

TRANSFORMING SERVICES FOR WOMEN'S FUTURES

Project Evaluation



**CHANGING
LIVES**

AGENDA
alliance

Introduction

The North-east of England experiences some of the highest rates of regional poverty in the UK.¹ With poverty levels rising, public services have struggled to support those in-need, grappling with the ongoing impact of austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis. These challenges have disproportionately affected women and girls experiencing multiple unmet needs, who face additional risks to their physical and mental health.

Transforming Services for Women's Futures (TSWF) was a partnership project between Agenda Alliance and Changing Lives, funded by the Smallwood Trust. The project took place from early 2022 until July 2023, and concentrated on the ways in which adult women (aged 18 and over) facing multiple unmet needs experience public services across Northumberland and Tyne and Wear.

Working with women with lived experience, local decision-makers and practitioners, TSWF made the case for systems-change, calling on public services to prevent the cycle of harm affecting many women facing multiple unmet needs. The final report can be read [here](#).

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1. At the time this research was conducted, the poverty rate for the North-East stood at 26%, the worst in the UK ([JRF UK Poverty 2023](#))
 2. See Agenda Alliance's glossary for our definition of 'multiple unmet needs': <https://www.agendaalliance.org/our-work/glossary/>



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Project Evaluation

An independent evaluation was conducted by Dr Hayley Alderson and Dr Ruth McGovern at Newcastle University, analysing the impact of the project by engaging with representatives from each of the core stakeholder groups involved in the project: Experts by Experience, a Community of Practice, and an Expert Advisory Group.

The following is a condensed summary of their findings, and key learnings that could be emulated in future projects.

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Key Findings

Authentic Co-production

Women with lived experience fed back that the project had given them a “voice.” Indeed, women with lived experience expressed hope that their experiences could help other women on the margins of society, and this was a huge motivating factor when deciding to stay involved. Importantly, women highlighted the project facilitators’ inclusivity and flexibility as key factors in feeling respectfully involved.



“I've got failed with the system all the time but just the idea of being able to have an input and helping other women to make a change” (Expert by Experience)

“We've been judged all of our lives. Do you know what I mean? So, we've come into this, and we're not judged” (Expert by Experience)

The evaluation identified that “clear”, “responsive” and “open” communication between the experts by experience and the facilitators led to genuine and effective co-production. Women with lived experience appreciated being presented with a variety of ways to feel involved and regular updates regarding project progress:



“What’s really good about Agenda [Alliance] is like they've never just left us hanging... we were all kept updated on stuff.” (Expert by Experience)

Experts by Experience felt respected by the project facilitators and praised the ways in which they had been engaged with during the project. Part of this was achieved by remunerating the women for their time by providing them with vouchers of their choice, although remuneration was found to be just one of many motivating factors.

Women also appreciated the training opportunities they received during the project to prepare them for participating in certain elements, such as supporting them to present during a parliamentary launch. This helped to ensure that involvement in the project was mutually beneficial.



“We were really conscious of making sure that there were elements of reciprocity built in. So, the women all had access to training from Faces and Voices of Recovery beforehand, then we made sure that they felt very comfortable.” (Project facilitator)

The opportunity to share their experiences at a parliamentary launch was regarded by the women with lived experience as emotionally significant, who describing they felt as though “someone was listening.” Among the women with lived experience, there was consensus that - although not the purpose of project - it had provided strong foundations for ongoing peer support and solidarity. Furthermore, professionals involved recognised that this network – or “sisterhood” – was influential in the women’s motivation to stay involved.



"I now know, I've got like 6-7 other girls there that's going through similar situations that I can, if I'm having a bad day or down day, I can reach out and send a message. You know we're all there for each other, no matter what's going on. And I think that will continue, that will continue like for the rest of my life, really." (Expert by experience)

Community of Practice (CoP) members also articulated a perception of an environment that was inclusive and void of power imbalances for Experts by Experience. One CoP member stated:



"I mean the lived experience element for me has really, really been like the shining light in this. I've genuinely never seen it done so well as it has been in this. I just feel as though, just there's that confidence from the women that shines through, it's been really, really incredible the way it's been done." (Community of practice member)

One CoP member went as far as to say that they would like Agenda Alliance to produce a best practice guide to showcase how to successfully involve Experts by Experience in projects as they had not experienced such authenticity within their practice previously.

Engaging a Community of Practice

The CoP was comprised of local practitioners from different sectors across Northumberland and Tyne and Wear, as well as women with lived experience. According to the evaluation, high and sustained levels of attendance of the CoP throughout the project reflected a commitment to tackle the issues facing women experiencing disadvantage.

The evaluation found it significant that CoP members set the agenda for the meetings (rather than the project facilitators), which encouraged buy-in and focus on topics that were regionally relevant.

The evaluation acknowledged that the CoP provided an important space for dialogue between varied practitioners, each with an interest in women with multiple unmet needs living in the North-east. These conversations provided an opportunity to develop an increasingly cohesive and unified understanding of women's needs across the region from differing professional perspectives.



“One of the beauties of the community of practice is that you're bringing together those people from those spaces that are intimately connected and yet wouldn't normally necessarily be sat in a room and talking about these interconnected challenges and the women that they are working with in some way.” (Project facilitator)

Furthermore, participants articulated that there was a desire to continue the CoP beyond the lifetime of the project, to enable actions made as part of the project to be followed through. This illustrates the perceived 'added benefit' of engaging in this forum, alongside the potential for long-term and sustained impact.

Convening an Expert Advisory Group

The Expert Advisory Group (EAG) was comprised of national policymakers, sector leaders, parliamentarians, and women with lived experience, who shared strategic insight at the national level on the project. The evaluation found that bringing together such a diverse group engaged a range of experiences and expertise that enriched the project. Moreover, consistent attendance levels at meetings indicated that members retained a commitment to the work.

By developing an EAG, who gave consistent and valuable feedback, the project benefited from a "critical friend" throughout. For instance, the expertise amongst the group was found to be especially valuable when developing policy recommendations: they critiqued initial drafts, leading to focused and targeted recommendations.

Multiple participants felt that the EAG would have benefitted from greater political representation and buy-in but recognised that women experiencing multiple disadvantages have not been a political priority and that there are limited decision-makers with a stake in this agenda.

The differences between local and national politics were also explored, with a recognition the findings were well-known locally even if not recognised nationally, and that engaging with current local political developments (such as combined authorities) had potential for greater political traction



*"Tragically, we know the findings, really, but I thought it was about a more co-production approach. But also trying to capitalise on a moment in terms of like, you know, the development of new, maybe administrative systems, the new kind of metro mayor coming in, all that kind of thing."
(Expert Advisory Group member)*

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Impact and Dissemination

- 14 blogs written and published, including 6 suggested and written by Experts by Experience. These have been accessed over 1500 times.
- The Parliamentary Launch event was oversubscribed, receiving registration for 135 delegates (capacity 125), showcasing the level of interest in the subject area.
- The final report received national coverage in the Guardian, Woman's Hour and Big Issue, with regional coverage on BBC Look North, BBC Radio Newcastle, ITV NE News, Metro radio, Global radio, Newcastle Evening Chronicle and Chronical Live.



Attendees at parliamentary launch event

Stakeholders felt there was potential for findings to be further disseminated into other networks and forums to reach others in influential policy positions. Comments included:



"[The project] could connect into other groups where I've got people sitting like the Police and Crime Commissioner and people that have got like that real voice, the next step into Parliament really, to push and put some pressure on." (Expert Advisory Group member)



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Key learnings

The project evaluation highlighted several key learnings that could be emulated in future projects, summarised below. These tangible takeaways summarise good practices employed throughout TSWF, but also incorporate some constructive reflections from project participants captured in the evaluation. Our aim at Agenda Alliance is to take these forward in our own projects, whilst also sharing them publicly here in the interest of them being applied by others also looking to work in this way.

- To facilitate successful co-production, offer a flexible approach, timely remuneration, and a diverse set of incentives for participants. It is essential to factor in a sense of “reciprocity” - beyond financial remuneration - that is responsive to the needs of women.
- To accommodate the communication preferences of individuals, recognise that needs will differ between participant groups, with digital/physical communication spaces offering different benefits depending on the circumstances.

- For projects that embed a Community of Practice, it is helpful not to arbitrarily limit the number of professionals included, so that more professionals can engage and therefore increase diversity of experience.
- When forming a project with both a Community of Practice and an Expert Advisory Group, it is useful to think about the ways in which these groups can work together to mobilise knowledge, which may support the scaling up of findings.
- When convening networks, it is important to think about longevity following the project and identify ways in which they could become self-sustaining, including demonstrating the achievability of small but significant changes to local policy and practice to help keep stakeholders engaged.
- It is important to invest time and resources into building relationships with MPs and parliamentarians throughout the course of a project to enhance the project's long-term political influence.
- When conducting place-based work, it is important to develop a strategy to disseminate at both the national and regional/local levels to ensure that findings are shared at all levels.
- Policy recommendations that are directive and delineate a key target to enact change are most effective. These should be made at the local, regional, and national levels, which will enhance the potential for meaningful systems-change.



About us

Agenda Alliance exists to make a difference to the lives of women and girls who are at the sharpest end of inequality. We are an alliance of over 100 member organisations – from large, national bodies to smaller, specialist organisations – working in collaboration to influence public policy and practice to respond appropriately to women and girls with multiple, complex unmet needs.

Changing Lives is a nationwide charity helping people facing the most challenging of circumstances make positive change – for good. We believe that everyone deserves a safe home, a rewarding job and a life free from addiction or abuse. We know that given the right support, anyone can change their life for the better.



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