HOW TO SET UP A PEER RESEARCH GROUP

Our Stories

PART 3: Our Stories

In this section of the manual, the peer researchers share their personal experiences from their peer research journey. The reflections have been compiled by 19 individuals across four peer research groups:

Justlife
- Group 1 (Pilot)

We authored the original manual and have continued our research, sharing additional learning.
- Group 2

We were set up as an additional group to test out and feedback on the manual.

RISE

We are a women-only team with shared experience of domestic abuse who have tested and helped to refine the manual and contributed new ideas.

Centre for Homelessness Research and Practice, University of Southampton

We are a peer research group established by the Centre for Homelessness Research and Practice to test and refine the manual.

The reflections from all four groups have been incorporated into the final manual, which builds on a previous manual on 'how to set up a peer research group', co-created by the first group run by Justlife.

We are grateful for the time and care everyone has taken to make this as successful and accessible as possible. While there were many overlaps, a few points were more important to some groups than others. The following section has reflections from each of the groups in their own words.

We hope that this resource will inspire you to see what might work well for you, should you wish to do this yourself.
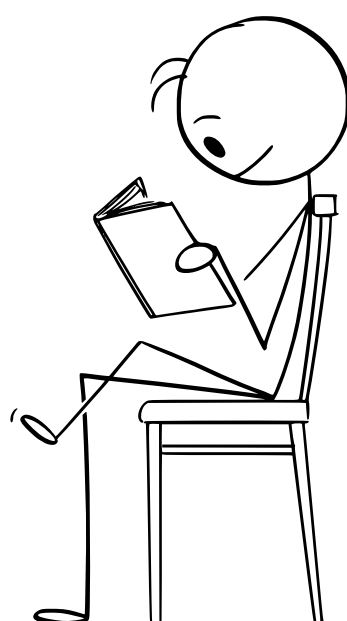
Justlife - Group 1 (Pilot)

When we first met we were all strangers in a brand new environment. We didn't have a common understanding of how the space should function, so we prioritised safety and comfort in the initial stages of the project.

The first session was dedicated to introducing ourselves to each other, discussing individual support needs/accommodations, informing how the group would function and also how we would handle issues within and outside the group. We created a group agreement, which we displayed on a large piece of paper with sticky notes, so it could be revised as the group felt necessary.

There was a wide group variety. People from a huge mix of backgrounds, broad neurodiversity, huge amounts of life experience and perspectives in the room, which led to really interesting shared learning from each other.

It was a cooperative space rather than a competitive one - this is really rare.

During the initial stage, we decided to document our processes and create something to aid others in setting up a peer research group.

Helped by our facilitators, we produced a manual on how to set up a peer research Group in a safe way. Below are some highlights (you can see the full pilot manual here).

Accessibility

Safety nets included trigger warnings and making sure we progressed at a pace that was suitable for all. We used metaphors in the early stages until everyone was ready to discuss topics that were potentially challenging for people with lived experience. For example, we talked about orange and green people to avoid participants feeling too close to the topic. As trust was built, the metaphors began to feel more like a barrier than an aid, and we moved on to discuss things that were based on reality.

**Equity and equality were built-in throughout and spoken about explicitly.**

Accessibility is very important - physical accessibility, sensory accessibility, psychological safety.

Support

Attending the sessions was optional. The content for each session was emailed to participants before the session so everyone came prepared and had a chance to opt out should we wish. This rarely happened. Support was offered throughout as well as additional one-to-one sessions if participants felt the need to discuss something privately. Being fed and watered, as well as paid, meant we could look after ourselves in the sessions.

> **There were safety nets built in - trigger warnings throughout, which doesn't always happen in these spaces. However, there was also freedom to explore difficult topics.**

> **In the beginning, we used metaphors to represent people and situations (...) It allowed us to gradually ease into talking about homelessness when the group were comfortable with each other and the concepts of research.**
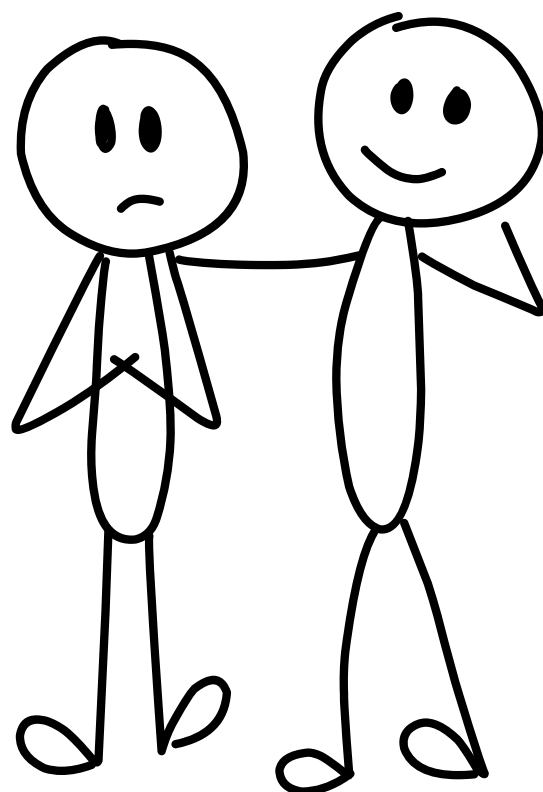
Knowledge Exchange

There was a conversational approach to learning and time for concepts to be chewed over and debated. Everyone's perspectives were valued and we learned from one another as well as from the training content.

> **There is a wide group variety. People from a huge mix of backgrounds, broad neurodiversity in the room, huge amounts of life experience and perspectives, which led to really interesting shared learning from each other.**

> **Listening to the views of the group specifically on the topic of TA [temporary accommodation] has been enriching and informative.**
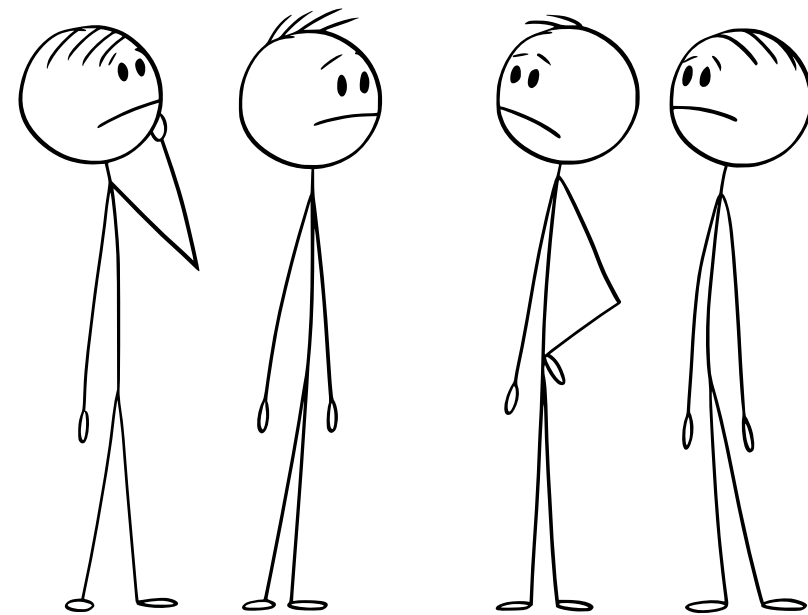
Payment

Respecting people enough to pay them for their time not only enables them to be there but also helps create a cohesive and committed group and contributes to the sense that peer researchers and facilitators are valued equally. It was great to have options - cash, bank transfers or vouchers.

> **This is about trust. We were paid for self-reflection time without having to prove what we've done. It was all done on trust.**

> **Self-reflection throughout, including paid time outside of sessions for this.**

Being Wise with Time

We spent months working together, in two-hour chunks including weeks where we didn't meet but instead did (paid) lightly guided self-reflection. There was camaraderie and focus as a result of this slow build. It was really important to include a ten-minute tea break in the sessions and to include check-in and check-out in the overall timing, as that's where we could raise issues or concerns.

> The 2 hours per session worked well. Even though it was challenging at times, it was a great consistent boundary for us to work to, and be focused in.
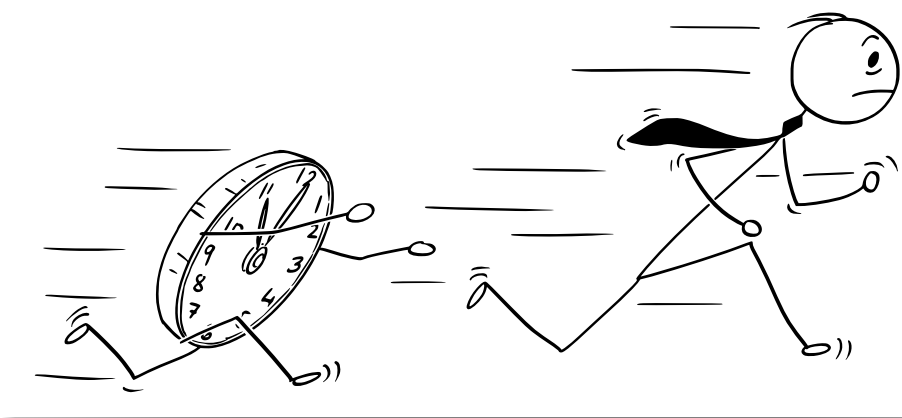
> We had a focus: working towards the timeline which was set by our funding. Openness about this from a start helped

Two-Person Facilitation

Having two facilitators meant that if someone was triggered or needed to leave, one person could check on them and offer support while the other stayed with the group. It felt like all of us, peers and facilitators were members of the group, and there was good communication between sessions.

> There was a non-patronising approach to facilitation - we felt like equals.

> Facilitators initially upheld the group agreement and supported the group to take the lead in doing this as we went along and got more comfortable.
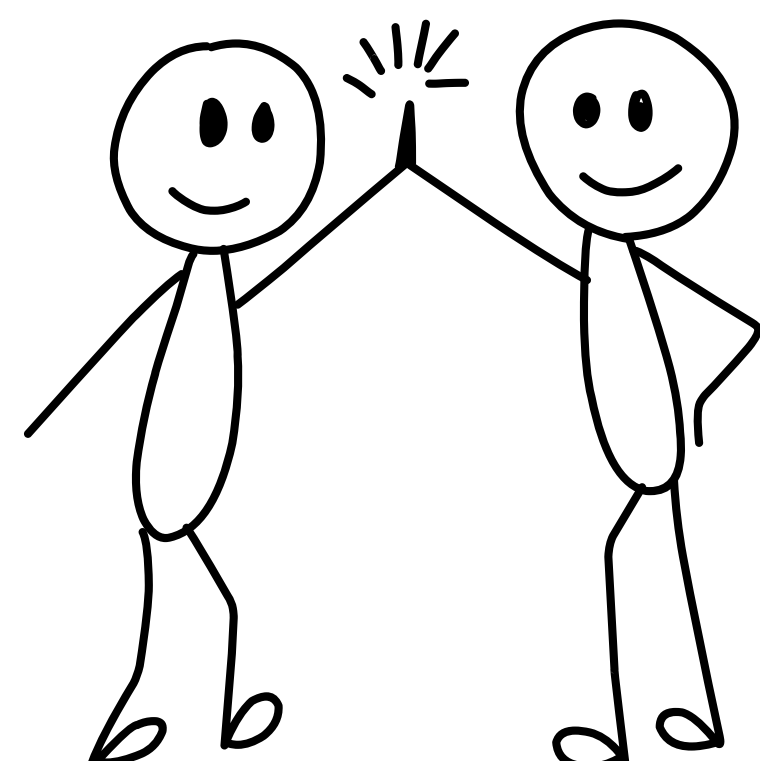
Joy and Fun

Humour, joy and fun helped hold some of the more difficult moments and content in a humanising way and created a feeling of warmth, care, respect and equality between the group.
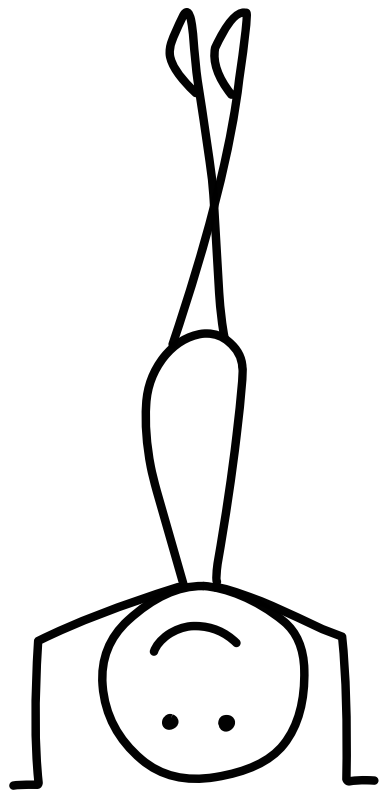
Joking happened a lot in this group and it really helped the social element. Sometimes veering us slightly off course but space was always made for the humour of the group to flow (while returning us to the point in good time).

Impact

"For a group like us with low expectations, it has been a remarkable success already. The experiences and skills gained have been enough to change each member of the group. It's been a worthwhile year already. This project is a means of empowering and supporting a group of peers, while also benefiting their wider community. We're positive that even the most disadvantaged people in a community can affect positive change on themselves and their surroundings with the right resources and support. And we're not finished yet!"

Justlife - Group 2

Our group was established in February 2024 to test the manual created by the pilot peer research group. We were trained on the same topics and are now about to start conducting our own research.

Our peer research group consists of four members, each with lived experience of being homeless in temporary accommodation (TA). But that's pretty much where the similarities end. We are a diverse group of people with very different backgrounds, but when we're all in the room together we're peer researchers and we're all equally valued. We have gotten to know enough about each other to know what strengths each of us has and how they can be used to keep everyone happy and safe.

We are supported by two facilitators who have been instrumental in teaching us essential research skills, including methods, methodology, and ethics. These skills—such as data collection and analysis—are directly applied to our project and will likely benefit us in future endeavours.

By focusing on lived experiences, we are committed to ensuring that our research accurately reflects the challenges faced by TA residents. This approach will help inform better service design, tailored to meet the diverse needs of this population. We hope these insights will contribute to improving the housing and homelessness system.

Here we reflect on some of the key themes we feel have been important to our success so far:

Group Dynamics

We developed a strong sense of trust, respect, and teamwork, which made it easier for us to focus on our goals and share ideas freely. The small size of our group was a plus, as it was easy to manage and fostered a collaborative atmosphere.

> **We do not push our personal beliefs on others and are mindful of others in terms of what we bring to the group. Everyone can learn from each other. Working as a group is more powerful and means we can share our skills.**

> **The working group agreement helps us work collaboratively.**
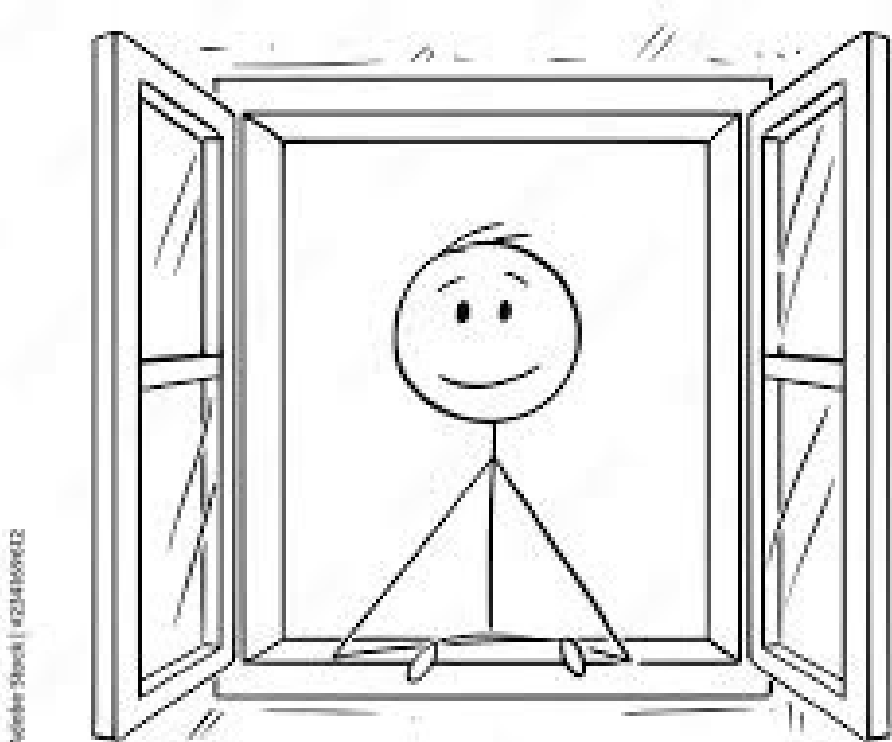
Intersectionality

We learned that research can be influenced by different identities and experiences, which made us more aware of the importance of accommodating diverse needs. We recognised that it's crucial to provide the right support to each person, focusing on equity rather than treating everyone the same.

> **Learning that there is so much more to research than I originally realised and how what you're researching can be different for different intersectionalities.**

Transparency

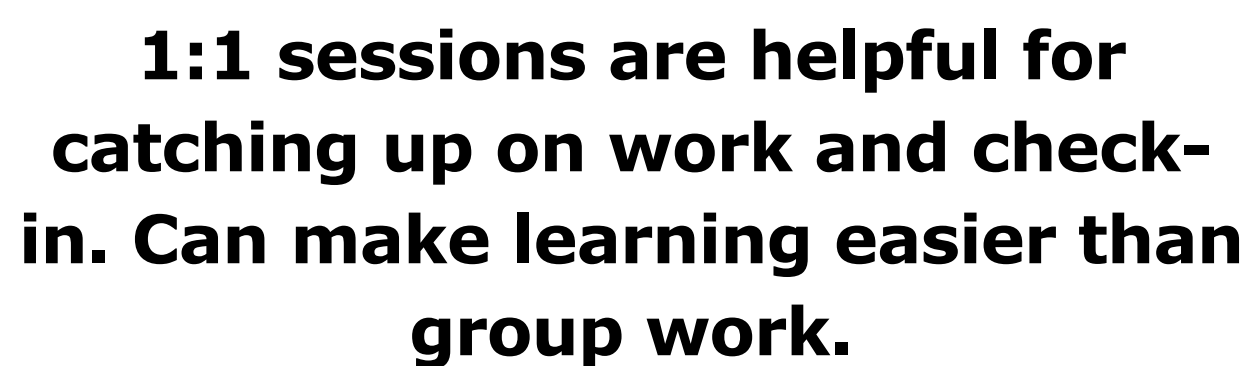> **The role description helped me explain peer research to others.**

We appreciated clear communication and knowing what to expect from each session, especially with advance emails that helped us prepare. Detailed role descriptions were also useful, giving us a better understanding of our responsibilities within the group.

> **I like knowing what the session will be about—having emails beforehand to prepare the mind. If there is a two-week gap, it refreshes the brain.**
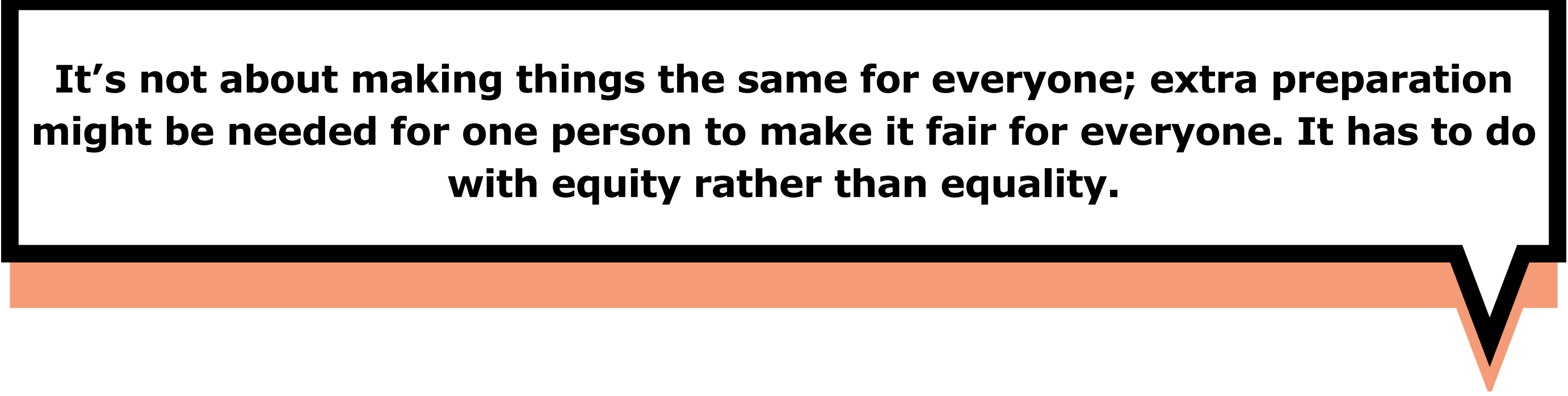
Flexibility and Adaptability

The flexibility to attend sessions as needed and the option to have one-on-one catch-up sessions were important to us. We also liked how the facilitators balanced teaching with discussions, adapting the sessions to keep things moving smoothly and at a pace that suited everyone.

> **1:1 sessions are helpful for catching up on work and check-in. Can make learning easier than group work.**
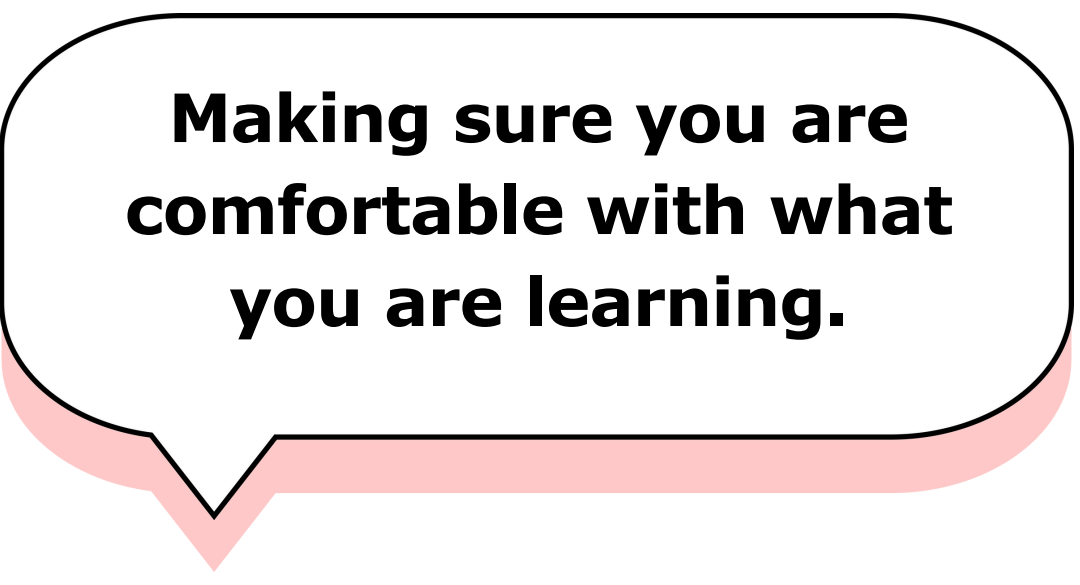
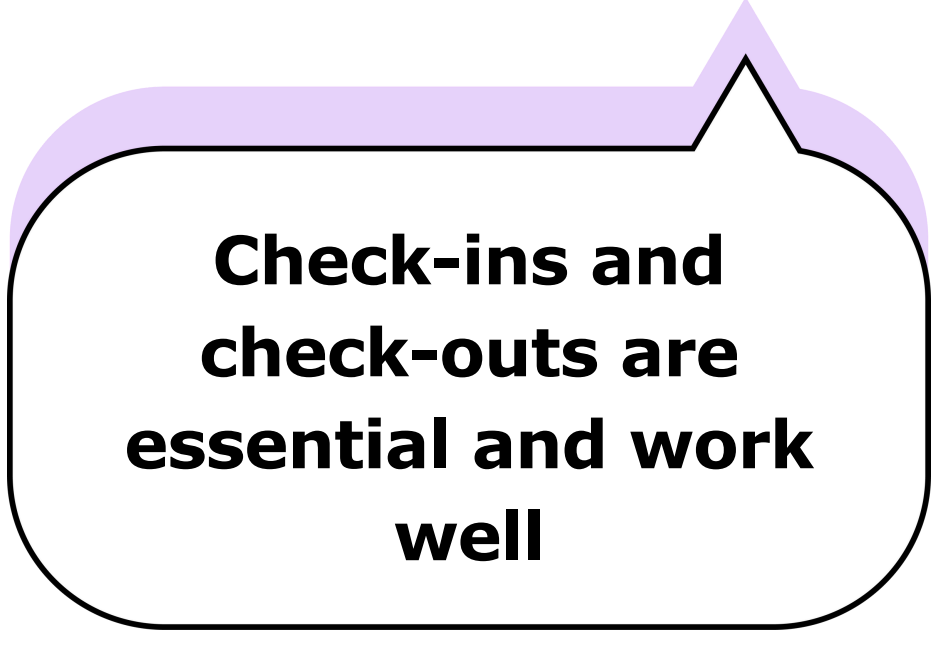> **Remote working gives flexibility— though it's not for everyone.**

> **It's not about making things the same for everyone; extra preparation might be needed for one person to make it fair for everyone. It has to do with equity rather than equality.**

Support and Safety

Creating a safe and comfortable environment was important to us. We used trigger warnings, break-out spaces, and regular check-ins to ensure everyone felt okay during sessions. We also thought that starting with a social event before formal agreements would help build a stronger sense of community.

> **Making sure you are comfortable with what you are learning.**

> **Check-ins and check-outs are essential and work well**

Mental Health and Well-being

Being part of the group was a welcome break from daily life, helping us to focus and engage our minds. We prioritised our mental and physical well-being, ensuring that these needs were met before anything else.

Being part of the peer research group is a helpful distraction from everyday life and gets my brain ticking.

Psychological and physical well-being comes first.

Personal Growth and Resilience

Through our experiences in the group, we grew personally and became more resilient. The challenges and learning opportunities provided by the group were key to our development, helping us to evolve as individuals.

I feel professional

I'm excited to put what i've learnt into practice, i'm grateful that i've been given this opportunity to learn new skills that I can take forward and build on in the future.

Impact

"Being part of this peer research group has been a transformative experience. I've come to understand that research is much more than simply gathering data; it involves deep thought and careful design to ensure questions are fair and insights are rich. Initially, I doubted whether I would have much to contribute, but the support from our facilitators and training materials has been invaluable. Together, we are confident in our ability to complete this research successfully.

Attending a knowledge exchange event further broadened my perspective, as I observed how other services use peer research. This experience has inspired me to consider a future role in peer mentoring."

RISE

Who We Are

We are a woman-only group of four peer researchers, and all of us have lived experience of domestic abuse. The experience of homeless and temporary accommodation is common for many women who experience domestic abuse. Even when women do not 'leave' (to take up emergency accommodation) it can be argued that the experience of abuse and isolation can make them feel homeless in their own homes and communities.

We are a diverse team in terms of education, age, sexuality, gender identity (including non-binary), disability, neurodiversity and ethnicity. All members have previous experience either as a Community Researcher volunteer at RISE or as a paid Change Maker linked to the Community Rising Project (Community Fund, 2021-24).

In addition to the manual, our facilitators were guided by the The RISE Walk Together Programme, based on a research approach that was created with and for women with lived experience of domestic abuse.
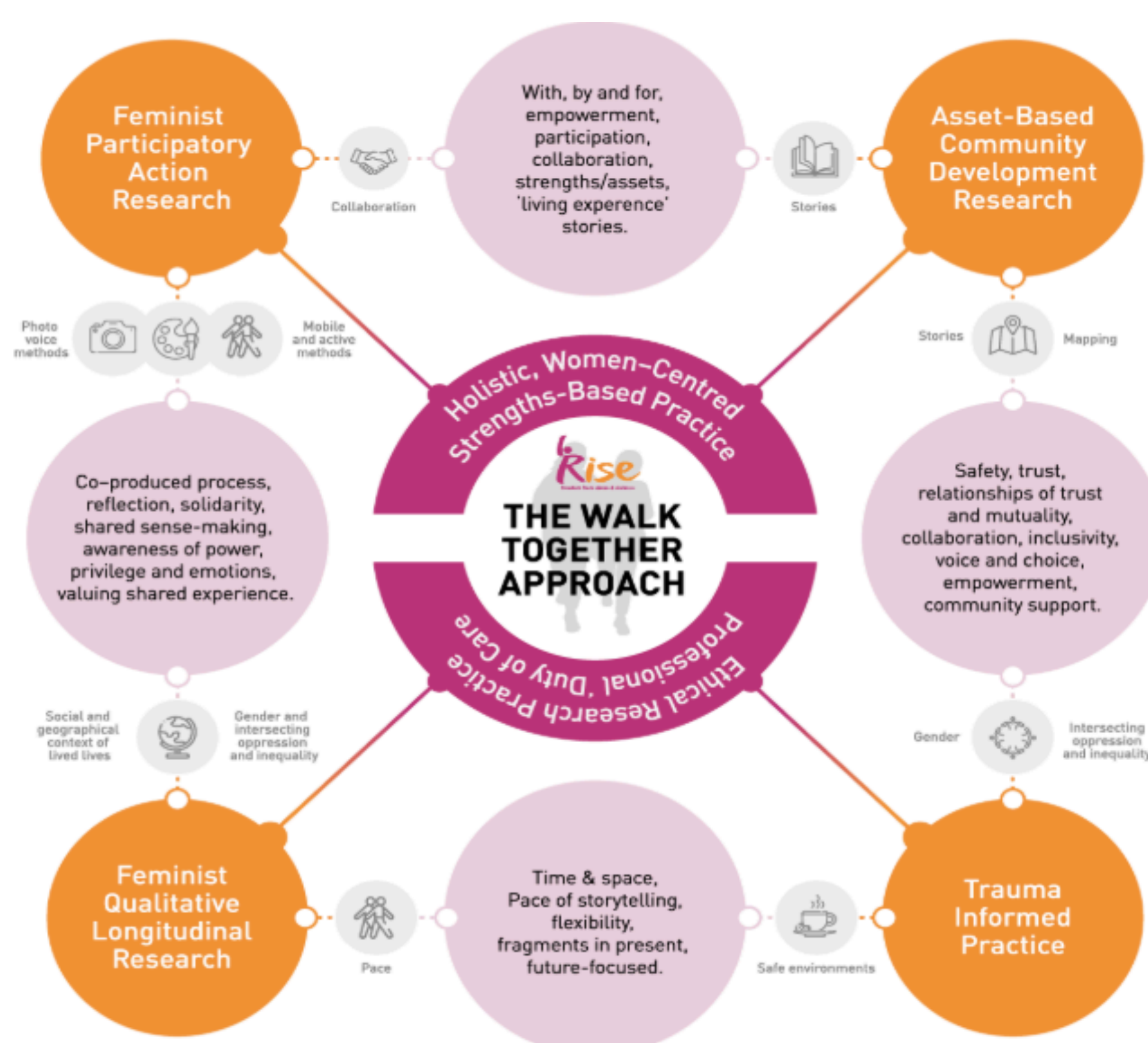

Image 1: The RISE Walk Together research approach, created with and for women who have experienced domestic abuse.

What We Did

As late starters to the project, we condensed two modules into each weekly session. We fed back to JustLife each week, what we thought worked well and what could be improved. We then created a presentation to present to the wider team at the Knowledge Exchange Event, highlighting what we had learnt and key things that mattered to us. Below is a condensed version.

Our Perspective

Our lived experiences have shaped how we work together as a research team and conduct research in the community. As a woman-only team, with the specific experience and needs of researchers and 'participants' who have experienced domestic abuse, it was essential to create trauma-informed research practice and environments.

What We Learnt

It's important to understand the experience of domestic abuse, and specifically coercive control, and the impact that this can have on peer researchers and 'participants'.

> **Domestic abuse, especially coercive control can take away your sense of freedom, it means you are 'isolated and trapped'. 'It can 'shrink your world' – you have no space. This can feel 'unexplainable to people who don't know'.**

As a 'woman - only team', what makes us feel supported is an understanding of domestic abuse, shared values and opportunities to feel free, heard and respected, and an organisation (RISE) and collaboration (JustLife) that reflects this.

Our lived experience of domestic abuse and intersecting oppression make us acutely aware of the power-imbalances that can occur in research settings and relationships, and the need for clear and safe ethical guidelines that address trauma informed support. The module on intersectionality felt crucial to understand different experiences of minority communities, but we wanted the right kind of language to feel inclusive and safe. We felt differently about terms like 'survivor' and 'victim' and felt the use of a glossary, in the words of the peer researchers, would help.

We created safe, comfortable and empowering research environments in our team, and mirrored these when working with research 'participants'. We felt strongly that advice about walking at someone's pace rather than 'digging deep' should be built into the manual, allowing for the fact that stories are rarely linear or safe to tell in one sitting or space.

We were struck by our unusually subdued mood after taking part in a group activity, outlined in the manual, where we were asked to list our skills and share them in the group. By introducing an Asset Based Development exercise, where instead we were invited to share stories about an activity or project we were proud of, and for a listener to reflect back on skills, gifts and passions (strengths of head, heart and hands), we felt lifted and energised. We talked about how hard it is for women to talk about their skills and how this can feel doubly hard for women who have experienced domestic abuse.

Stories are personal and help you express yourself. It feels like you are being listened to and heard. It's also like a mini exercise on how to be a researcher
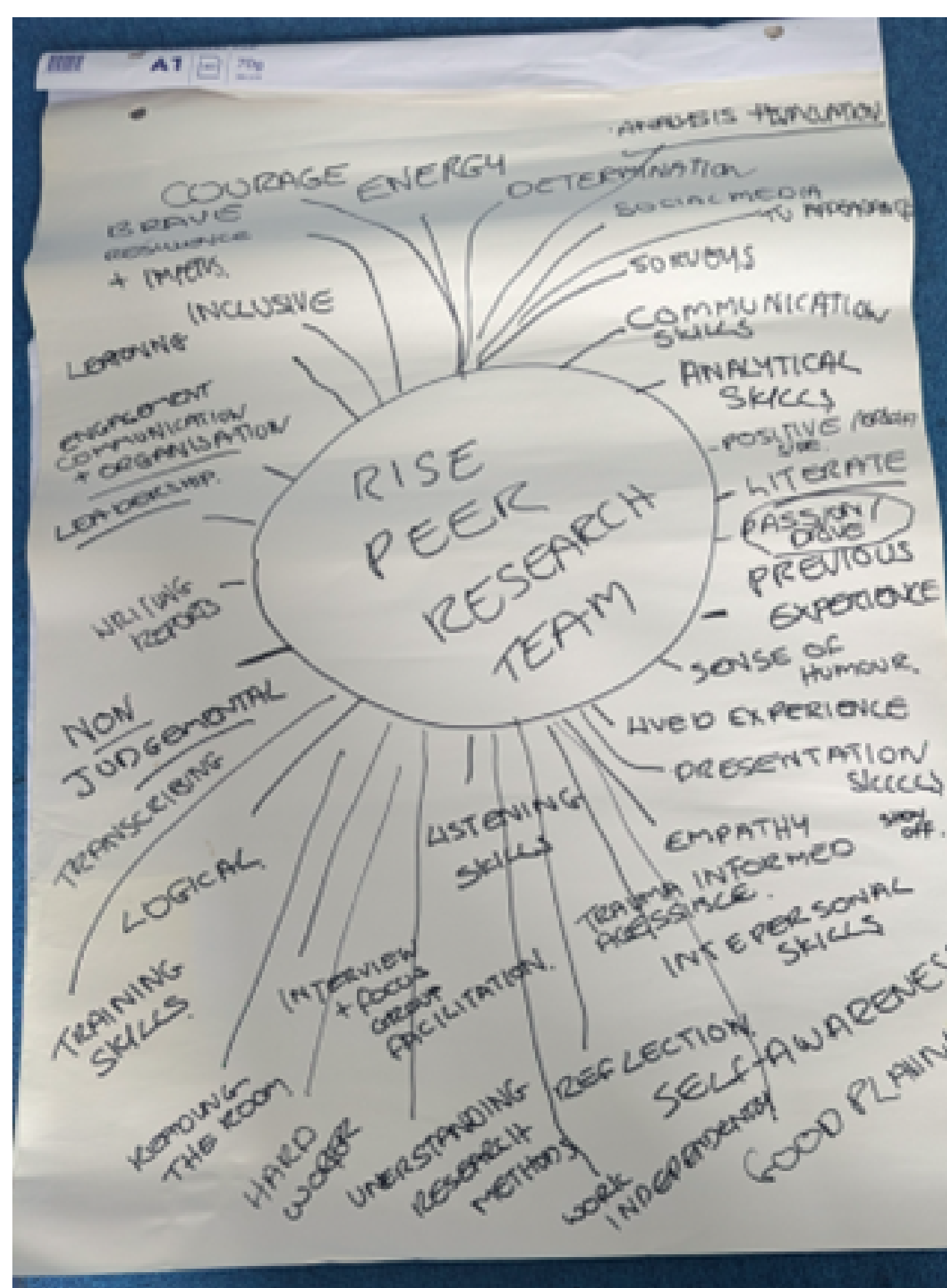

Image 2: Our Collective Strengths

Using real examples can make people feel a pressure to get it right. The hypothetical research questions and activities in the manual got us talking about this pressure within our own training, and how the more hypothetical examples (squirrels and seagulls!), could make sessions feel more inclusive and safe. (peer research Facilitator)

We Are a Community

Joining together as a network of peer researchers is deeply valuable and we welcome future opportunities to grow and strengthen our work. The development of a peer research ethics committee felt like an exciting direction for future work.

As survivors, peer research has been essential to finding a community as domestic abuse isolates you. No perpetrator wants you to have a community of survivors around you.

Being a Peer-Researcher makes us feel proud of ourselves and feel proud of the group. It offers reintegration into society and the opportunity to use lived experience and turn it from something really negative to something valuable

These two poems express how we felt on our research journey, and in the space that was made possible by the JustLife project.

Poem 1

When someone deeply listens to you
It's like the curtains in a dark room are gently peeled open, and beams of sunlight and warmth fill the once-buried and cold space
When the sun's rays bounce off each wall, you are heard and held
When the window opens and a fresh breeze breathes life into the room, you are healing.
When someone deeply listens to you
You are swimming freely in an ocean
In a depth of breathtaking beauty
That nurtures and soothes you
Untangling your pain and rippling out
Connecting you on a boundless journey of peace that becomes you, a force of nature you were always destined to be.

Poem 2

When someone deeply listens to me

I am seen

I am whole

I am valued

Not silenced

Not gagged

Not bound

I am free

To be.

We aren't just 'peers' we are 'community researchers', our lived experience enables us to create 'bridges of understanding' with each other, and to reach the voices and experiences of a wider community of women who are rarely heard in traditional research.

Centre for Homelessness Research and Practice, University of Southampton

Who We Are

Our group at the Centre for Homelessness Research and Practice, University of Southampton used the peer research Manual to form a peer research team, made up of six individuals with lived experience of homelessness. Our goal was to train five peer mentors to become peer researchers, using the manual as a guide to ensure the process was carried out safely and effectively over six weeks.

In the initial sessions, we introduced the project and explored the fundamentals of research, covering various methods, designs, creative approaches, and brainstorming research question ideas. We felt it was important to start discussing potential research questions early in the process.

A key focus for us was research ethics, which we supported with an ethics worksheet designed by the facilitators. In one session, we concentrated on the personal skills module, discussing the difference between soft and hard skills, using content from the manual to guide our discussion.

The venue we used was accessible, well-located, and free, but we learned that being clear about timetables, including break times, was crucial to the group's overall experience.

We also felt there should be a facilitator's version of the manual, distinct from the one used by peer researchers. This could focus on lesson plans and help improve the structure and accessibility of the process, making it easier to follow.

A key focus for us was maintaining a balance between facilitating and offering support throughout the process.

Here are our reflections on how we found our experience during the peer research journey.

"A lovely network service"

"Worked well as a team"

"Learned a lot, discuss different ideas, hear people's different experiences and opinions"

"Thought provoking especially about ethical methods used and we talked about this in depth"

How have you found the research group?

"I enjoyed it, some parts found challenging, like having a room full of individuals who have different views and opinions and had to remain open minded about the differences"

"Opened my eyes to different ways of doing peer research within ethical acceptability"

"Felt a bit confused about what the actual main goal was, what the final topic was"

What was missing (if there was any)? What could be done better?

"more clarity on research question/topic"

"I would like to see peers learn all the parts and then come back and challenge the book (or how would you set up a research group now, would you do the same, what would you change), so have the basic understanding of research before being asked to set one up"

What would you like to do next?

"Would like to see peers given the tools and skills (trained and accredited) and then come back to set up a peer research project"

"Would be interested in doing peer research in the future"

"Would like to see peer research programmes accredited/as a qualification where peers can progress professionally in research"

The working group agreement helps us work collaboratively.
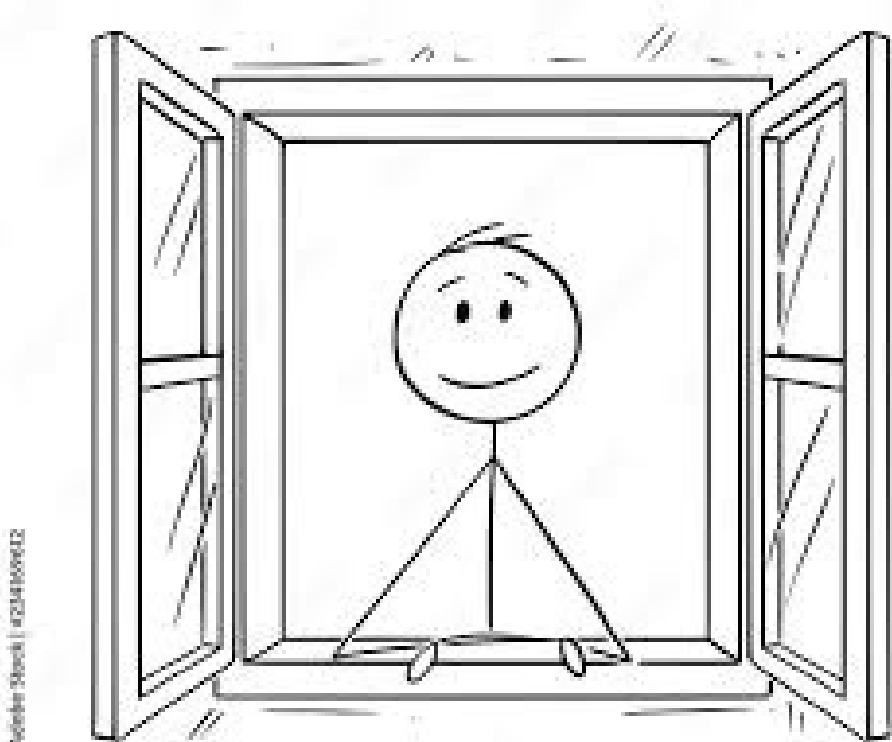
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Transparency

The role description helped me explain peer research to others.

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I like knowing what the session will be about—having emails beforehand to prepare the mind. If there is a two-week gap, it refreshes the brain.

Access More Peer Research Insights and Support

Thank you for accessing this section of the Peer Research manual. We hope it's been helpful. For further peer research resources and information please go to https://www.justlife.org.uk/our-work/lived-experience/peer-research