. There needs to be a bridge to foster a relationship, and people need to see change for the better to incentivise future engagement. I’d like to see as many places as possible embrace listening – it allows things to evolve and creates opportunities to change practice. My hope is that those making decisions will sit up and take notice – listening is a powerful tool for change and it would be foolish to discount it.

**Fiona Tasker**  
**Project participant and member of the Experts by Experience Network with Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead**

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who supported and participated in the listening exercises and sensemaking sessions to enable voices to be both heard and understood. We would particularly like to thank the Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead – Experts by Experience network for helping us to hear from so many people and for the enthusiasm they brought. We would also like to thank Changing Lives staff who supported this project, including Laura Seebohm, James Ward, Isobel Corby, Beverley Hunter, Carmelle Harold, Sharon Wilson and all staff who were listeners.

From the Centre for Public Impact (CPI), we would like to thank CPI's visiting professor Dr Toby Lowe and CPI fellow Nadine Smith for their insights about facilitating sensemaking sessions and how listening can transform systems; CPI's programme director Katie Rose for her contribution to this report; and Dr Martin King, who was our lead researcher in bringing insights about how engagement methods are adapting worldwide and how our work is contributing to that process.

We would like to thank our partners at the Emerging Futures Fund at The National Lottery Community Fund for supporting our work to take listening to new levels.

This review was coauthored by Dr Martin King, Ruth Ball, senior associate at CPI, and Jovana Ma, a consultant at CPI.

## CENTRE FOR PUBLIC IMPACT

Centre for Public Impact (CPI) is a charity, founded by Boston Consulting Group, that works with government, voluntary and public sector organisations in the UK to help them reimagine and redesign the systems, work and cultures of public services to be more human, relational and adaptive - and put people's needs and voices front and centre. Our mission is to support the people in these organisations to bring about a paradigm shift towards a more human centered and relational approach to public management, that embraces complexity and places learning at the heart.

## CHANGING LIVES

Changing Lives is a charity working with people who experience disadvantage across the Midlands and the North. Changing Lives believes that everyone deserves a safe home, a rewarding job, and a life free from addiction or abuse and that, given the right support, anyone can change their life for the better. By focusing on their strengths, potential and opportunities, the charity helps over 14,000 people overcome their problems and live safe, successful, independent lives each year. Changing Lives services help people experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, long-term unemployment and more, to make positive change – for good.



# Executive Summary

As we moved into a new year, the Covid-19 pandemic continued to create unprecedented challenges for everyone across the UK, against a backdrop of high levels of isolation, stress and fatigue for many. A lack of trust – and unsatisfactory relationships with those in government – was a concern even before the pandemic, but issues raised by Covid-19 have thrown those challenges of trust into sharp relief. Listening to one another and understanding everyone's different experiences has been crucial in national conversations around social distancing measures, vaccine uptake, and rebuilding after the pandemic. However, some groups struggled and continue to struggle to get their voices heard.

This project followed on from the first phase of the work, which we conducted in the summer of 2020. We heard about people's experiences of the pandemic and of being listened to – within their communities, by public services and by wider government – and how they would like to be engaged in the future. This report focuses on the lessons from the second phase of listening, which took place between October 2020 and April 2021, as the UK went through regional lockdowns and a third national lockdown.

The people who participated in this project lived in Northeastern England and were experiencing multiple disadvantages, such as poverty, homelessness, domestic abuse, addiction, sexual exploitation, and involvement in the criminal justice system. They often felt unheard and unrecognised in public debates, and we wanted to hear their experiences of being listened to by those around them. Our findings are relevant to those in a range of government roles, particularly in public services, including health and local authority services and central government. They can help professionals in these organisations consider how they might build better listening into their services, improving their service delivery and their ability to respond to emerging needs.

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Through this project, we also wanted to explore methodologies around “deep listening” and sensemaking. Other approaches to citizen engagement, such as coproduction, service user involvement, codesign, and focus groups with people who have lived experience, are important but can often be structured as “one-off” events, focused on a narrow issue, where commonly only a few people engage. We wanted to develop a sustainable approach to engagement that could be continually used and delivered by Changing Lives staff, allowing the organisation to hear from everybody it works with. Moreover, we wanted to find an approach to sensemaking that was inclusive and delivered practical insights that could be used to inform service, organisational, and policy developments. This report includes reflections on what we learnt about the approach that may be of interest to other organisations and leaders facing similar challenges.



This is what we heard from participants' experiences:

- **The best listening can come from support workers and peer supporters:** our conversations have highlighted the fact that this group felt the best listening often came from people who had “walked in your shoes”, demonstrated empathy, and challenged in a supportive way. The reason why some of the best listening came from these groups was not so much about the role that support workers or peer supporters play as the knowledge and shared experience they bring. While some participants spoke about the importance of friends, family and the wider community, the lack of shared experience and relatability could be experienced as counterproductive for effective listening. We should be careful to recognise that sometimes people felt isolated and excluded from the community around them.
- **People felt most listened to at the level of their community:** as we moved from this very immediate space to statutory services and local and national government, people felt less and less listened to, although many did describe wanting to be listened to and to have better relationships with local and national government.
- **Silos were seen as a key barrier to good listening:** participants described experiences with services and in the community where they did not feel they were seen as a whole person. The various services and support structures available in the community often treated specific issues in isolation, failing to address the wider causes or understand the issues people faced in a holistic way. Community and peer support groups could sometimes replicate the silos of more formal services, perpetuating the pressure on citizens to “make the fit happen” themselves.
- **An urgent need for more mental health support was felt by many:** participants observed that authorities were relatively effective at meeting physical needs – for example, by providing food packages – or addressing physical problems through GP surgeries and other NHS resources, and there needed to be something equally effective in place for mental health. Furthermore, the relationships and support services that people relied upon, but which were not part of the formal mental health system, were considered to be insecure due to funding and capacity constraints. This heightened anxiety for many participants, some of whom had experienced an abrupt end to their services due to Covid-19 or feared that this would happen in future.

And this is what we learned about listening:

- **People want to be listened to and are interested in exploring this further:** 87% of those who engaged in our listening sessions were interested in being involved in future discussions. Altruism and having an impact for others and themselves were key drivers for their desire to engage.
- **Collective sensemaking was enjoyable for participants and created a shared understanding of issues:** after experimentation with the approach and receiving crucial feedback from participants, we developed a method for sensemaking that was more inclusive, enjoyable and supported the collective creation of key themes arising from the listening conversations with both participants and listeners. There are still improvements that can be made to ensure the process is made even more inclusive.

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*...participants described experiences with services and in the community where they did not feel they were seen as a whole person.*

- **Changing Lives staff felt that listening was a crucial part of their role:** our conversations with staff who were listeners and those who were not directly involved in the project highlighted the fact that most felt listening was critical to their support role and that they used both formal and informal listening in their work. Sometimes, staff capacity, role boundaries, and the emotional toll of listening created tensions and barriers to more holistic listening.
- **It was more difficult to engage people at this point in the pandemic:** fatigue in services and the additional pressure of supporting more people who were in crisis meant that staff felt less able to conduct listening sessions with the people they worked with. This indicates the need to learn even more about how to make deep listening truly integrated into day-to-day practice and sustainable, even at challenging times.

While these insights are drawn from a particular group of seldom heard people – and the staff who work with them – during an unprecedented time of global crisis, the implications of these findings are wide-ranging. When seeking views from different seldom heard groups, how often do government and public services recognise the crucial listening role that support workers and peer supporters can play? How well are different government actors and public service professionals able to reach across organisational silos to listen to people and address their concerns holistically? Is government doing enough to listen to people and understand their emerging needs before they reach a crisis level?

This report explores key questions for government, professionals, and civil society to ask themselves when considering how to build listening into the way public services are designed and delivered, and how to better learn from and respond to what they hear.

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*...how often do  
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# Our approach

## Introduction

For governments, organisations and professionals, the challenge of learning how to listen better to citizens is a perennial one. The pandemic and the capacity of governments and society to respond to crisis has prompted renewed inquiry into this challenge, increasing our focus on what is at stake when we fail to listen to people, especially those experiencing multiple disadvantages and those who are seldom heard. It is in this context that Changing Lives and the Centre for Public Impact (CPI) embarked on an ongoing journey of learning about listening.

This report covers the second phase of this work, following on from an early experimental phase of listening that took place during the summer of 2020. The report consists of four sections:

1. This first section, **Our approach**, introduces the context of the listening process and how it relates to our ongoing process of learning how to listen. It also outlines our aims for Phase 2 and the methodology we applied to listening.
2. The second section, **What we heard about people's experiences**, outlines what we heard from participants in Phase 2 about their experiences of being listened to.
3. The third section, **What we learned about our listening approach**, reflects on what we learned about our methodology and approach to listening.
4. In the final section, **Conclusions, implications and further explorations**, we summarise our findings and conclude with reflections on the potential future development of listening.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The first phase of our listening journey took place over the summer of 2020, during the initial period of lockdown and as the country began to ease out of lockdown restrictions. We held listening sessions with 90 people who were in contact with Changing Lives services. The people who participated in this project lived in Northeastern England and were experiencing multiple disadvantages, such as poverty, homelessness, domestic abuse, addiction, sexual exploitation, and involvement in the criminal justice system. We learned that people did want to be listened to by those in power, but that the channels through which they engage need to be built on reciprocal trust and meaningful connection, often at a very local level. Their motivation for participating in the process was partly altruistic – they wanted to be listened to, so that their experiences might help others. However, people also experienced a sense of connection and empowerment from the actual listening process itself.

The results from Phase 1 clarified the scale of the task of understanding how to support



good listening and how much we have to learn and explore. It prompted us to think further about the motivational factors and barriers to engagement with the seldom heard, listening at different levels – from community and services to local and national government – and how listening can be translated into impact and a feeling of being heard.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In Phase 2, we took what we had learned about listening to the seldom heard from the first phase and tried to develop a stronger understanding of how people want to be listened to and who they trust to listen to them. Our original stated aims for this project were as follows:

- A greater understanding of people's experiences of being listened to, and the impact this has on groups who are traditionally unheard.
- An understanding of whether there are specific needs that are particular to people experiencing multiple disadvantages.
- A better understanding of how listening can be made a regular part of Changing Lives and other organisations' practices as they embark on collating ideas for local recovery plans.
- Laying the groundwork for how a listening project can be scaled up and embedded within organisations, not just as a response to the pandemic but in recognition of the importance in involving people with relevant lived experience when shaping services.

By exploring these questions, we hoped to provide government, civil society, and those in power with a deeper understanding of how to listen to people who are seldom heard.

It is important to note at this stage that, as the project developed, we had to adapt our focus in ways that deviated from these original aims as stated. This can be attributed in part to the practical difficulties presented by the circumstances of the pandemic, which heavily restricted methods of communication and engagement, as well as people's availability to participate in the process. The importance of flexibility during listening is highlighted in our findings, and we have tried to reflect this in this report, focusing on themes that were important to participants rather than limiting ourselves to the themes that fit the original scope and hypotheses.

## OVERVIEW

Over the period from October 2020 to April 2021, we conducted listening conversations with 47 people who are in contact with Changing Lives' services. The graphics on page 12 provide further details on the participants in the listening process.

## Total participants 47

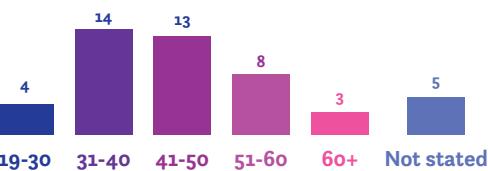
### Gender



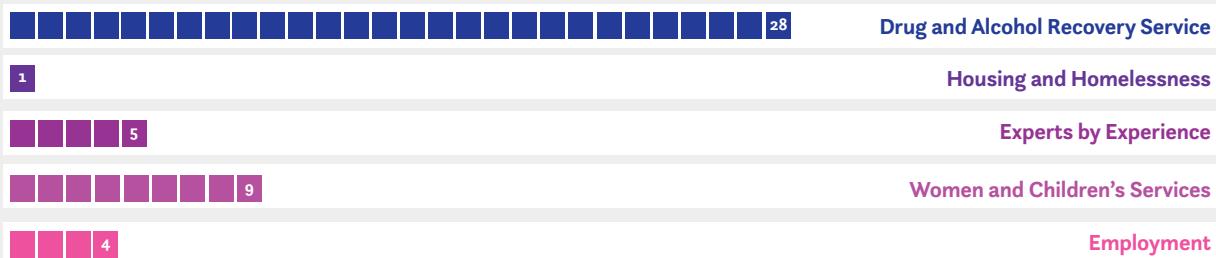
### Ethnicity



### Age



### Type of Services Accessing/Working with



### Accommodation Status



As in Phase 1, we drew on the principle of appreciative inquiry, which is a strengths-based approach that encourages learning from positive experiences, not just negative ones. To do this, we listened to participants about positive experiences where they had felt listened to, as well as providing the freedom for them to discuss negative experiences. As in Phase 1, we used rounds of listening and sensemaking so that we could adapt our approach as the project progressed. However, for Phase 2 we refined and developed these techniques to focus specifically on where people currently felt listened to, what it was about those interactions that allowed them to feel listened to, and the extent to which people felt listened to at community, service, local and national levels. We also sought to explore how people would want to be engaged in the future, what those conversations would look like, and what would be needed for people to feel heard by professionals and those in authority.

We should note that the period over which the listening took place included regional lockdowns and a third national lockdown. Restrictions meant that much of the listening had to take place

remotely, either over the phone or online. Furthermore, the fatigue and emotional toll of the pandemic was deeply felt across the project team, listeners, and participants, and it was felt this might have impacted our ability to engage people.

## Methodology

The methodology consisted of three components:

1. We conducted listening conversations with participants.
2. We then invited people from those conversations who were either listened to or conducted the listening to sensemaking sessions to discuss the results of the listening conversations.
3. Following this, we held conversations with listeners (Changing Lives staff) to better understand how valuable the process was and how it could be improved.

### 1. LISTENING CONVERSATIONS

Listening conversations took place between Changing Lives support workers (the “listeners”) and participants who were involved with Changing Lives through various services and projects. Conversations were framed by six questions concerning participants’ experiences of being listened to and how they would like to be listened to in the future (full details of the questions asked at this stage are provided in Background Documents, Annex 1.2), though listeners and participants had flexibility within the conversation to respond to wider issues raised by participants. Participants were offered a £15 voucher for their time in this component, although no compensation was offered for other stages of the methodology. Some of the listening conversations were followed by one-to-one debriefs (see Background Documents, Annex 1.3) with participants to assess their experience and try to identify how listening might be improved.

During the period of listening, a staff member went on long term leave at short notice and was therefore unable to document the notes from a small number of listening conversations. To gather the insights from the group that was impacted we ran extra listening conversations. The insights from these conversations have been included in the report, however they were conducted after the last sensemaking session and so did not go through the same sensemaking process as the other conversations.

### 2. SENSEMAKING SESSIONS

Participants, listeners, and the project team were invited to join collective sensemaking sessions, chaired by CPI, to help make sense of what had been heard during the listening conversations. The purpose was to help develop a collective understanding of the key findings, in line with the principle of *“no sensemaking about me without me”*. To support this, and following feedback from Phase 1, background materials that documented the results of the listening conversations were prepared and distributed to those who accepted the invitation to sensemaking (see Background Documents, Annex 2.4). The sensemaking sessions themselves involved facilitated discussions that sought to identify key themes and messages emerging from the conversations. (Full details of the structure and design of these sessions, including the questions framing discussion are provided in Background Documents, Annex 2.)

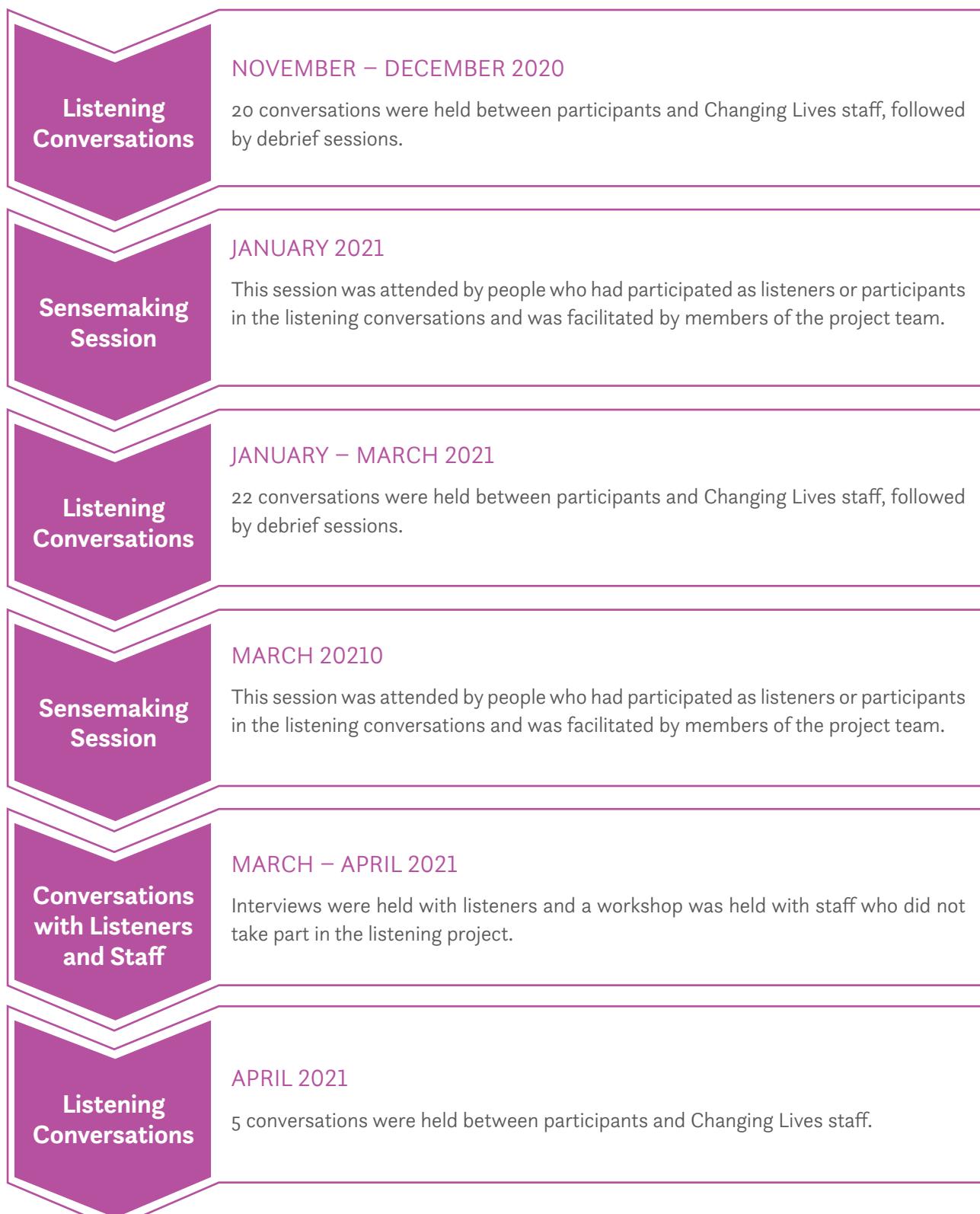
### 3. CONVERSATIONS WITH CHANGING LIVES SUPPORT WORKERS WHO WERE LISTENERS AND WIDER STAFF

Following the listening conversations and sensemaking sessions, we conducted a series of conversations with the listeners to explore their experiences of the process. This was an opportunity to better understand what worked well, the barriers to listening, and how the

process of listening could be adapted to make it easier, more valuable for staff, and more embedded in routine practice. To complement this, we also held conversations with wider Changing Lives staff about the listening project and their views on the function of listening in their roles. For full details on the questions asked, see Background Documents, Annex 3.

## Timeline

The timeline and application of the different components of listening are outlined below:



# What we heard about people's experiences

In this section, we explore what we heard from participants. It is of relevance to anyone seeking to understand the experiences that seldom heard groups with multiple disadvantages have of being listened to within their communities, by public services, and by wider government. We identified these four themes as being the key lessons to emerge from the listening conversations. These themes were identified in collaboration with participants and listeners during our sensemaking sessions:

- **The importance of support workers, peer support groups, and the wider community**
- **The need to connect silos**
- **The connection between listening and the relationships formed at the service, local and national levels**
- **Emerging needs around mental health.**

## The importance of support workers, peer support groups, and the wider community

When asked, many participants reported that they did feel part of a community and that it was important to them. When asked to explain what this community was and why it was important, they gave a variety of answers. **It was common for participants to describe their community as the support they received from services and peer support groups.** Among the reasons why participants considered these communities to be important was that they made them feel cared for, included and understood. Community was a place in which the participants felt that “people know me”. **Participants said that empathy was crucial to good listening, especially from peers who had “walked in your shoes”.** They also highlighted the ability of good listeners to challenge them in a supportive and understanding way. However, it is important not to overstate the importance of support workers and peer support to all those experiencing complex challenges. Some may not have any relationship with people in these roles or may have a poor relationship with them, and it is likely that those individuals are underrepresented in this project because of the listening approach that we adopted.

It is also important to note that peer supporters are some of the most effective listeners. Government and public services must therefore recognise the huge potential role and value of those individuals we often deem to be “needing support” as those who can actually provide the most effective support to those who are seldom heard. They should also consider how to enable peer supporters and experts by experience groups to have a much stronger voice in public debates.

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*...recognise the huge potential role and value of those individuals we often deem to be “needing support” as those who can actually provide the most effective support to those who are seldom heard.*



Community, particularly communities outside support worker and peer support groups, were often felt to be important and were generally experienced positively. However this was not always the case. **Participants explained how a community could be a place where people felt lonely, isolated, excluded, and subject to stigma.** Some participants commented on their daily experiences of racism. Families seeking asylum during the pandemic told of their exclusion from many community support initiatives. During the sensemaking sessions, people discussed less effective listening they had experienced from communities, for example some interactions where family and friends had offered advice or comments which had left them feeling less understood and more alone, due to a lack of understanding and shared experiences.

## The need to connect silos

A key message emerging from the listening conversations related to the challenge of silos and a lack of connection across and within statutory services and the voluntary sector. While there has been wider discussion of the challenge of silos in public service delivery from the perspective of policymakers and managers – see Hundred (2006) and O’Leary (2015) – what was striking about these conversations was how this issue manifested itself in the direct experiences of the people we spoke with.

**Participants described feeling that they were not seen as a whole person, and this had a detrimental impact on how they felt, the service they received, and the relationships and trust they had with professionals.** During the sensemaking, one participant described visiting a GP and feeling as though the doctor had attempted to treat a symptom independently of the root cause, a reaction that resonated with the wider group. Participants also described a need to repeat their stories to different services, which they found retraumatising. Mental health was seen as a particular casualty of this process, falling through the cracks as different services sought to address different symptoms in isolation. In response to the difficulties presented by silos, people felt there was often pressure on citizens to make the fit happen themselves when services were not communicating with one another.

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**Silos were not limited to services, however. Participants identified silos both between and within communities, for instance between different peer support groups.** Participants described “communities of function”, where silos between formal services created broader false distinctions and barriers, for instance between support for mental health and recovery from addiction.

Linked to the issue of silos was the participants’ concern that there was a lack of awareness of available support. During one of the sensemaking sessions, participants discussed how it was often only by chance that they came to know about useful support services and community organisations. They felt that this also applied to services and organisations themselves – they were often unaware of other support services and therefore could not signpost them effectively. **People talked about the need for a central “body of knowledge”, meaning an accessible resource that could show people what support was available. This would allow people to choose their own support packages – a “pick-and-mix approach”, as one participant described it.** During the sensemaking sessions, people emphasised the need for a more “seamless” approach, drawing on the challenge of silos and the need for greater awareness.

## The connection between listening and relationships at the level of services and local and national government

We asked people whether they felt listened to by those at a service, local and national level. There was a clear pattern in the results indicating that people felt less and less listened to as we moved from community through to service, local and national levels.

**At the service level, people described the quality of listening as highly variable, depending on the particular service or professional.** During a sensemaking session, one participant highlighted an experience with an individual nurse who had shown good listening skills and taken what seemed like extra time with them. This was contrasted with an experience at a GP surgery in which they felt the doctor had, under time pressure, failed to listen as well as the nurse and had rushed through the process. The experiences pointed to the role of individual listening skills, but also to the structure and pressures professionals were operating within and the impact this had on their capacity to listen effectively.

*"The professionals are well intentioned, but unless you walk the walk, it is difficult to understand other people's perspective."* Source: Sensemaking session

At the local level, some people described positive interactions with councillors, but many of the conversations revealed that participants had limited or no contact with local government. During a sensemaking session, participants observed that some people viewed local government as a place to take complaints when things were going wrong.

**They felt there was the potential for a more positive perspective on local government as an institution through which citizens can try to improve their area,** and argued that there was some responsibility on the part of citizens to try to ensure this happened.

At the level of national government, people described far more negative experiences and there was generally a greater reluctance to discuss their feelings on this matter in the listening conversations. **One theme that emerged from this discussion concerned interaction with those administering universal credit. The role of these professionals was seen as one of scrutiny rather than support, and the relationship was characterised by anxiety, suspicion and uncertainty.** During the pandemic, there was less communication from these services and no requirement to attend appointments. This increased anxiety among participants, who feared being sanctioned in the uncertain environment. This makes for an illuminating contrast with other experiences, where less scrutiny and contact had been experienced positively as an indication of increased trust.

We also heard from people seeking asylum who described feeling that they were not visible or listened to by the government. Some specifically recounted their challenging relationships with the solicitors representing their claims who frequently changed appointments, sometimes with little notice, resulting in both mental and financial impacts. Again these relationships were characterised by anxiety, unequal power dynamics, a lack of trust and a lack of listening.

Discussing perceptions of the national government, one participant observed that they did not feel listened to by the government and they did not listen to the government themselves. People doubted the honesty and sincerity of the government, describing "tick-box exercises", overpromising and underdelivering, and feeling that the government did not care. The lack of clarity around messaging on Covid-19 was the focus of some criticisms of government. However, there were participants who acknowledged that it had been a difficult time for the

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*The professionals are well intentioned, but unless you walk the walk, it is difficult to understand other people's perspective.*

Source: Sensemaking session

government, and that they were doing their best. In some cases, the experience of Covid and lockdown had made them more aware and engaged in national politics than they had been before.

## Emerging needs around mental health

The effect on mental health was a recurring theme in both sensemaking sessions. It was felt that mental health needed to be recognised and taken far more seriously, and the pandemic had only increased the urgency of this issue. Participants observed that authorities were relatively effective at meeting physical needs – for example, by providing food packages – or addressing physical problems, through GP surgeries and other NHS resources, and there needed to be something as effective as this in place for mental health.

During one sensemaking session, **participants observed that the services that many people trust and rely on for their sense of community depend on funding that is uncertain. This lack of stability and consistency was connected to people's anxiety and struggles to get support for mental health.** Participants described a feeling of being “left in the lurch”. This issue also emerged very strongly when participants were asked a broader question about what they would do to help build greater trust – many responded by saying they would invest greater resources in services and ensure consistency in service delivery.

During the sensemaking sessions, the theme of silos and a lack of coordination across services was connected directly to the issue of mental health. As discussed earlier, it was felt that mental health was neglected because services sought to address symptoms in isolation. People’s interactions with services saw them failing to get the support they needed on mental health while also being required to repeat their stories in a way that retraumatised them. This suggested that not only was there a need for a greater commitment of resources and prioritisation of mental health in service delivery, but also that support in this area may require change to the structure and system in which these services are delivered.

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*...the theme of silos and a lack of coordination across services was connected directly to the issue of mental health.*

# What we learned about our listening approach

In this section, we explore in more detail our methodology of listening. This includes a discussion of the validity of the results and the limits our methodology imposes on the conclusions that we can reach. Our attempt here is to reflect on what worked well or less well, how easy or difficult it has been to listen to the seldom heard, and what lessons we learned through this phase of work. This is of particular relevance for those who are interested in either exploring different methods for listening to seldom heard groups or establishing listening and sensemaking sessions within their own organisation, or who are already using similar approaches.

## People wanted to be listened to, and key motivational factors for engaging were altruism and having an impact

A large proportion (87%) of participants in the listening sessions said that they would like to be involved in future discussions about being heard, while 7% said maybe they would, and only 7% said that they would not. The opportunity to help others, to share personal experiences, and to have an impact on one's own life were the most influential factors in encouraging people to engage. This strong sense of altruism was repeatedly reinforced throughout the listening and sensemaking sessions, with participants describing their strong desire to help and support others.

Participants were asked what the ideal conversation would look like for them and how it would be structured. Face-to-face conversation remained the most popular method of communication. However, it is notable that participants were far more comfortable with using videoconferencing and the idea of future engagement taking place online than they had been during Phase 1 of the listening process. They said it would be important for future engagement to take place in an inclusive and safe environment. Many of them talked about how they would like to share their experiences and stories to people with power and authority (e.g. doctors, the police and government). Finally, they wanted the process to be "purposeful" and provide them with the opportunity to change things.

The participants' comments about the importance of impact and purposeful listening highlight the potential for ambiguity in the intended outcome of listening. Are we listening because listening is a good practice in itself, or are we seeking to connect listening to decision-making? There are legitimate arguments in favour of both forms of listening, and Phase 1 highlighted other potential purposes, such as building relationships and the opportunity for learning. However, there is a risk that if there are different expectations present among those taking part, and these expectations are not met, then listening could become harmful to trust and engagement. It is therefore important to establish clear expectations with everyone involved about the intended outcomes of listening sessions.



## Through experimentation, we found an approach that people enjoyed and allowed us to conduct robust sensemaking, though there are still limitations to the approach we used

The sensemaking sessions represented our effort to apply the principle of “no sensemaking about me without me”. We found that we needed to experiment with the design of the process to ensure that people felt comfortable about participating and enjoyed the experience, and to ensure we could conduct robust sensemaking that enabled everyone to feel heard and gain a joint understanding of the key issues arising from the listening sessions.

“No sensemaking about me without me” can only be achieved if people want to take part and enjoy the process. Only a quarter of those who took part in listening conversations attended either of the sensemaking sessions. We did offer alternative participation methods, including remote asynchronous participation via email, but such options were not taken up. We were unable to get much feedback as to why many of those who participated in listening sessions did not go on to participate in the sensemaking sessions, although some of the listeners did mention that those they spoke with were happy with one-to-one conversations but less comfortable with group discussions.

Those who did attend the sensemaking sessions reported that they enjoyed them, and a poll of attendees at the end of both sessions revealed very positive experiences. However, we should caveat this by recognising that there may have been an unwillingness to give negative feedback as the poll was conducted in the presence of facilitators from Changing Lives and CPI, even though the results were automatically anonymised.

Another challenge is to ensure that the sensemaking sessions enabled everyone to feel heard and gain a joint understanding of the key issues arising from the listening sessions. We found that sensemaking sessions were vulnerable to becoming distorted by attendees’ personal reflections, different power dynamics within the group, or giving attention to striking individual examples in the data rather than accurately reflecting broader themes. We introduced a range of design choices to mitigate these potential sources of bias and distortion. Our approach included inviting attendees to introduce themselves with first names rather than names and roles, establishing ground rules that helped support the safety of the space, using check-in questions on how people were coming into the session, and applying inclusive facilitation methods to ensure everyone had the opportunity to speak. Arguably the most dramatic difference in the quality of the sensemaking sessions came through using visual cues and reframing the questions asked in the second sensemaking session. We used a shared screen to provide a visual cue of the results from the conversations to support and focus discussion, and we asked participants “if you were to repeat back what you heard from these conversations, what would you say?”

While it is right to make efforts to minimise collective bias and sources of distortion, it is important to recognise that we cannot entirely eliminate bias and not all difference in interpretation should be attributed to bias. When the data is as rich and open as these conversations were, people across different sensemaking sessions can reasonably come to different conclusions about the key messages, because there is no single true way to understand the data but rather multiple legitimate interpretations.

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*“No sensemaking about me without me” can only be achieved if people want to take part and enjoy the process*

We reflected that the experience could still be improved and made more inclusive through the use of more varied and creative engagement methods. Attendees were required to take part in group discussion for much of the 2.5 hour session, although this could be broken up by introducing more variety into the activities involved, including self-reflection and mixing up discussion groups. The ability to deliver face-to-face sessions would support the inclusion of some groups. However, other participants would have been less keen to attend a face-to-face group session and happier to participate in a group discussion over videoconference. Findings from our conversations with listeners suggested that participants might enjoy different types of sensemaking sessions, for example there may be different levels of comfort with talking about or hearing other people's stories. This invites us to consider whether we need to offer different formats for sensemaking with respect to the nature of the discussion as well as the means of communication. Organisations seeking to run sensemaking sessions will need to experiment to find approaches that work best for their particular groups and audiences.

## **Changing Lives staff felt that listening was crucial to their role, though capacity and role boundaries can get in the way**

Through our conversations with listeners who were involved in the project and other Changing Lives staff who were not, we learned that all staff felt listening was crucial to their role. Listeners reflected on the benefits they gained from having listening conversations with the people they worked with and supported. They told us they had learned more about what it meant to be a good listener and how they were able to apply this to their practice. They also spoke about the benefits of gaining a wider understanding of the people they supported, along with their perspectives on issues that they would not normally discuss as part of their work together. These listeners did not perceive any barriers to listening as such, although they did discuss some tensions that arose around responding to issues raised during the listening conversations that lay outside the remit of their role.

Workshops with Changing Lives staff who did not take part in the listening project concluded that listening was part of everyone's role, and that deep listening can happen in more informal ways, for instance unplanned conversations while getting a cup of tea, rather than only in a formal session.

They noted that limited time, pressure at work, and an inability to provide undivided attention could be barriers to listening, particularly given the wider demands on practitioners caused by the pandemic. They also spoke about the importance of safe spaces for listening, including how you would create them in the digital and physical worlds. They also reflected that sometimes these conversations could take an emotional toll and it is important to consider staff and participants' wellbeing.

*"There's something as well about barriers, about being able to quieten your own brain... Going into a situation where you need to listen to somebody else, you need to quieten your own brain in terms of all the stuff you've got going on."*

*"I think it's very unique in this job, isn't it?... If you have some personal issues, then it's going to affect you, you've got the double whammy of then dealing with people who have experienced trauma as well."*

*"What makes a good listener is being able to make sure that you have the capacity to listen, and in the current climate I feel very drained and like I don't have the capacity to listen"*

Source: Changing Lives staff workshops

A further issue that emerged from these conversations was how role boundaries can get in the way of good listening, and there were different perspectives on the relationship between listening and providing solutions. In some respects, staff welcomed the opportunity to listen to participants and better understand their attitudes and experiences on issues beyond their immediate responsibilities. Yet this also came with a sense of pressure, as staff felt they were inviting participants to talk about issues that they were not necessarily able to respond to or resolve. Others pushed back on this feeling, for example they described how they were very solution-focused but needed to resist this, observing that good listening didn't always mean providing solutions. Often it meant allowing people to be heard and then reflecting back what they had said. This again raises the issue of the need to have clear expectations of what listening is for and what it can achieve in each particular context.

## **It was more difficult to engage people at this point in the pandemic**

Engaging people in listening was more difficult in Phase 2 than in Phase 1. The difficulties were noted across the project team, staff and listeners. This contributed to significantly less participation than we had anticipated. In Phase 1, we spoke with 90 people and had originally planned to listen to 150 people in Phase 2, yet we were only able to conduct 47 conversations. There was not only an issue of the number of people we spoke to, but also an issue of diversity and representation. Our record of the demographic details of participants shows an underrepresentation of groups in relation to ethnicity and age.

There are a number of factors to consider when trying to understand why engagement was more difficult at this point than during the summer of 2020. Staff and listeners described the months during which listening took place, particularly during the national lockdown beginning in January 2021, as especially busy, stressful and chaotic. It was felt that pressure on staff and participants during this period limited the time that people could give to listening. This was in contrast with the experience of the first lockdown during Phase 1, when staff and listeners suggested there was an energy and enthusiasm in the unusual circumstances, particularly during the summer.

We should also acknowledge other issues with participation. Listeners described selecting who they approached for listening conversations, deciding not to engage some people who were in the early stages of recovery or experiencing a particularly difficult time, fearing that the conversation might be harmful to those individuals' welfare and their work together. In some cases, they felt this was just a matter of timing, and if listening had taken place over a longer period of time this might have afforded them an opportunity to conduct a conversation. This raised interesting questions. If listening is primarily an empathic endeavour, then what are the concerns about listening to people regardless of where they are in their journey? If a different kind of listening is required for these situations, then how would it be different?

We must also acknowledge the role of selection bias at a number of other levels. Listeners made a judgement in selecting particular people to take part in the listening conversations. Of those who participated in these conversations, people self-selected to participate in the sensemaking sessions. Finally, the listeners we spoke to in order to understand their experiences of listening also self-selected and may not have been representative of all the listeners involved in the project. At each stage, it is likely that we were hearing from those who were most enthusiastic about the listening process and who faced relatively fewer barriers to participation. Therefore, while we have taken important steps to enhance our understanding of how to listen to the seldom heard, we also need to recognise that there are limits to who we are hearing from and to view our findings within that context.

## **Reflections from James Ward, Head of Quality at Changing Lives**

*Phase 2 of the listening programme has felt materially different from Phase 1. We have had to adapt and change our plans much more frequently and to much more significant degrees in response to the demands that the pandemic has placed on our services. There have also been many more discussions and questions of ourselves ensuring we do not exploit the goodwill of colleagues, experts by experience, and people in our services. Nor have we been able to realise some of our original aims of reaching minoritised communities or younger people. This clearly raises the question why? Both phases took place in lockdown, both had broadly similar aims and, if anything, thanks to the support of the Emerging Futures fund, we were better resourced to “deliver the project” in this second phase.*

*It is only on reflection, as we near the end of the project, that of course Phase 2 is materially different because everything IS materially different. The scope of change at every level of society over the last twelve months has been huge, and the pace fast and sometimes frenetic. One year on from the start of the pandemic, the adrenaline that kept many people going has long since run out and yet more changes, even positive ones such as those that the vaccine will hopefully deliver, are always just on the horizon. We also know that those colleagues who have continued to provide services in person have experienced significantly higher levels of personal anxiety and stress due to understandable health concerns of their own, whilst also providing support and doing the best they can for those who access our services. Excitement and novelty have inevitably given way to exhaustion and worry. So, on top of this, asking colleagues to talk to people in our services and listen to how they want to be listened to was a tall order, and I am very grateful to those that have managed to find the time to do so. This was primarily the reason why it soon became clear that we also needed to talk to colleagues about their experiences of listening.*

*Despite the challenges and changes, this exercise in listening has been invaluable and there are significant implications for the way that we work. In the context of service delivery, we need to learn more about how people accessing our services want to be listened to and how this may differ from “delivering support”. We need to consider how our systems and process can better facilitate, rather than hinder, open and empathic listening and what needs to change to enable this. We also need to acknowledge the emotional toll of listening for colleagues and how we can listen better as an organisation. All this also needs to be done with the same appreciative approach that this programme has aimed to take.*

# Conclusions, implications and further explorations

Through this project we have developed a much richer understanding of the importance of listening to people who are experiencing multiple disadvantages, of the places where good listening already exists, and some of the barriers to building this into standard practice. However, it is notable that it appears to be harder to engage in listening at this later stage of the pandemic. This has implications as to why important voices go unheard and certain needs, particularly around mental health and wellbeing, go unrecognised. It is important for those in government and public services to pay urgent attention to the voices of those who have been overlooked during the pandemic, to rebuild relationships and trust, to respond to emerging and currently hidden needs, and to ensure that the world we build after the crisis enables everyone to thrive.

We are only just beginning to understand how to listen to and help elevate the voices of the seldom heard, and we need others to join us on this journey. In the spirit of “no sensemaking about me without me”, this report does not offer specific recommendations or models for those working with seldom heard groups. Instead, it is an open invitation to government, professionals, and civil society to join us in this exploration to make listening and elevating the voices of seldom heard groups a part of daily practice. This section notes some of the key questions that have arisen as a result of what we have learned so far.

## Building better listening into how public services are designed and delivered

We heard again and again that good listening requires empathy and respect, ensuring that people feel understood and cared for. The best listening often came from relationships built on trust that has developed over time and on the connection of shared experience. People we listened to often spoke about the importance of listening by support workers and peer supporters, and while this may not hold true for all people experiencing complex challenges, these were certainly important relationships for participants in this project.

We also heard about instances where time pressures, a lack of listening skills, and the use of sanctions within public services damaged trust and became barriers to good listening. We have further developed our approach to using discrete listening sessions and sensemaking sessions, and this approach was highly valued by both participants and staff. This has helped us to understand how listening could be built into public services, although there remain some challenges to building this into day-to-day practice and reaching everyone we would want to listen to. The key questions that arise from this process are:

- How can governments and public services better value and empower the roles of support workers and peer support to listen to seldom heard groups? In particular, how can we

move from seeing those facing multiple disadvantages as “needing help” to seeing them as well placed to listen to seldom heard voices and advise on how to improve the current systems of support?

- How can public services provide frontline staff with the time, training and support to listen well and make best use of these trusted relationships?
- How can we build trusted relationships between frontline staff and the communities they serve where this is not the norm within the service?

## Learning from, and responding to, what we have heard

It is important for those in government to consider how to make best use of the good listening that occurs in peer support communities and some frontline roles, and to enable people in these roles to respond to and act upon the wide range of concerns raised by the people they are listening to. One of the key motivators for listening was the ability to have an impact. Listeners and participants both said that silos and role boundaries can be barriers and create tensions around good listening – support staff were better able to listen and respond when the issues were limited to ones that they could deal with as part of their professional role. Needing to repeat their story to multiple people, or telling their story and not seeing a response, was perceived as poor listening by participants and could damage trust. Key questions to consider are:

- How can peer support communities and good listeners in frontline roles be better enabled to offer a response to a wider range of concerns? This does not necessarily mean that support workers and peer supporters should take on these additional demands themselves, but could it mean creating more fluid connections across team and organisational boundaries to ensure a better and more holistic response?
- How can those in government seeking to engage with seldom heard voices across a wide range of policy issues make more use of experts by experience and peer support groups, as well as the insights gathered by frontline staff?

## Where we want to go next

At CPI and Changing Lives we do not believe this journey is over – in many ways it is just beginning. These are some questions that we are keen to explore further:

- How can we make listening and sensemaking sessions more inclusive in order to strengthen the voices of a wider range of seldom heard groups?
- How can we build deep listening and sensemaking into standard practice within and across different organisations, in a way that connects with key decision-makers and policymakers to ensure the organisation is able to respond to what has been heard?
- How can we break down silos between different public and community services to support good and trusted listeners in listening more holistically to seldom heard groups and in responding effectively to a wider range of issues?

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# **Learning to Listen Again:**

## **Deepening our understanding of how to amplify seldom heard voices through positive listening**

Join the conversation

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