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| Employing lived experience consultants as members of the core project team  |
| Improving care in Victorian residential services initiative |
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Contents

[This case study shows 1](#_Toc98844750)

[About the initiative 1](#_Toc98844751)

[Benefits 2](#_Toc98844752)

[For lived experience consultants 2](#_Toc98844753)

[For the department and the initiative 2](#_Toc98844754)

[For residential care settings and residents 2](#_Toc98844755)

[Success factors 3](#_Toc98844756)

[Openness, care, understanding and advocacy 3](#_Toc98844757)

[Strong communication 3](#_Toc98844758)

[Clearly defined roles with the flexibility to evolve the way of working 3](#_Toc98844759)

[Lived experience is central to all aspects of the work 3](#_Toc98844760)

[What people said 4](#_Toc98844761)

[Learn more 4](#_Toc98844762)

# This case study shows

The importance of engaging lived experience consultants (LEC) as members of the core project team and the factors that are making this model a success.



# About the initiative

The Improving Care in Victorian Residential Services initiative is a partnership between the Community Services Quality and Safety Office (CSQSO), the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and Safer Care Victoria (SCV).

It aims to improve residential care (resi care) so that children and young people:

* Feel safe
* Have stability
* Are connected to their culture and family (particularly for Aboriginal children)
* Are given education and life skills to support their future aspirations.

Part of the initiative is testing if improvement methodology can make a positive difference for children and young people living in resi care. The initiative is also about building improvement science capability to support similar approaches in other parts of the community services system.

11 improvement teams from community services organisations and operational areas in West division who provide resi care or placement services are working on small changes in resi care that are being tested and refined through the plan study do act (PDSA) cycle.

The core team leading the initiative is made up of 3 LECs (who are employed by the project) and 5 staff from the three partner organisations.

On a day-to-day basis, all members of the core project team have a role in:

* **Coaching calls** – each improvement team is supported by improvement coaches who meet with them regularly to help with the PDSAs, data collection and engagement of children and young people. All teams also come together fortnightly for a ‘coaching call’ with each other to share updates, wins and challenges and to dive a bit deeper into aspects of the improvement methodology.
* **Team huddles** – regular catch-ups between individual improvement teams and their coaches. These are an opportunity to informally support and coach the whole team or members of the team through their specific changes.
* **Workshops** – bring together all teams for intensive teaching and reflection on the work undertaken as well as an opportunity to think about building skills to prepare for the next phase of work.

# Benefits

Having LECs as part of the core team has benefits across the board – for the LECs themselves, the department, the initiative and for the resi care settings and the young people who live in them.

## For lived experience consultants

* Opportunities to learn about new projects and ways of working
* Opportunities to meet new people, build networks and work experience
* Paid work.

## For the department and the initiative

* Improved approaches and outcomes through being able to test ideas and methods (such as survey questions and approaches to consultation) before they are rolled out to young people living in resi care.
* Better designed and developed communications resources, project materials and plans that are much more suited to the audience (young people in resi care).
* Networking and connections in the community services sector that the department doesn’t have. The lived experience consultants are in the community, working in a range of different spaces, having contact with people and other projects and initiatives. They bring this, as well as their lived experience to the work.
* Improvements to culture and ways of working. Having LECs ‘in the room’ and involved throughout holds everyone to account. It improves communication and the way people conduct themselves. There is less jargon, less assumptions and more positive and authentic input and interactions.

## For residential care settings and residents

Potential for:

* Better placement
* A new ‘home profile’ to better capture information that matters to children and young people and in ways that inform and influence placement decisions
* Safer home environment with changes that relate to night-time routines, handovers, ‘about me’ profiles and family contact
* A positive impact on young people in resi care because of their involvement.

# Success factors

## Openness, care, understanding and advocacy

* Open to involving young people in every step of the project.
* Open to thinking in different ways.
* Department staff who advocate for other opportunities for the LECs beyond the project.
* Department staff with the care and understanding to find out what the LECs’ passions and interests are so that the opportunities align with the LECs’ own priorities.
* Creating a regular time on a Friday for an optional team check-in that could be about wellbeing or anything to do with the project.

## Strong communication

* Establish shared understanding of terms such as ‘co-design’ and ‘consultancy’ where previously members had different understandings.
* Have some regular structures in place for communication (such as the ‘Friday check-in’) but be flexible to enable plenty of informal communication using various channels (such as e-mail, text messages, phone calls and Teams chats). This allows team members to support one another when and how it’s needed.

## Clearly defined roles with the flexibility to evolve the way of working

* Begin with clearly defined roles as a foundation for safe participation.
* Be open to adapting ways of working to best suit the people and actions involved.

*I think it did grow organically. Of course, there were certain times when we allocated tasks to certain people. In terms of learning the style, it sort of came as we built that relationship up and built that rapport.*

Lived Experience Consultant

## Lived experience is central to all aspects of the work

* The input of the lived experience consultants into the design and delivery of the project means the approaches are more likely to be a good fit with the young people living in resi care and to be successful.
* As well as the lived experience consultants, young people living in resi care inform every step along the way.

**Funding**

* Appropriately funding the project shows commitment to lived experience expertise, roles and input, and enables suitable remuneration of LECs.

**‘Leave your role at the door’**

* Ignore hierarchies and recognise the value of each person’s input

*Once we come together, we’ve all gotta be seen as equals. You can’t be trying to patronise someone. You can’t be looking at it from “oh, I’m a senior manager so I know that this isn’t going to work”. Cause you’re not gonna get anywhere. It’s gonna create barriers. So when you come together, you’re all on the same playing field. You’re all coming with something different but you’re there as equals. And your input is your input and it needs to be valued by everyone there*

Lived Experience Consultant

# What people said

*My role in the core team is to bring my lived experience and to share a perspective on what I think would work and how I think we’re going – sharing different ideas based on my experience within other projects and my lived experience* – LEC

*So often we go off reports or policy… and we try to base it on them. I feel like having that lived experience really brings forward what it’s like from the other side. What does the young person see it as? How do they think the system’s working? I’m not saying that you dismiss your policy and all the reports that you’ve read but if you put both together, you get a much better and much clearer picture of how to move forward* – LEC

*The reason we have the lived experience consultants is that reality check. Cause we can go off into this very fanciful, policy-type or project thinking and it’s those moments of “stop what you’re doing, you’re going the wrong direction. You really need to think about the places and spaces that this work is going to be happening in”* – DFFH project team member

*It’s really good to learn how different departments are working, how different community organisations are getting involved. I find that really positive for myself* – LEC

*People will have these ideas and it’s all about testing it… in a smaller group. You’re still taking a risk but… you have that room to improve before you take it out there. Because once you take it out there, it’s very hard to re-engage someone when it doesn’t go well the first time* – LEC.

# Learn more

Email the Community Services Quality and Safety Office <CSQSO@dhhs.vic.gov.au> to find out more about the initiative.

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