



CASE STUDY: “SERVING UNDERSTANDING: A COLLABORATIVE ‘LEARNING LUNCH’”

The ‘Learning Lunch’ grew out of the *“I am more than...”* project, which began in autumn 2023. The project set out to better understand what being involved in research means to those with lived experience of homelessness or being vulnerably housed (and the staff and volunteers from the community organisations that support them); and to co-create opportunities to be involved in ways they would want in health and social care research, policy and practice.

The project was developed with people who are homeless and vulnerably housed, who wanted to be seen as *‘more than’* a label. *“I am more than...”* was an NHS England funded Dorset Research Engagement Network (REN) Programme project. It was through continuing conversations between Lantern Trust (LT) and Bournemouth University (BU) PIER (Public Involvement in Education and Research) two of the project’s partner organisations, and involving Dorset Council (DC) who coordinate the Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI), that the idea of the Learning Lunch developed.

During these informal conversations the RSI coordinator shared:

“Having attended two ‘I Am More Than’ events, what came through, loudly, is that many people felt judged and unheard through the process of making a homeless application”, and that many of the barriers were “compounded by the systems we use”.

The Learning Lunch was an opportunity to go beyond REN, taking what we had learnt from creating inclusive, shared space for people from different perspectives to come together and feel able to use their voice to contribute to change. This activity reflected the growing confidence and capacity of LT to engage in research, practice and service development.

Who: We welcomed 19 attendees: 9 Dorset Council staff members, 8 Lantern customers, and 2 REN members: 1 from Lantern and 1 from BU PIER.

Why: To take an aspect of the ***'I am more than...' dream*** - *'if all communities connect and understand each other. Everyone is safe and feels safe. Our individual life experiences are valued. There is no judgement. There is no them and us. In our dream, everyone is seen as an individual, is listened to, is treated with respect and dignity. All policy is designed with lived experience at its heart'* - and do something about it.



Part of what was captured throughout 'I am more than...' was the imperative that visible, tangible action is taken, and people can see that change is happening as a result of what has been shared.

How: This activity's success relied on the unity, planning and trust behind it. The roles of Tanya Bailey (LT), Kate Jupp (BU PIER) and Kerry Mellor (RSI Coordinator, DC) was the scaffolding for the activity to flourish.



Having lunch together offered a welcoming, relaxed and familiar activity to begin to share and engage as people first



We developed a safer space with flexibility for people to join in as much or as little as they felt confident

What: The Learning Lunch created a shared space a for LT customers and DC housing staff to engage outside the usual constraints of the system - an opportunity to share food and connect on a human level. Facilitated using a flexible and paced approach, the workshop flow invited people to engage in groupwork and reflection. Everyone shared experiences and the ever-present tensions around individual 'person-labels'. What unfolded was active listening, exploration of perceptions from the diverse experiences of the group, and respectful and empathic open discussions between people meeting, in many cases, for the first time.



Using Post-it notes everyone was invited to identify their own 'person labels' and shared these within small groups



We explored assumptions, judgements and what it feels like to be heard and understood



We reflected together that despite personal and situational differences, there were a lot of experiential commonalities



Pledges were made and shared; making a commitment to take the learning and put it into action

Where: The setting was Hope House, a familiar and welcome setting for LT customers and the hub of Access Wellbeing (AW) services also run by LT. The setting provided an additional opportunity for DC staff to learn more about the services and activities offered by Access Wellbeing, providing new information for many.



Image: 'I am more than...' dream

IMPACT

"It was gratifying to see someone who had sat back quietly at the beginning and struggled a little with the first exercise, looking involved and energised by the end."

(DC RSI coordinator)

"There was a hum of conversation during the event that I believe testifies to the successful breaking down of some of the barriers between the groups (LT customers (housing service service-users) and DC staff (housing service providers)). Likewise, some of the responses during the session indicated that participants had been prepared to share personal experiences, to listen openly to one another and to explore their common humanity."

(DC RSI coordinator)

Everyone was invited to make a personal pledge at the end of the session drawing on inspiration from **The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**. The invitation was to pledge to make one small change in their own life that would improve the lives of others. The pledge was open to personal interpretation of whether to align this to home, work or community.

Here are a few of those captured pledges:

"I pledge to carry out my role with compassion and empathy."

"Pledge to keep listening. To hear and consider what changes I can make."

"Listen!"

MOVING FORWARDS

It really did take this long:

The Learning Lunch idea began in October 2024 and took place March 2025. Allowing time for adequate planning and choosing a time and place that suited all concerned meant it was well attended. Preparatory conversations with LT customers as they engaged in their usual activities provided by LT, supported their involvement and made space for a level of peer engagement and support to evolve. The event reaped the rewards of its organic development, but it is acknowledged it comes with a need to make sure activities like this are not forgotten, as other immediate frontline pressures arise. At the end of the Learning Lunch, one LT customer enquired *"do these happen every week?"*. This casual remark encapsulates the complexities involved in supporting inclusive lived experience involvement. On one hand, it illustrates the communities' willingness and enthusiasm to be involved, and at the same time identifies a need to manage expectations and to ensure the work required to support successful inclusive involvement is appropriately resourced.

It would not have happened without:

An important aspect of the Learning Lunch initiative was the DC RSI coordinator's 'desire and dedication to continue in their learning and include colleagues from the local housing team. The buy-in from the LT contributors did not happen by chance! It reflected a huge amount of leg work by Tanya (LT) putting together a thoughtful and paced agenda and through ongoing conversations and reminders to support people through the door on the day. Equally, the trusted relationship developed between BU PIER and LT throughout the project was a pre-requisite for the success of this activity. A budget for lunch was also essential!



Things to consider for next steps:

The following reflections from the DC RSI coordinator capture important lessons to take forward for future collaborative working:

"Many of the lived experience participants (LT customers) appeared far more at ease in sharing feelings and experiences than the council (housing team) staff. There are doubtless many reasons for this, not least because as staff we are hyper-aware of boundaries around personal information, but I did also wonder if all the work done so far as part of the REN research has given the lived experience participants (LT customers) literacy around the sharing of their experience that staff, coming cold into this scenario, were lacking. However, I was impressed by the willingness of all to acknowledge their vulnerability, to name their discomfort and still be prepared to stay and work through the session. If we were to repeat the session with different staff, I think I would do some preparatory work around what to expect for those taking part".

"For any future forum, I would also be more direct and more assertive (with my DC colleagues) around the nature of the event; in other words, that this is not an outcome-driven process but intrinsically relational, and that there is real value in that".

*NHS England's Research Engagement Network (REN): REN is a program to increase diversity and inclusion in health and care research by creating regional networks of community researchers, particularly focusing on underrepresented groups. It aims to build capacity within these communities and make research more accessible and equitable. The REN was launched in 2022 and works with partners like the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) to engage communities and improve research participation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Sharing lunch and connecting at a human level really can lead to change:

"In terms of Next Steps, we (DC) are needing to do a review of our current rough sleeping services, this is a good moment to evaluate what is working well and where change is necessary, alongside being ready for whatever resources are allocated and able to adjust accordingly. It would be good to have involvement from LT customers, in a way that feels meaningful to them, including accepting that they might not want to participate" (DC RSI coordinator). Coming back to the 'I am more than dream' that 'all policy is designed with lived experience at its heart'.