
Embedding lived experience into service design, delivery, and policy development across Highland: The need for a partnership approach

A Rocket Science report for the
Highland Community Planning
Partnership

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Contents

Executive summary	1
Context to the research	1
Recommendations	1
1. Introduction	2
1.1. The project context	2
1.2. The value of lived experience	2
1.3. The recommended model for Highland	3
1.4. Existing strengths and challenges in Highland	3
1.5. This report	4
2. Summary of existing literature on lived experience	5
3. Strengths and challenges of existing lived experience work in Highland	6
4. Design principles to meaningfully, ethically and sustainably embed lived experience	7
5. The recommended lived experience model for Highland	9
5.1. Lived Experience Toolkit for partners	9
5.2. Strategic leadership and coordination	11
6. What is needed to develop the model	13
6.1. Governance and ways of working	13
6.2. Feedback, accountability and sustainability	15
6.3. Resourcing	16
6.4. Developing insight for systemic change	18
6.5. Embedding sustainable system level change	19
7. Conclusion and recommendations	21

Executive summary

Context to the research

Highland Community Planning Partnership (CPP) commissioned Rocket Science to research how lived experience can be effectively and sustainably embedded into service delivery and policy design and development across Highland. This work was funded via Highland's Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund allocation.

Meaningfully collecting and responding to lived experience voices – the firsthand knowledge that people who have experienced poverty and inequality have about services and policies – is important to improve services and policies for the people affected and for the organisations delivering.

To develop the research, Rocket Science:

- undertook desk-based reviews to map out approaches to embedding lived experience from elsewhere;
- conducted engagement activities with local stakeholders from statutory and third sector organisations, and people with lived experience of poverty to better learn about the strengths, challenges and opportunities any approach should consider;
- conducted sense-checking activities to develop insight and agreement into how to operationalise and embed the recommended model.

Recommendations

To meaningfully, sustainably, and ethically embed lived experience into service and policy design and delivery in Highland senior strategic buy-in and leadership from Highland CPP and partner buy in and operational support for partners is needed.

Lived Experience Toolkit for partners should...

Support partners to decide if, when and how to work with lived experience expertise

Provide guidance and templates to ensure consistent, equitable, ethical, and accessible participation

Enable the gathering of insights and actions made as a result of lived experience voice

Strategic leadership and coordination should...

Demonstrate commitment to transformation from Highland CCP Board and partners

Support a Lived Experience Coordinator Role to develop the foundation including tools, templates and buy-in

Ensure there are mechanisms to collate and develop Highland-wide insights, creating systemic change

1. Introduction

1.1. The project context

Highland Council, on behalf of the Highland Community Planning Partnership's (CPP) Poverty Reduction Delivery Group commissioned Rocket Science, an independent research consultancy.

This work was funded via Highland's Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund (CPAF) allocation. From June–August 2026, Rocket Science has:

- Researched best practice and ways of working around lived experience of poverty and inequality, focused on remote rural contexts (see Appendix 1).
- Engaged 31 partner stakeholders including Highland CPP members to understand local requirements and aspirations.
- Engaged six people with direct lived experience of poverty and inequality or who represent those with direct experience.
- Scoped out options for embedding Lived Experience into service design, delivery and policy making, accounting for the local context (see Appendix 2).
- Led a workshop with Highland CPP partners and stakeholders (with 14 stakeholders) to examine options and finalise design, and sense-checked the approach with people with direct lived experience (4 individuals).

1.2. The value of lived experience

Lived experience refers to “the knowledge, insight and expertise that comes from having first-hand experience of” social issues ([Wellcome, 2026](#)), such as poverty.

Lived experience is more than just hearing someone's thoughts. It recognises that people with experience of services, policies and life circumstances bring specific, valuable and unique expertise and perspectives that can only be understood by working closely with people with lived experience. It also recognises the diversity of lived experience voices, that change according to people's personal, demographic, geographic lives and histories.

This expertise can help services and policies be designed, developed and delivered in ways that better meet people's needs. In turn, this supports more effective and efficient service and policy design and delivery and can lead to a higher return on investment. It also improves outcomes for those affected by services and policies, ensuring services and policies are better designed to meet the needs of people with lived experience of poverty and inequality.

Lived experience is a relatively new concept that builds on concepts such as community engagement, citizens panels, participatory research and co-design. However, lived experience goes further, developing closer relationships and involving people in co-design. In order to be ethical and sustainable, however, it is important that people see and experience change. Without this, there is a risk of ‘engagement fatigue’ that can deepen or create distrust of public services.

1.3. The recommended model for Highland

To meaningfully, sustainably, and ethically embed lived experience in service and policy design and delivery in Highland, there must be both senior strategic leadership and buy-in from Highland CPP, and a Lived Experience Partnership with organisations across Highland working together to understand, listen to and act on lived experience voices.

To achieve this, it is recommended that Highland CPPs allocated CPAF budget (available until March 2028) is used to support a coordinator role that can:

- develop a partnership approach including a partner charter;
- create a lived experience toolkit and associated resources and capacity building support for partner organisations;
- develop a system to capture lived experience insights gathered by partner organisations so that voices are not lost and other partners can draw on existing lived experience data (reducing duplication of efforts);
- analyse, collate and learn from lived experience voices, to develop wider strategic insight that can support service and policy design for partners and people across Highland, feeding this back to the Highland CPP.

To note, 'partner organisations' are public and third sector organisations across Highland that work with and for people that may experience poverty and financial difficulties.

1.4. Existing strengths and challenges in Highland

There are many positive examples where lived experience voice is shaping into decision-making across Highland. This provides a strong foundation to build from.

Various approaches are already being used to collect, learn from and design services and policies that meet the needs of people with lived experience of poverty. This includes lived experience panels, community research, and an existing ['library of voices'](#) hosted by Children's Rights and Participation Highland that (at the time of writing) consists of 8859 voices heard that led to five reports, two films, and four books.

However, for the most part, the approaches are organisational-led or occur within specific sectoral areas. Throughout the system, there is a lack of awareness of what organisations/teams are doing, and there are limited opportunities to share and learn from the insight on a broader scale, i.e., at the Highland CPP-level. This has led to duplications of efforts, where similar groups of people are being asked to engage about similar topics. It also means that change is small-scale, with insights from lived experience voices shaping specific services or policies, but not being used to inform broader service or policy design principles Highland-wide. What may be learned in one place, is not being used to inform others, or to inform how to best work with people with lived experience.

Without a more intentional, strategic, and sufficiently resourced approach, the risk is that people with lived experience continue to be engaged in piecemeal ways and do not see or experience what has changed as a result of their time. This can lead to engagement fatigue and/or people losing or further losing trust in the Council and its partner organisations.

1.5. This report

This report summarises the research conducted by Rocket Science to demonstrate what is needed to develop and embed lived experience in service and policy design, development and delivery in Highland. It is hoped this can be used by the Highland CPP Board to prompt discussions, reflection, and ultimately decisions.

Section 2: Summary of existing literature on lived experience

- A summary of existing evidence on lived experience taken from relevant literature.

Section 3: Strengths and challenges of existing lived experience work in Highland

- A summary of existing strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats Highland faces in terms of existing and potential ways to embed lived experience voice in Highland

Section 4: Design principles to meaningfully, ethically and sustainably embed lived experience

- An overview of practical design principles that should inform any approach to embedding lived experience in Highland.

Section 5: The recommended lived experience model for Highland

- Outlines the recommended model showing the need for a toolkit and what it should include (decision guides, engagement methods, feedback protocols, monitoring templates), and strategic coordination including a charter, governance, and a Lived Experience Coordinator role.

Section 6: What is needed to develop the model

- Provides detail about what is needed to develop the model, with a focus on the first 18 months, including governance structures and ways of working, feedback and accountability structures, how the model should be resourced, and how to embed sustainable change.

Section 7: Conclusions

- Summarises the report and suggests next steps.

An additional Appendices document with detail about the research accompanies this report. Please note, the Appendices is not an essential read. The Appendices includes:

- Appendix 1: provides a detailed desk review report with references to existing research and best practice case studies. This supplements Section 2 of this report.
- Appendix 2: provides the Options and Appraisal Development report; detailing the model, approaches and tools within each and how to critically appraise them X

2. Summary of existing literature on lived experience

Existing evidence on lived experience points to two consistent conclusions:

- **lived experience is most valuable when it is embedded into decision-making, rather than treated as a one-off consultation exercise;**
- **no single approach of gathering lived experience is sufficient on its own if the aim is to embed across multiple service and policy design.**

Table 1 summarises key findings to provide context to the need for a flexible, strategic model. If required, Appendix 1 provides significant extra detail.

Table 1: Key findings from the desk review

Principle/ theme from literature

Strong approaches rely on key conditions including:

- engaging people early enough to shape questions, priorities and options;
- inclusive recruitment with careful consent and safeguarding;
- accessible participation with clear materials and skilled trauma-aware facilitation,
- clarity about what can and cannot be influenced;
- provision of practical support so participation is realistic, especially around travel and digital access;
- commitment to providing visible feedback that shows what changed, what did not change, and why.

Different approaches offer different benefits:

- standing lived experience panels provide continuity and institutional memory,
- short-life thematic panels are useful where there is a live policy, service or commissioning decision,
- peer/community research can generate deeper insight on sensitive or under-evidenced issues,
- shared insight resources can reduce repeated consultation by making existing evidence visible.

Any approach must be tailored to local needs. For Highland, this means:

- designing participation around rurality, transport barriers, digital exclusion, hidden poverty, stigma, confidence, language, literacy, caring responsibilities and small-community visibility.
- Directing participation through trusted local partners people engage with, given many hold some distrust of the Council and statutory services.

Weaknesses occur when the mandate is vague, engagement is too late, dominant voices are not managed, people are not supported, or insight is gathered without a route into action.

3. Strengths and challenges of existing lived experience work in Highland

Across Highland, there is already a strong culture of organisations taking steps to embed lived experience voices in service and policy design, however, for the most part, activity is not joined up. This gives Highland CPP a strong starting point: the task is not to create participation from scratch, but to connect, strengthen and systematise what is already happening.

Fundamentally then, the issue is not that current activity is weak, but that it is uneven. This has both practical and strategic implications.

- Practically, inconsistent processes create the risk that participation is experienced differently depending on which service, partner or local area people encounter.
- Strategically, inconsistent recording and reporting make it harder to identify recurring themes, compare evidence across places, spot gaps in reach, avoid duplication, or demonstrate how lived experience has shaped decisions.

The SWOT analysis of existing activity, based on the findings of the desk reviews, stakeholder and lived experience engagement, informs the design principles, recommended mode, and ways to develop that follow (Appendix 2 has further detail).

Table 2: SWOT analysis of existing activity

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Broad base of lived experience and participation activity to build on, with 20+ activities mapped. • range of participation models already present including some strategic engagement routes, such as the Poverty and Equality Commission Sounding Boards, and Children's Services planning. • activities recognise the importance of rurality, remoteness, transport, digital exclusion, higher living costs, stigma and uneven access to services. • Existing 'Library of Voices' that captures children's lived experience voices.	• lack of a joined-up approach makes it difficult to see how activity connects or is duplicated, and prevents insight being collated to inform shared priorities. • lack of consistency across recruitment methods, inclusivity/ accessibility, ethics and safeguarding arrangements, payment or recognition, how activity is recorded. • lack of feedback loops and accountability where neither participants nor strategic stakeholders are informed of findings or priorities. • Lack of clarity as to how representative engagement is given above challenges.
Opportunities	Threats
• use existing networks and referral routes between organisations, to join up local intelligence • develop toolkit as decision guide and quality checklist for partners to avoid duplication, choose right methods, test if inclusive and ethical, identify credible routes into decisions, and outline how feedback is given.	• reliance on the third sector to bridge between action and lived experience voices. Stakeholders feel constrained and under-resourced, and could not commit to additional work without resourcing. • No feedback could lead to engagement fatigue, reducing willingness of people to share as they are repeatedly asked to tell difficult stories without seeing impact.

4. Design principles to meaningfully, ethically and sustainably embed lived experience

The desk review, mapping framework, stakeholder engagement, lived experience interviews and co-design workshops, brought attention to key practical implications for that should inform any approach to embedding lived experience voice.

Suggested design principles are detailed below (Appendix 2 has further detail). These should be embedded in any and all work with people with lived experience and should form the foundation of the recommended lived experience model that is described in the next section.

Table 3: Suggested design principles

Design principles	Explanation
Trust is a precondition for participation	Lived experience participants repeatedly described low trust in formal consultation processes (especially those that are led by statutory services), and concern that sharing difficult experiences may not lead to change. Honest communication about what can and cannot be influenced, clear timelines, respectful and non-judgemental facilitation, regular updates, and visible evidence that participation has shaped decisions is needed. Engaging people via people or organisations they already know and trust is key. Trusted relationships are different for different people.
A balance of approaches is needed	Multiple ways to reach people with lived experience are needed. Different tools are better suited to different people and needs. • Highland-wide standing panels about certain topics or policy areas (such as housing, transport, fuel costs and childcare) can provide continuity in decision-making, but need rotation and ongoing outreach to avoid becoming unrepresentative or dominated by a small number of voices. • Ad-hoc panels can be useful for practical problem-solving around designing or redesigning new services. • Local conversations are a strong way to reach people seldom heard, particularly in remote and rural communities • Peer research was valued for building trust and generating richer insight where training, supervision, safeguarding, emotional support and payment are in place.
Design participation around people's lives, not organisational convenience	Stakeholders and lived experience participants repeatedly described barriers linked to transport, childcare, digital access, working patterns, stigma, confidence, language, literacy, trauma, isolation, anxiety about seeking help and small-community visibility. Making participation accessible across remote and rural areas, including through familiar community spaces, phone, online and

Design principles	Explanation
	face-to-face options, home visits where appropriate, digital access support, accessible information and tailored approaches is key to ensuring approaches are ethical.
Provide proportionate practical and relationship-based support and avoid extractive engagement	The voices of individuals and communities need to be seen as expert in those respective areas or surrounding specific issues. People experiencing poverty should not be expected to contribute without adequate support. The toolkit should specify the practical support, setting, timing, facilitation and accessibility arrangements needed to make participation realistic, including payment for time, travel expenses, childcare, flexible participation routes, quiet spaces, emotional support and phone or home-based options for people unable to travel.
Reduce duplication by making better use of what is already known	Stakeholders and lived experience participants highlighted that people are often asked similar questions by different organisations, while existing insight held by services, schools, third sector organisations and participation programmes is not always visible to decision-makers. A shared insight resource, or “library of voices”, could prevent repeated consultations, create a long-term evidence base and help decision-makers access lived experience insights. However, this would need clear consent, ethical use, anonymisation, quality standards and governance to avoid outdated evidence being over-used or applied without further engagement.

5. The recommended lived experience model for Highland

To meaningfully, sustainably, and ethically embed lived experience into service and policy design and delivery, there must be both senior strategic leadership and buy-in from Highland CPP, *and* a Lived Experience Partnership with organisations across Highland working together to understand, listen to and act on lived experience voices.

Fundamentally, then, the recommended model comprises two main areas:

1. **a partner toolkit** that sets out a flexible approach and provides guidance to support all partner organisations/ teams/ individuals to effectively and ethically reach and work with people with lived experience through a variety of means, and embed their voice into service and policy design and delivery;
2. **strategic leadership and coordination** to ensure a commitment to transformation is built in from the outset, and that there are mechanisms to look across the range of lived experience voices that are heard to develop system-wide insights and understanding, supporting Highland-wide policy change.

This section first outlines *what* the toolkit must do and what elements are needed within it, before discussing *what* effective strategic oversight and coordination must look like. Section 6 provides detail about *how* these two areas can be achieved.

5.1. Lived Experience Toolkit for partners

A Lived Experience Toolkit should include key information and guidance to support partners. Done right, this toolkit could focus and build consistency and equity into existing work partners are already doing, rather than requiring additional engagement to be commissioned.

Across the various strands of the research, it was apparent that no single approach of engaging lived experience voice is sufficient for Highland if the aim is to influence policymaking and service design across the Highland CPP. Different participation tools are needed depending on the issue, community, decision point and level of influence available. Primary participation tools will include (see Appendix 2 for detail, section 10):

- a shared insight resource or “library of voices” to support learning across partners, and identifying where there is already sufficient recent lived experience insight
- standing lived experience panels that allow comment from certain groups (i.e., parents) or on certain topics (i.e., healthcare) that would provide continuity;
- short-life thematic panels, to respond to specific decisions;
- place-based participation through trusted local partners to support reach;
- peer and community researcher approaches to provide depth;

This means that to ensure consistency in approach, it is important there is a toolkit that sets out *what* partners should use and *how* they should use it in practice.

A more consistent approach does not need to standardise every engagement method, rather set out common minimum expectations so that the engagement is ethical and equitable, and that there is a way to measure and report on engagement. For example,

- being able to consistently record recruitment routes, participant support provided, safeguarding, payment or feedback is important to be able to demonstrate if participation is accessible, safe or properly supported.
- having a record of where activities generate findings and influence decisions ensures lived experience work has a visible route into action.

Table 4 outlines key components needed in the toolkit. An example of a toolkit that supports partnership working with the third sector has been developed by the [Local Government Association \(2023\)](#).

Table 4: Components of the Lived Experience Toolkit for partners

Toolkit components	What this involves
Decision guide to determine if and how lived experience voice should be captured	Before redesigning or designing a service or policy, partners need to be supported to decide two areas: Whether they should seek out lived experience voice, considering what evidence already exists and what can realistically be influenced. Prompting partners to ask if lived experience is needed is important to reduce the risk of consultation fatigue and tokenism, and prevents people being asked to share difficult experiences without the chance that their involvement can shape action. If lived experience voice is needed, which participation tool(s) are proportionate, considering which voices need to be heard, what can realistically be influenced, and time and budget constraints. • Where time or resources are limited, partners should start with existing insight, targeted local conversations or a short thematic process, rather than creating new standing structures too quickly. • More intensive methods will only be suggested where there is a clear decision route, adequate participant support, skilled facilitation, partner capacity and a commitment to respond.
Templates to plan and record activity	Templates to plan and record activity will support partners by minimising administrative burden, but will also allow consistency of data that can support more strategic oversight. Templates should include: • a simple decision record, • engagement plan, • risk, ethics and safeguarding checklist, • adaptable consent and information sheets, • accessibility and participant support checklist, • template for logging findings into the shared insight resource.

Toolkit components	What this involves
Guidance and space to record insights	An easily accessible and usable area partners can input insights from their lived experience work and view that of others is needed to ensure the value of insights gathered is maximised. Children's Rights Highland currently hosts a Library of Voices that has captured insights from over 8,000 children and young people. Ideally, this would be built on to avoid duplicating efforts and adding complexity into existing work.
Quality standards	Guidance to explain how partners should apply minimum expectations for inclusion, ethics, trauma-aware facilitation, payment and recognition, confidentiality, data protection, safeguarding, accessibility, and use of trusted local partners are important to include to ensure consistent approaches that are equitable and fair.
Communication guides	Plain-language communication materials that explain how partners should communicate the purpose of lived experience activity, what people can influence, how their information will be used, and how they will be kept updated.
Feedback and accountability resources	Both guidance on how and when feedback should be provided and templates to support partners to provide feedback are important. • Guidance must support partners to effectively communicate back what has happened, considering the best mediums for doing so. • Templates should include an action tracker and "you said, we did, we could not do" poster, text, email etc. templates.
Resources for analysis and reporting	Partners may need support with how to make sense of what people tell them. Providing guidance on how to identify recurring themes, evidence gaps, groups or places not reached, as well as implications for service design or policy, and the route into Highland CPP decision-making is key.

5.2. Strategic leadership and coordination

For lived experience to be meaningfully embedded, the model must go further than just supporting partners to collect lived experience perspectives. It must have senior commitment to transformation built in from the outset, and mechanisms to develop system-wide insights and understanding that support Highland-wide policy change.

The lived experience model will only generate meaningful change if there is a clear route from lived experience insight into Highland CPP partnership priorities, commissioning, service redesign, delivery, resource allocation and review.

To develop this route, there must be clarity over the overall strategic direction, clear governance and accountability structures, a central coordination role, a way to clarify partner commitments and expectations, insight and feedback systems and ways to measure success from the outset. Table 5 outlines what each of these elements should look like. Section 6 provides additional context as to how these elements can be achieved.

Table 5: Required elements of strategic leadership

Element	Description
Clear strategic direction	The long-term strategic direction should be ensuring lived experience becomes a routine part of policymaking, service design, commissioning, delivery, resource allocation and review. The model should be embedded within the overall operating framework across Highland CPP, not treated as a separate project or engagement programme. This is not about encouraging partners to do more lived experience engagement, the value is in changing how existing engagement, is captured, shared, and leads to decision-making across Highland.
Governance and accountability	The link to governance is critical. Highland CPP should provide the strategic home for the model because it offers the route into formal partnership decisions, while delivery should still feel locally credible and accessible through trusted partners across sectors.
Role of central coordination	A named coordination role should develop the toolkit and templates, create and maintain a shared insight resource, provide ongoing support to partners, and take leadership over developing system-wide insight.
Insight for systemic change	A mechanism to bring together separate engagement exercises in a more holistic analysis of need across Highland is vital to scale up and connect the existing work being done. Doing this effectively ensures recurring themes, gaps in reach, overlapping pressures on households and communities, and opportunities for coordinated action can be identified. In turn, this should minimise duplication of work, and allow the central coordination role to identify new strategic priorities, ensuring the approach is responsive to system changes.
Partner commitment	As noted, many partners are already building in lived experience insight into their services and policies. It is important they can see the benefits of working in a more collaborative way. Key benefits include: • training, guidance and tools (via the toolkit); • access to a library of voices that means they gain additional insight and can reduce the amount of time they individually spend reaching people with lived experience It is also important to have a charter or terms of reference that outlines expectations from partners and from Highland CPP.
Ways to measure and feedback success	Success should be judged not by the number of engagement activities completed, but by whether lived experience perspectives lead to new insights and change and whether feedback to those with lived experience is given. Highland CPP must be able to evidence that lived experience insight has shaped priorities, services and investment over time.

6. What is needed to develop the model

This section sets out the specifics of what needs to be in place for lived experience engagement to be meaningful, credible, sustainable and strategic across Highland. All of what is discussed in this section is feasible to be developed within the first 12 months, on the assumption that a Lived Experience Coordinator is hired (see section 6.3).

The section outlines practical conditions that show how the proposed participation model can be embedded long term, rather than delivered as a one-off programme or set of disconnected activities. It determines how the approach works in day-to-day partnership activity: clear governance and ways of working; feedback, accountability and sustainability; realistic resourcing; and how wider system change can be embedded.

6.1. Governance and ways of working

Governance should sit with Highland CPP because the model needs authority, longevity and a direct route into partnership priorities, thematic groups, commissioning, service redesign and resource decisions.

The co-design findings were clear that the approach should formalise what is already happening across Highland, rather than create another disconnected consultation structure. Implementation should be held through a simple operating model with defined actions and roles, using existing partners.

Highland CPP was identified as the logical owner of the framework. It should:

- set the strategic direction and accountability, introducing lived experience evidence as a required section in relevant strategy, policy, commissioning and service redesign papers
- nominate, resource and host a Lived Experience Coordinator role, using the existing child poverty practice accelerator funding;
- outline minimum standards via a participation charter¹ or similar that sets out minimum expectations of partners and Highland CPP, shared commitments to inclusion, confidentiality, voice, relationships, opportunity and feedback;
- require partners to identify a named lead for lived experience activity and to show how lived experience has informed relevant decisions such
- include lived experience as a standing agenda item into quarterly board meetings.

Governance must balance strategic accountability with independence and local credibility. Stakeholders and lived experience participants cautioned that delivery should not feel overly statutory, top-down or bureaucratic.

¹ See the Scottish Borders Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum's [Co-Production Charter](#) for an example.

The Lived Experience Coordinator role should

- maintain a map of activity;
- support partners to choose and use the right tools;
- manage the shared insight resource/ library of voices;
- identify gaps, synthesise learning and update priorities;
- prepare reports to communicate findings and feedback to decision-makers, partners, and people with lived experience;
- host community of learning sessions to support collaboration and insight generation.

Trusted local partners are organisations, groups or individuals that already have established, credible relationships with people and communities across Highland. This includes public partners such as the NHS, Council departments and education organisations, third sector partners including HTSI and its member organisations, and private organisations such as workplaces.

Partners understand local needs, barriers and sensitivities, and can support participation in ways that feel accessible, safe and relevant, particularly where people may be less likely to engage directly with statutory services. This is important as people often hold distrust of statutory services and may be less willing to engage or share their views.

Responsibility for rebuilding trust must sit across the partnership, supported by co-production, visible action, feedback loops and sustained investment in third-sector intermediaries. Partners should:

- nominate lived experience leads to coordinate internal activity and link into the central function;
- lead or support engagement where relationships, reach and local knowledge are essential, with funded time and clear reporting expectations;
- log existing and planned lived experience engagement and findings;
- engage with the central coordinator to understand how insights from other partners can shape their work and reduce duplication of efforts.

The model's public-facing identity should align with Highland CPP, while using plain, accessible and community-facing language that makes participation feel open and locally credible. A separate standalone brand could be explored, but this would require additional communications resource, design costs and ongoing maintenance. A proportionate approach may be to use Highland CPP as the strategic owner, supported by a simple participation identity and delivery through trusted local partners across sectors.

6.2. Feedback, accountability and sustainability

Accountability should focus on influence, not only engagement activity. Stakeholders and lived experience individuals emphasised that action must be fed back so people can see how their voice has shaped decisions, otherwise participation risks becoming tokenistic.

Feedback and accountability should be treated as essential infrastructure. Lived experience participants were clear that the greatest risk is tokenism, i.e., where people share personal or difficult experiences but never hear what happened afterwards. Engagement loses credibility when people do not receive updates, when decision-making is opaque, or when there is no evidence that contributions have influenced policy, service design, funding or delivery.

Highland CPP should agree a **minimum feedback standard for every activity** which can structure the feedback template in the Toolkit:

- who is responsible, the timescale, and when progress will be reviewed
- what was heard and from who,
- what changed, what cannot change and why.

The coordinator role and partners should ensure **feedback is routed through the places and people participants already trust**. Formal reports will not be enough. A combination of tools will be needed to meet people's needs, and in many cases, feedback can be provided through existing engagement with residents rather than having to develop additional work. Tools to feedback how change has (or hasn't) happened include:

- share updates through existing forums and meetings of community organisations, advice services, schools, youth routes, local groups etc.;
- maintain a live “you said, we did, we could not do” tracker for each participation route hosted in a central place, where people can see the range of activity;
- short learning summaries for communities and decisions, using plain language and accessible formats such as videos and infographics, templates can be provided for partners in the Toolkit, and the coordinator role should develop quarterly Highland-wide updates.

Monitoring should combine activity, quality and influence. Monitoring should be overseen by the coordinator role who should develop a standard decision record and monitoring system early on. As noted, the Toolkit will ask partners to confirm the decision being influenced, who needs to be heard, what is already known, which participation tool is proportionate, what support is required, who will respond, and how feedback will be provided to the people they work with. The coordinator can collate these (perhaps using a simple Microsoft Form) to monitor activities and compare learning across places.

The monitoring record should also include a short “use of insight” section for impact assessments, strategy papers, commissioning proposals and service redesign papers, so decision-makers can show how lived experience evidence has shaped the recommendation, what other evidence was considered, and where there are gaps that

require further engagement. Partners, particularly the lead organisations of the Highland CPP could also be encouraged to include use of insight into their impact assessments.

In order for Highland CPP Board to monitor whether lived experience is changing priorities, services, investment or delivery over time and can shape commissioning priorities focusing on where evidence gaps remain, there is a need for:

- A live action tracker recording the challenges raised, source of insight, responsible partner, decision route, response, timescale and feedback provided, overseen by the coordinator and completed by partners.
- Community of practice meetings for partner staff to share methods, learning, analysis and feedback approaches, gaining insight from others.
- Quarterly summaries developed by the coordinator and presented to the CPP Board (likely in existing reporting mechanisms) that identify recurring themes, evidence gaps, places or groups not being reached, actions completed and issues requiring escalation. The escalation of unresolved or recurring issues to the relevant Highland CPP thematic group with a named owner and response date.
- Reviews as to whether feedback has reached participants, not just whether a report has been produced.
- Benchmarking progress at the start of the pilot and review it at 12, 24 and 36 months against reach, quality, influence, feedback and reduced duplication.

6.3. Resourcing

Highland CCPs allocated CPAF budget (available until March 2028) provides the opportunity to resource the foundations needed to deliver the first year of activity without needing to allocate additional resources. This is sufficient to develop the Toolkit, governance structures, and library of voices; support partners; and collect initial evidence to understand the effectiveness of the approach.

Using the existing CPAF budget to set up the foundations and test the approach allows Highland CPP to conduct a low-risk, high-return test. Specifically, the funding should support:

- **Lived Experience Coordinator role:** this is a time-intensive role in year one when the Toolkit must be developed, and the approach is being embedded. It should ideally be a new role/ secondment rather than added to an existing staff members' responsibility, although this can be reviewed when the approach is set up and the coordinator is focused on analysis and reporting, management of the shared insight resource, and providing ongoing support to partners. The Board needs to consider which organisation is best placed to host this position.
- **Small flexible participation budgets for partner time:** this will include a combination of venues, travel, childcare, food, digital access, interpretation, accessible materials and follow-up. It must be recognised that engagement costs vary significantly across Highland depending on geography and group engaged. Without this resourcing, the responsibility will fall unevenly on already stretched third sector and community partners, and the model will be difficult to sustain.

- **Payment or recognition for participants** that meet the threshold for incentives as per [Scottish Government guidance](#)², i.e. those who give up significant time to sit on panels or peer/community researchers. It is important payment/ recognition applies consistently across Highland.

Assuming the first year shows the model is effective, then longer-term resourcing can be agreed in the December 2027 Board meeting. Expansion should depend on monitoring evidence, including whether the approach reached the intended people, whether local partners were adequately supported, whether decision-makers responded, and whether the cost and effort were proportionate to the influence achieved. Please note, it is assumed that there will not be a need for a full-time coordination role from March 2028.

Done well, embedding lived experience into service and policy design and delivery has potential for longer-term return on investment (ROI). Evidence from elsewhere shows there is a strong possibility that over time, long-term ROI will accrue as services and support are better designed to people's needs. A positive ROI is dependent on the effectiveness of the principles being embedded across the model, and can only be evidenced with clear monitoring approaches (as detailed above).

Case study: Independent Living Fund (ILF) Scotland: In 2024, ILF Scotland published a [Social Return on Investment evaluation](#) exploring the value generated by its funding for disabled people with high support needs.

The study tested whether outcomes (that were identified in evaluations ILF undertook in Northern Ireland evaluations) including emotional wellbeing, health maintenance, sustaining natural support, personal development and living independently were met. The evaluation concluded that ILF support enabled people to live more independently, maintain health and wellbeing, take part in community life and reduce pressure on unpaid carers and wider services.

The ILF Scotland example shows how lived experience-informed funding can create value beyond the immediate recipient, including for families, carers, communities and public services.

For Highland CPP, this supports the case for resourcing the proposed model properly: if lived experience insight helps partners design support earlier, target resources more effectively and maintain independence, then the model can contribute to both better quality decisions and longer-term social value.

² The guidance states that participants should be paid at least Real Living Wage per hour; including the principle that people should not be out of pocket and that payment should recognise the expertise, time and responsibility involved in participation. Flexibility is allowed in how support is provided, such as vouchers, travel arrangements, childcare, digital support or other practical help.

6.4. Developing insight for systemic change

By bringing current activity, local intelligence and lived experience evidence into one shared framework, Highland CPP and partners can move from separate, issue-by-issue consultation towards a more joined-up understanding of need across places, communities and services. Doing this effectively will in the medium-to-long-term reduce duplication and maximise ROI.

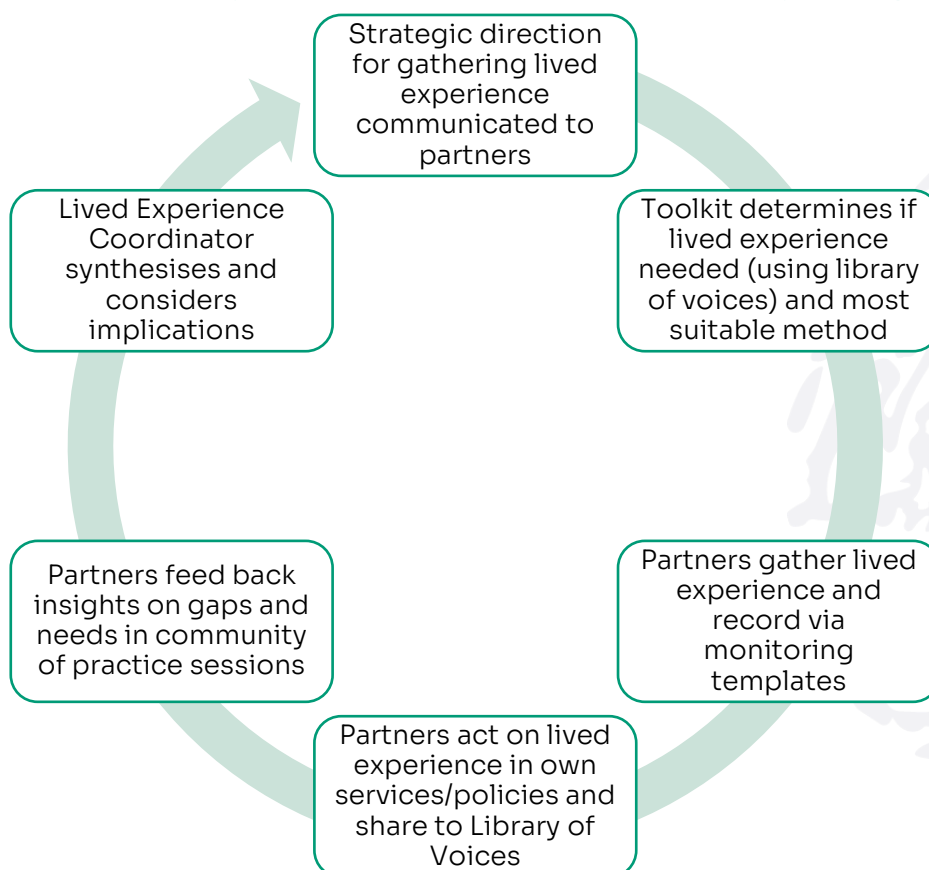
The Lived Experience Coordinator can play a key role in analysing monitoring returns about activity and change to identify where:

- needs overlap;
- some groups or areas are being missed;
- partners are asking similar questions repeatedly;
- existing insight is strong enough to inform action without starting again;
- there are patterns suggesting wider strategic change is needed/ possible.

In this way, the model should improve the quality of analysis behind decisions as well as the quality of participation itself.

Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical nature of the process, whereby Highland CPP can strategically identify areas to delve into, meaningfully engage individuals and communities with the most suitable methods, feedback their influence and strive for solutions and actions on an ongoing basis. Ideally, the library of voices is built on to support this aim.

Figure 1: Process for ensuring lived experience develops wider insight for systems change



6.5. Embedding sustainable system level change

Future-proofing the model means embedding lived experience into routine Highland CPP and partner business, not relying on individual champions or short-term projects. It also means ensuring decision-makers are on board from the outset, and are willing to lead on systemic change where identified as needed. The previous sections highlight what is needed procedurally to embed the approach, here the need for cultural change at all levels it outlined.

The [Highland Poverty and Equality Commission's final report](#) (2026) reinforces this need for culture change, calling for a fundamental shift in how organisations work together, with deeper collaboration between sectors, shared accountability and more meaningful involvement of people with direct experience of poverty and inequality. Embedding lived experience across Highland should therefore be understood not only as a participation process, but as part of a wider change in how partners share power, act on insight and demonstrate collective responsibility.

Table 6 outlines key mechanisms that will support sustainably embedding the approach for the long-term.

Table 6: Ways to support the sustainability of the lived experience model

Mechanism	Description
Develop a professional learning network or community of practice	This would support consistent, and embedded practice across the system, giving partners the opportunity to learn and share insights about how to best work with people with lived experience and how to best create change from what they find out. This should be led by the coordinator role.
Have clear indicators of success	Monitoring should define success at 12, 24 and 36 months. • After 12 months there should be governance, coordination, standards, feedback routes and tested tools in place. • After 24 months, lived experience should be influencing live decisions, with action trackers and partner responses showing what changed. • After 36 months, the model should be embedded in routine partnership business, with evidence of reduced duplication, wider reach, stronger feedback loops and decisions or services changing because of lived experience insight.
Ensure partners recognise meaningful impacts for Highland and their own organisations	Many partners are already using lived experience to change their own services and approaches, so asking them to feed into a centralised approach means they must see how this will benefit their organisation. Benefits include: • being able to access and use insights gathered by others; • having clear processes that are not overly cumbersome or difficult to engage with;

Mechanism	Description
	• seeing buy-in from senior level decision-makers at the Highland CPP level and perhaps even above, knowing that wider change will happen; • getting clear evidence they can share back to the people that use their services and their staff that insight shaped choices, priorities, delivery or investment on a wider scale.
Ensure people with lived experience are reached in consistent and ethical ways and that they see meaningful impacts	It is important to build community trust in the process of gathering lived experience voice, so people remain committed to providing their expertise. Distrust is strongest where communities and third-sector organisations feel Highland Council consults without demonstrating action, sharing power, or valuing third-sector expertise. To develop trust, it is important to • meet people via established community organisations they already trust; • ensure people have a relatively consistent experience in terms of expectations on incentives/payments; • ensure partners capacity to deliver ethical, equitable and accessible participation routes is developed; • ensure action is visible via feedback loops.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Findings: This report has highlighted several key findings:

- meaningfully, sustainably, and ethically embedding lived experience in service and policy design and delivery can create lasting benefit for the people of Highland and the public and third sector organisations that serve them.
- across Highland, there are many positive examples where organisations have taken meaningful steps to work with people with lived experience, and ensure their voice shapes decision-making, policy and service design within their services;
- however, this is fragmented and siloed and the lack of coordination means there is duplication of efforts, repeated requests to certain groups to engage, and a lack of clarity as to what has changed;
- insights gathered from lived experience participation may be lost as there is a lack of oversight or coordination of voices.

Recommendations: Given these findings, it is recommended that to better work with, learn from and shape policies and services around the expertise of people with lived experience, that a partnership-based lived experience model is required. The existing CPAF budget can be used to support first year of delivery which should be sufficient to set up the key foundations.

Lived Experience Toolkit for partners should...

Support partners to decide if, when and how to work with lived experience expertise

Provide guidance and templates to ensure consistent, equitable, ethical, and accessible participation

Enable the gathering of insights and actions made as a result of lived experience voice

Strategic leadership and coordination should...

Demonstrate commitment to transformation from Highland CCP Board and partners

Support a Lived Experience Coordinator Role to develop the foundation including tools, templates and buy-in

Ensure there are mechanisms to collate and develop Highland-wide insights, creating systemic change

Potential benefits: Embedding lived experience properly will help services and policies be designed, developed and delivered in ways that better meet people's needs, supporting more effective and efficient service and policy design and delivery, likely leading to a higher return on investment and better outcomes for those affected by services and policies.

Next steps: The Highland CPP Board must consider if it is willing to support the model as proposed. The risks of not properly supporting lived experience work are that people and partner organisations disengage and lose trust.

About Rocket Science

Rocket Science is a social purpose business, working towards a future where everyone can live healthy, happy, and fulfilling lives.

Our objectives are to help our clients reimagine systems, maximise investment to have the greatest impact and transform lifetime outcomes using a whole-person and prevention lens. We do this through research, mapping and analysis, evaluation and impact measurement, strategy and service design, participatory and peer research, learning, collaboration, and end to end fund management.

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Appendices: Embedding lived experience into service design, delivery, and policy development across Highland

This document provides comprehensive information to support the ‘Embedding lived experience into service design, delivery, and policy development across Highland: The need for a partnership approach’ report produced for the Highland Community Planning Partnership board.

Here, two reports that Rocket Science developed as part of the research into how lived experience can be effectively and sustainably embedded into service, delivery and policy design and development across Highland are provided.

- **Appendix 1** synthesises desk review evidence from national and international models, local context and policies
- **Appendix 2** based on findings from the stakeholder engagement, recommends a flexible, blended participation approach tailored to Highland’s unique rural, dispersed, and digitally excluded communities. Please note, this was developed before a sense-checking session brought additional clarity.

Appendix 1: Desk report of lived experience models **2**

1. Introduction and report overview	2
2. The Highland context	6
3. Definitions	7
4. Models: What is happening elsewhere	8
5. Principles: What does and doesn’t work	18
6. Evidence and design needs and actions for embedding lived experience in Highland	33
7. Policy and practice alignment	35

Appendix 2: Options development and appraisal report **44**

1. Introduction and purpose	44
2. Options for embedding lived experience	48
3. How a Lived Experience Toolkit could support the approach	56
4. Conclusion	67

Appendix 1: Desk report of lived experience models

1. Introduction and report overview

This review brings together evidence on how lived experience can move from one-off consultation to meaningful co-production. It examines the models, conditions and design choices that enable people to influence decisions, not simply contribute testimony. By linking wider learning to poverty and equality priorities, and to local and national frameworks, the review helps clarify what a practical, inclusive and proportionate Highland model for embedding lived experience in service design could look like.

1.1 Overall findings

The evidence reviewed in this report points to a consistent conclusion: **lived experience has the greatest value when it is embedded as a meaningful part of decision-making, rather than treated as an occasional source of insight or validation.**

Across national and international examples, the strongest approaches **move beyond consultation and towards co-production**, where people influence how problems are defined, how options are developed and how decisions are taken.

However, what makes these approaches effective is **not a single model, but a set of conditions**: early involvement, clarity of purpose, visible routes into decision-making, inclusive and accessible participation methods, fair support and recognition, and strong feedback loops that show what changed as a result.

These lessons are important in the context of poverty and equality work, and are reinforced by Highland's own strategic direction, which places increasing emphasis on child poverty, rights and participation, prevention, early intervention and designing services around the lived realities of children, young people and families. **This means that embedding lived experience into service design cannot rely on generic engagement approaches or imported models alone.** The size and diversity of the area, alongside rurality, transport barriers, digital exclusion, service fragmentation and uneven access to support, mean that participation must be designed around how people actually live and interact with services.

1.2 Summary of Appendix 1 sections

Table 1: Summary of Appendix 1 purpose and key findings

Section	Purpose	Key findings
Definitions	Highlights differences in terminology	Consultation = people with lived experience (PWLE) are sources of data that professionals interpret and act upon. Co-production = PWLE are positioned as, or at least should be in theory, co-owners jointly framing problems, interpreting evidence, making decisions and aiming for outcomes. Highlights importance of service professionals as being agents of change.
Models: what is happening elsewhere	Summarises national and international learning on lived experience approaches (e.g., panels, advisory groups, co-production models).	Six key models are explored, with examples of where used, strengths and challenges, and the relevance for Highland context. This section highlights that there will be a need for trade-offs in terms of feasibility/resources needed and potential impacts. We will examine preferences around this through the engagement. 1. Lived experience panels 2. Ad hoc panels 3. Peer/ community researchers 4. Deliberative mini-publics 5. Participatory budgeting 6. Professional-led lived experience engagement Additionally, the community culture framework, an approach for assessing community readiness is provided. We will assess Highland against this following the engagement.

Section	Purpose	Key findings
Principles	Identifies the core conditions that make lived experience involvement effective, and the common risks that undermine it. It also helps frame the key design choices to make about how lived experience should be structured and where the model should go next.	• No single model is sufficient on its own: success depends on applying core principles well and matching the approach to purpose. • The strongest approaches involve people early, are clear about remit and influence, provide inclusive and well-supported ways to participate, manage power and facilitation well, and build visible feedback and follow-through. • The section also highlights a key design question for Highland: whether lived experience should be used on an ad hoc basis, organised around themes, or embedded more routinely across decision-making, and which combination of model features should be taken forward into the next stage of research. It also shows what inhibits success: tokenism, unclear mandates, inaccessible formats, dominant voices, weak facilitation, broken feedback loops, insufficient support, and a gap between co-production language and the willingness of organisations to share power and act on what they hear.
Evidence and design needs	Examines practical design needs and actions for Highland, drawing out what is needed for lived experience to shape services in a consistent and credible way.	• Understand the culture and everyday reality • Recognise assumptions and stigma • Maintain professional qualities • Ensure people feel respected and listened to: • Draw on networks, partnerships and local knowledge • Consider motivations for participation • Ensure participants benefit • Choose the right location • Understand digital exclusion as more than simply a skills gap.

Section	Purpose	Key findings
Policy and practice alignment	Summarises relevant national and local policies that highlight the need for embedding lived experience engagement in policymaking and service design.	The Local Child Poverty Action Report, Children's Services Partnership Plan, Children and Young People's Needs Assessment, Poverty and Equality Commission and Highland Outcome Improvement Plan all point in a similar direction: services need to be more joined up, preventative, rights-based and grounded in the experiences of those most affected by poverty and inequality.

2. The Highland context

There are key factors that shape the poverty in Highland.

- Poverty in Highland is experienced in **multiple and changing ways**, including in-work poverty, and is often compounded by higher living costs, housing pressures, limited transport options, and access barriers linked to remoteness and digital connectivity.
- The Highlands covers 11% of the UK's landmass and one third of Scotland's, yet is home to only 0.35% of the UK population. Its **large, sparsely populated geography** creates significant challenges for service delivery, access to support and everyday living costs. Poverty is multifaceted, shaped by low income, insecurity, unstable employment, housing pressures and limited access to essential services.
- **Child poverty** remains a major concern, with over 23% of children living in poverty after housing costs, and many affected households including at least one working adult. Poverty and deprivation are often dispersed across rural communities, with 76% of income-deprived people living outside the most deprived SIMD data zones, highlighting the hidden nature of rural poverty.
- The **scale and remoteness** of Highland create distinct challenges for residents accessing services and opportunities, and for partners designing and delivering support consistently across diverse places. Deprivation can also be hidden because it is dispersed and may not be captured by standard area-based measures. Remote and rural living can increase the cost of a minimum acceptable standard of living, creating a rural cost premium that standard measures may also miss.

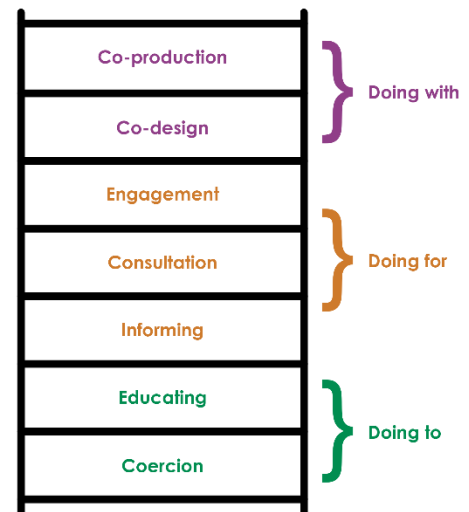
Rural and island conditions compound poverty through higher living costs, fuel poverty, transport barriers, and reduced access to healthcare, childcare, digital connectivity, and employment opportunities. Research on the Minimum Income Standard for Remote Rural Scotland demonstrates that achieving a minimum acceptable standard of living in rural Scotland can require 10–33% higher household spending than in urban areas. In Highland, 33% of households experience fuel poverty, compared with the Scottish average of 24%.

3. Definitions

Over the past decade, a substantial body of evidence has developed on how lived experience can be meaningfully embedded in research, service design and policy. A key distinction is whether lived experience is used mainly as evidence for professionals to interpret, or whether people with lived experience share power in defining problems, interpreting evidence and shaping decisions.

In the **consultation model**, people with lived experience (PWLE) are positioned as sources of data that professionals interpret and act upon. For example, The NHS Provider Selection Regime statutory guidance ([2023](#)) notes that PWLE should be consulted, but under lists them under ‘sources of information’.

In **co-production** PWLE are positioned as, or at least should be in theory, co-owners jointly framing problems, interpreting evidence, making decisions and aiming for outcomes.



A 2025 scoping review examined decades of patient and public involvement (PPI) found that the value of lived experience is dual. It benefits both the research quality, bringing an increased sense of belonging and purpose, and it develops increased skills, confidence, and sense of agency for the advisors. ([Mah et.al, 2025, p. 6](#)).

The UK Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE, 2022) interprets co-production as also **working with professionals in a reciprocal manner to use existing capabilities and networks and to build new skills and networks**. This then changes services into being ‘agents of change’, rather than just being service providers. They break down co-production into the following activities:

- **co-design**, including planning of services
- **co-decision making** in the allocation of resources
- **co-delivery of services**, including the role of volunteers in providing the service
- **co-evaluation** of the service.

4. Models: What is happening elsewhere

This section presents national and international examples of how lived experience is embedded in policymaking. For each model, examples, strengths, challenges and relevance for Highland are considered. These models provide a basis for identifying principles, methods and safeguards needed to support meaningful involvement in a large, rural and unequal context (section 5).

4.1 Lived experience advisory panels (LEAPs)

LEAPs are small, dedicated groups who bring personal experience of a specific issue to influence decision-making on a structured basis.

Examples

- Implemented by NHS trusts such as Berkshire Healthcare, in which they hope it will ‘build and shape’ their health services to help improve the services themselves and inclusivity ([NHS Berkshire](#), n.d)
- Scotland’s National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group (McClelland and Platt [2021](#))
- Used to shape and influence components of the CommonHealth Catalyst research project (Ahmed, [2023](#))

Strengths and challenges

Strengths	Challenges
• Members are motivated by a desire and belief that they understand ‘deficiencies in existing provisions’ and are well positioned to guide and inform future strategies • LEAPs can lead to increased knowledge and awareness of the topic of research for the PWLE. • Builds continuity, trust and institutional memory, which is often missing in one-off engagement	• Under-advertising at the recruitment stage, limits the representative breadth of the panel. • Some voices may dominate discussions whilst others struggle to contribute and/or assimilate. This could be people using employment-specific jargon, limiting the understanding of others. • Meeting minutes must be consistently circulated, and the research aims should be explicit. • Attendance must be consistent to achieve the efficacy • Consistent engagement requires consistent resourcing

When members can see the impact of their input (through e.g. You Said We Did approach) it alleviates fears surrounding the use of the data and provides tangible evidence that their input matters and is being used to shape policy. If this feedback loop is missing, the engagement risks being tokenistic.

Relevance for Highland context

The breadth of the Highlands present both a unique opportunity and a barrier to implementing it within their context. The dispersion of rural poverty results in a variety of differing lived experience. A LEAP would allow this variety of experience be heard. At the same time however, when considering the limited transport options, remoteness and access surrounding digital accessibility the consistent facilitation of LEAPs may require a volume of logistical planning.

4.2 Lived experience advisory panels: ad hoc panels

Ad hoc panels are short-life, purpose-built groups convened around a specific policy question, service redesign, strategy, inspection theme, funding decision or urgent issue. Unlike standing LEAPs, they are designed to provide focused input within a defined timeframe rather than ongoing advice across several issues.

Examples

- Ministry of Housing used ad hoc panels, (30 individuals over 4 forums) to produce recommendations for the cross-government homelessness strategy ([2025](#))

Strengths and challenges

Strengths	Challenges
- More specific issue means that the members can be more precise and inclusive as recruitment can be tailored. - Can provided a faster lived experience soundboard to test ideas and policies with. - Efficient use of hard-to-reach groups time, increasing the likelihood of continued engagement for the full process.	- Higher risk of extractive engagement - Still requires proper resourcing, facilitation etc. - Shorter time period can limit trust-building and reduce confidence in the process as a whole - If topic is traumatic, a short, intensive setting may not be suitable without ongoing support structures. - Ad hoc groups may result in a lack of continuity in thinking and policy

Relevance for Highland context

The short-term nature of ad hoc panels could reduce some access and logistical barriers in Highland, particularly where input is needed on a defined issue. Their specificity may also help participants see the relevance of their contribution. However, they would still need careful recruitment, support and feedback to avoid feeling extractive or disconnected from wider decision-making.

4.3 Peer or community researchers

People with lived experience are trained and paid to help design research questions, interview peers, analyse findings and present recommendations. This shifts the role of lived experience from respondent to knowledge producer.

Examples

- Rocket Science trained 10 Gateshead College learners as researchers. Together the learners and Rocket Science co-designed a college-wide engagement strategy to understand poverty. Learners each interviewed 10 others, including those that were very hard to reach, and a survey reached 850 responses.
- Brent Youth Futures Foundation – young people trained as community researchers and points of contact to gather and spread information, advice and signposting to young people across the local area.

Strengths and challenges

Strengths	Challenges
• Get a much broader and diverse input of lived experience voice • Reach seldom heard voices • Upskills, peer/community researchers, can lead to employability outcomes/ support poverty alleviation • Supports communities to identify their own needs, solutions, challenges, etc. • Researchers can be trained to research different topics and challenges	• Need a diversity of researchers, may be hard to recruit appropriately • Costly – researchers should be paid at minimum real living wage for each hour of work • Administrative burden • Researcher support resources needed • Researchers drop off and needs re-recruitment • Hard to track researcher activities • Safeguarding, ethics, etc.

Relevance for Highland context

This model could be valuable where Highland needs to understand hidden experiences across dispersed communities. Training peer researchers enables people with lived

experience to investigate local issues, analyse findings and build a more detailed understanding of the challenges facing their communities. Peer research could provide finer-grained intelligence than centralised consultation, supporting more locally tailored policy and service design.

4.4 Deliberative mini-publics (citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, people's panels)

Deliberative mini-publics go beyond self-selected engagement. They bring together citizens selected through random or stratified sampling to hear evidence, deliberate on a specific public issue and make recommendations. The aim is to create a representative group that can support informed public judgement and decision-making.

Examples

- Scotland's Climate Assembly([2022](#)) – 106 members selected to meet across 7 weekends, and produce recommendations which ministers had to respond to.
- Citizens Assembly of Scotland – a national level assembly which brought together a cross-section of Scotland's adult population
- Ireland's Citizen Assembly – with the benefit of expert, impartial and factual advice, the 100 citizen Members considered five topics. Conclusions formed the basis of a number of reports and recommendations that were submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas for further debate by elected representatives. ([2016](#))

Strengths and challenges

Strengths	Challenges
• Strong for legitimacy on contested issues because participants hear and consider evidence and work toward a collective recommendation • Brings together a wide demographic mix than self-selecting consultation • Useful when elected members wants informed public mandate on difficult choices • Specific mini-publics allow for a deep dive into topics. • Allows people to have a direct say and respond to decisions directly relating to them.	• There can be uncertainty and lack of clarity regarding roles and decision-making authority between the different groups involved in the organisation, especially at the start. A clear remit is required to set out clear parameters of how the assembly should interact with each other etc. • More expensive and complex than panels, with significant requirements for recruitment, evidence curation, facilitation and follow up. • It is reliant on decision-makers to clearly act or respond to the recommendations.

Relevance for Highland context

This would be suitable for major strategic issues, where Highland Council needs a visible, fair process for understanding competing needs and views across its huge geography. The remote nature of the Highlands, and the varying levels of digital participation would again present a logistical challenge. When looking to implement this support with travel or digital access may be required.

4.5 Participatory budgeting / community choices

Residents and communities directly help decide how part of a public budget is spent through engagements such as workshops. This can range from small grants to mainstream service commissioning and investment decisions.

Examples

- City of Edinburgh Council – they have used participatory budgeting since 2010, starting with small grants funding and expanding to other areas such as the Neighbourhood Environment Programme and the Health and Social Care Change Fund.
- In 2017 Scottish Local Government committed to the Community Choices 1% Framework Agreement whereby at least 1% of local government budgets will be subject to participatory budgeting (PB) by the end of 2021.
- Newham People Powered Places – Between 2021 – 2023, £1.6 million from the Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure levy has led to investment in 157 local projects ([2023](#))

Strengths and challenges

Strengths	Challenges
• Goes beyond consultation and enable active citizen decision-making. • Strengthens local democracy and civic engagement • Increases community cohesion • Gives an insight into local priorities. • Produces more responsive spending	• Can privilege well-organised groups without active outreach and support for under-represented communities • Longer term cycles are needed to allow for better planning and smoother project implementation • Needs transparent rules, communications, project development support and often local facilitation

Relevance for Highland context

With **child poverty** levels being at 23% in the Highlands, participatory budgeting could be a strong way to devolve small funds to local priorities in remote communities where local residents understand their practical needs best. The sparseness of the Highlands

means that this would have to devolved in regions, or sub-regions to avoid a one size fits all approach and recognise the differing challenges facing differing communities.

4.6 Professional-led lived experience engagement

Acknowledging that many professionals working in VCS organisations tend to come with lived experience and/or a broad and deep understanding of the varied experiences of those they engage, community engagement strategies can be centred on using professionals as conduits to and proxies for community voice.

Examples

- Healthwatch – professionally staffed voided that collect lived experience from patients and service users and report it to health authorities.
- Gateshead Council Tackling Poverty Together strategic action planning – ongoing process engaging third, public, and private sector organisations as proxies for lived engagement. This was decided as a core approach given resource constraints to engage ethically, lack of certainty on outcomes and desire to not engage without knowing potential futures.

Strengths and challenges

Strengths	Challenges
• Activities largely within working time, so reduces burden on individuals • Professionals may have better understanding of feasibility of solutions • Professional facilitation may lead to increased consistency and comparability of data	• One step removed from lived experience voice (unless professionals have lived experience) • Only as good as the VCS organisations’ engagement • Less community ownership • Risk of ‘filtering’ lived experience, losing nuance or emotional truth when translating into reports.

Relevance for Highland context

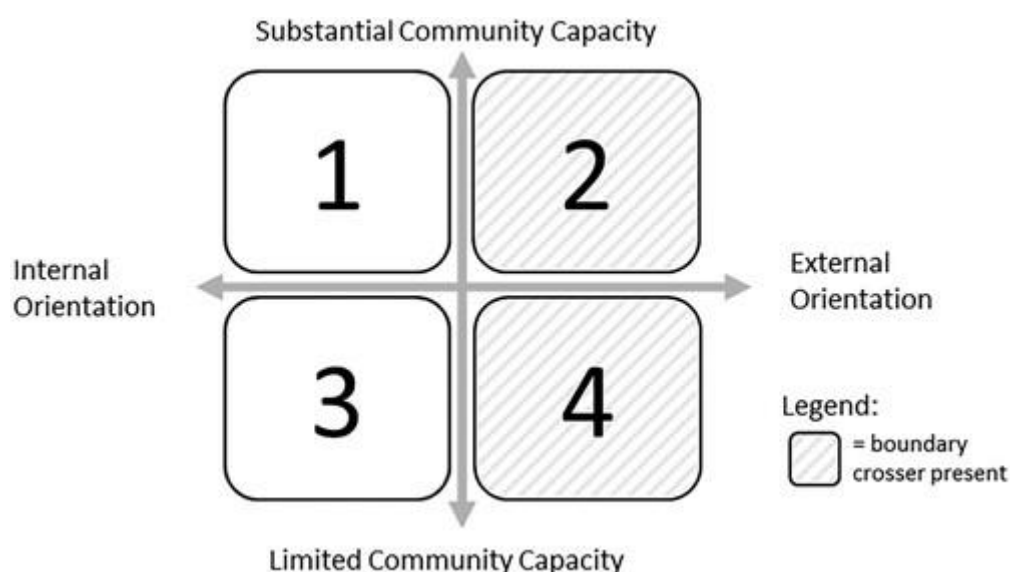
This model could be implemented where people already have trusted relationships with people through staff at VCS. This is particularly useful in the Highland rural context, where individuals may be less likely to engage due to travel, digital connectivity etc.

4.7 Community culture framework

This framework was developed by Barnes et al. (2024). Its purpose is to help researchers understand a community’s readiness to engage in research and plan appropriate, responsive engagement. We will use this following the stakeholder engagement to map out readiness.

The model uses four quadrants based on three elements: capacity for engagement and change, internal–external orientation, and access to boundary crossers who connect groups within and beyond the community

Figure 1: Community culture framework quadrants



Quadrant 1: This community is internally focused with multiple competing agendas and no effective boundary crosser to connect groups. While it has strong skills and capacity, limited shared perspectives make coordinated change difficult.

Quadrant 2: This community is collaborative, outward-looking, and supported by trusted boundary crossers who connect groups and encourage shared progress. Strong skills, openness to new ideas, and a focus on collective benefit enable effective and creative change.

Quadrant 3: This community is fragmented, internally focused, and lacks both boundary crossers and access to a broad range of skills. Disagreements between factions and limited external engagement make it difficult to agree on or implement change.

Quadrant 4: This community works together with an external focus and has boundary crossers who support collective action. Although skills and knowledge are limited, strong community will helps overcome challenges and drive progress.

4.8 Relational learning pairs

Relational learning pairs between decision-makers and people with lived experience of low income create a more personal and trust-based route for connecting service providers with lived experience. Compared with group settings, paired approaches can give people more space to discuss sensitive experiences, stigma and mistrust, and can help professionals reflect on how systems, language and behaviours are experienced by people using services. This is particularly relevant to the report's wider findings on emotional labour, trust and the importance of relational groundwork.

In practice, the model usually involves matching a service provider, decision-maker or practitioner with a person who has lived experience of low income or service use, with the pair supported to meet over a defined period rather than in a one-off discussion. The purpose is not simply to collect testimony, but to create a structured space for mutual learning: the person with lived experience can describe how systems, language, decisions and access routes are experienced in everyday life, while the professional is expected to listen, reflect on assumptions and consider how this learning should influence their own practice or wider service design. This means the model depends on careful preparation, matching, facilitation and follow-up. It also requires clarity about what will happen with the learning afterwards, so that insight generated through a personal relationship is translated into organisational reflection, service improvement and decision-making rather than remaining private or informal.

Strengths and challenges

Strengths	Challenges
• Builds deeper trust and mutual understanding than may be possible in larger group settings. • Creates space for people to speak more openly about sensitive experiences, stigma or mistrust. • Helps service providers reflect on assumptions, language and behaviours from the perspective of PWLE. • Can complement wider models by adding depth, empathy and relational learning to broader engagement evidence.	• Depth does not replace breadth; paired learning should not be treated as representative on its own. • Relationships need clear boundaries, consent, confidentiality and emotional support. • There is a risk that learning remains personal unless it is connected to wider service design and decision-making. • Requires skilled matching, facilitation and follow-up to avoid over-reliance on individual relationships.

Relevance for Highland context

In the Highland context, relational learning pairs could be particularly useful where people are unlikely to engage through formal groups because of stigma, low confidence, previous negative experiences of services or concern about being visible in small communities. The approach offers a way to build trust between service providers and people with lived experience, helping professionals understand the everyday realities of poverty, access barriers and service interactions in greater depth. It would be most effective as part of a mixed model, sitting alongside wider group-based, peer research or thematic engagement so that individual learning informs broader service design and decision-making.

4.9 National models – what is happening elsewhere

4.9.1 UK Network of Age-Friendly Communities

The UK Network of Age-friendly Communities, supported by the Centre for Ageing Better, provides a useful model for embedding lived experience into place-based service and system design. The network brings together over 100 places across the UK and is affiliated to the World Health Organisation's Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities. Its relevance to this review lies in its emphasis on ongoing local improvement across housing, transport, social participation, access to services, inclusion and the built environment, rather than one-off consultation.

The network relies on engagement with lead organisations in local places, usually local authorities, and third sector organisations, but in some cases, it is led by health boards and universities. The lead organisations feed into the national network. They organise local meetings to gather local views. These meetings are attended by a combination of people with lived and professional experience.

For Highland, the model is especially relevant because ageing, rurality, transport barriers, digital exclusion and uneven access to services intersect strongly with poverty and equality. The Age-friendly Communities approach encourages places to understand their own assets and challenges, rather than applying a standardised model, which fits the need for a Highland approach that recognises dispersed communities, hidden rural poverty and different local service realities. It also shows the value of combining local leadership with networked learning: Highland would not need to replicate another area's model wholesale but could draw on the framework to structure engagement with older residents, test what makes communities liveable and accessible across different geographies, and connect lived experience to wider community planning and preventative agendas. As with the other models reviewed, its effectiveness would depend on inclusive recruitment, practical support for participation, clear routes into decision-making and visible follow-through so that older people can see how their contributions influence local change.

4.9.2 CPAG, Changing Realities

Changing Realities, associated with CPAG, offers a useful national model because it combines lived experience, anti-poverty research and policy influence over time. Rather than relying on one-off consultation, it supports parents and carers on low incomes to document everyday experiences of poverty through creative and accessible methods, including written testimony, audio, zines and collective analysis. This makes it relevant to the report because it treats lived experience as an ongoing source of evidence and expertise, helping to show how policy, services and systems are experienced in practice by families affected by poverty.

For Highland, the model is highly relevant because it could help capture the day-to-day realities of poverty across dispersed rural communities, including hidden costs, transport barriers, digital exclusion, stigma and the cumulative impact of service access issues. Its strengths are depth, continuity and the ability to translate personal experience into policy-facing evidence, but it would need careful adaptation. Any similar approach in Highland would require trauma-aware facilitation, practical support, fair recognition for participants, clear consent and safeguarding arrangements, and visible routes into decision-making so that families can see how their contributions inform service design and wider poverty and equality priorities.

4.9.3 Grassroots Poverty Action Group

This standing lived experience group brings together people with direct experience of poverty across the UK to inform Joseph Rowntree Foundation research, analysis and influencing work. It shows how lived experience can be embedded beyond one-off consultation, with members helping to interpret evidence, shape messages, identify what matters to people on low incomes and strengthen how research communicates the reality of poverty. For Highland, GPAG is relevant as a potential model for a standing poverty and equality reference group, provided it is adapted to local geography and governance. Its strengths are continuity, trust-building, cumulative learning and the ability to involve people in sense-making as well as evidence-giving. However, the model also underlines several design requirements already identified in the report: careful recruitment, accessible language, practical support, fair recognition, attention to stigma and mistrust, and clarity about how lived experience will influence decisions. In a Highland context, a similar approach could work best if combined with local or thematic routes into participation, so that a standing group does not become too centralised or disconnected from dispersed rural communities.

4.10 Online engagement platforms

Online engagement tools can be useful for engaging PWLE, but they should be treated as supporting infrastructure, not the engagement model itself. Their main value is reach, visibility and continuity: partners can use them to host plain-English information, invite views through surveys or idea boards, advertise lived experience opportunities, publish accessible summaries, and provide “you said, we did” feedback in one place. In a Highland context, where distance and travel can be major barriers, these platforms could help people contribute asynchronously and reduce reliance on centralised meetings. They could also be used across partners to create a more joined-up participation pathway, so people can see different opportunities, understand how their input will be used, and avoid being repeatedly asked the same questions by different organisations. Online platforms work best as part of a blended and supported approach. They can widen participation for some people, but may reproduce inequalities if they rely on self-selection, literacy, confidence, digital access or trust in formal systems. In Highland, the strongest use would be to combine online tools with

trusted intermediaries: VCS organisations, community workers, schools, advice services and peer researchers could help people access the platform, interpret questions, contribute offline where needed and receive feedback. Digital tools should amplify relational engagement, not replace it.

5. Principles: What does and doesn't work

The national and international learning shows that lived experience has the greatest impact when it is embedded in decision-making rather than used as a one-off consultation exercise. The additional models reviewed in Sections 4.8 to 4.10 reinforce this conclusion: relational learning pairs highlight trust and reflective learning; national models show the value of continuity, networked learning and policy-facing evidence; and online platforms can widen reach and strengthen feedback when used as part of a blended approach. The evidence also points to recurring risks where impact is lowest: tokenism, inaccessible processes, dominant voices, weak facilitation, digital exclusion, unsupported emotional labour and failure to reach those most affected by poverty and inequality.

For Highland, these lessons are especially important because rurality, poverty, transport barriers, digital exclusion, ageing, stigma, small-community visibility and uneven access to services can intensify the gap between formal opportunities to participate and who is actually able to take part. Section 4 also shows that different approaches are needed for different purposes: some people may benefit from private, relational routes to sharing experience; some issues require sustained local or thematic structures; and some participation can be supported through online platforms, provided these do not replace trusted relationships, outreach and offline routes. This section therefore examines not only what works and what fails, but why these conditions matter if lived experience is to be embedded credibly in service design across the poverty and equality agenda.

Section 3 findings also suggest an important design question for Highland: whether lived experience is being invited in occasionally to comment on particular issues, organised around specific themes, or embedded more routinely across the decisions that shape services. This matters because the distinction between consultation and co-production is not only about language, but about role and power. Ad hoc approaches may be proportionate where a defined issue needs focused input; thematic structures may work where recurring priorities such as transport, housing, early years or financial security need sustained attention; and more embedded involvement across governance and service design is likely to be needed if lived experience is to influence how problems are framed, options are developed and trade-offs are made. A key condition, therefore, is to be explicit about where Highland wants lived experience to sit on this spectrum, and to align the model, remit and level of influence accordingly.

For Highland, the task is not to replicate a single model, but to select and test the combination of approaches that best fits its context. This is likely to mean combining

methods that build continuity and trust, respond to specific themes or decisions, and reach dispersed or seldom-heard communities flexibly. This links directly to the purpose set out in the introduction: to narrow the options, shape engagement questions and support a practical, proportionate model that gives lived experience a genuine role in improving services.

5.1 Principles for success

The evidence is clear that lived experience involvement is most effective when it is purposeful, well-supported and connected to real decisions, and least effective when it is treated as an add-on to processes that remain professionally controlled.

Across the models reviewed in Section 4, effective approaches are those that match method to purpose, combine reach with depth, and build in support, clarity and visible influence from the outset. Standing advisory panels and regular lived experience groups support continuity and trust; ad hoc panels provide focused input; peer and community research reaches seldom-heard groups and generates local intelligence; deliberative approaches support legitimacy; participatory budgeting creates a direct route into decision-making; relational learning pairs add depth and reflective learning; national models connect local participation to wider networks and policy influence; and online platforms can support reach, transparency and feedback when used as part of a blended approach. Across policy, health, social care and community planning, the strongest approaches share a common set of features:

- The model is matched to the purpose: ongoing groups where continuity and trust matter, targeted panels where a specific issue needs rapid input, deeper peer research where local intelligence and seldom-heard voices are needed, and more deliberative or budget-linked methods where legitimacy or decision-making power is central.
- People are involved early enough to shape questions, priorities and options, not simply comment on decisions that are already largely formed.
- Roles, remit and influence are clear from the outset, including how lived experience input connects to formal decision-making and what the limits of that influence are.
- Participation is accessible, inclusive and properly supported, with practical help, fair recognition, and formats that work for people facing transport, digital, financial or confidence barriers.
- Facilitation is strong enough to manage power imbalances, prevent dominant voices from taking over, and create space for both shared priorities and different perspectives to be heard.
- There are visible feedback and follow-through mechanisms, so people can see what changed, how recommendations were used, and whether the process led to any meaningful action.

- Digital tools are used to amplify, not replace, relational engagement, with online platforms linked to trusted intermediaries, offline participation routes and clear feedback so that digital participation does not reproduce existing inequalities.

5.1.1 The importance of facilitation

The Policy Lab ([2024](#)) reflects on 10 years of lived experience work to give the following guiding principles is how to facilitate lived experience work: Be yourself; Practice active listening and postpone judgement; Be open to what you might learn; Give people time to prepare; Remind people that they are valued; Provide opportunities for people to see the impact of their contribution; Fight the fear and do it anyway.

Table 2: Facilitation conditions, evidence findings and implications for Highland

Facilitation condition	What the review shows	Implications for Highland
Clarity of purpose, remit and influence	Across the review, weak impact is most often linked to vague mandates and unclear routes into decision-making. Section 3 shows that co-production depends on people shaping problems, options and decisions, not simply contributing views after the fact. Section 4 also shows that deliberative processes, panels and steering groups all require a clear remit if participants are to understand what they can influence.	Highland will need to be explicit at the next stage of research about whether lived experience is being used for ad hoc input, thematic work, or embedded influence across wider governance and service design, and what level of decision-making power sits with each approach.
Matching facilitation to the model and purpose	The strongest approaches in Section 4 work for different reasons: ongoing groups build trust and continuity, ad hoc panels provide focused input, peer research broadens reach and local intelligence, and deliberative or budget-linked approaches support legitimacy and visible influence. The newer models add further distinctions: relational learning pairs require careful matching, boundaries and reflective support; national models rely on networked learning and routes into policy influence; and online platforms require facilitation through trusted partners so they do not become self-selecting digital	Rather than designing one facilitation approach for all activity, Highland is likely to need a mixed model: strong relational facilitation for ongoing groups and learning pairs, more focused support for thematic or ad hoc work, community-based methods where the aim is to reach dispersed or seldom-heard voices, and supported digital routes that connect online engagement to trusted local organisations and offline participation.

Facilitation condition	What the review shows	Implications for Highland
	consultations. Facilitation needs are therefore different across models.	
Managing power and participation	Evidence in Sections 4 and 5 shows that some voices can dominate if facilitation is weak, while others may be crowded out by confidence, jargon or professional status. The review also highlights that analysis and write-up are often the stages where power is least shared.	Facilitation in Highland will need to do more than run meetings well: it will need to actively manage dominance, make language accessible, create different ways to contribute, and consider how lived experience can be involved in sense-making as well as in discussion.
Accessibility and practical support	A consistent message is that participation fails when practical barriers are not addressed. The review highlights transport, distance, digital exclusion, hidden rural poverty and uneven access to trusted support. It also shows that payment, preparation time and clear communication all matter for sustained involvement.	For Highland, good facilitation is inseparable from logistics and inclusion. This is likely to mean flexible formats, local venues, hybrid or outreach approaches where appropriate, support with travel or connectivity, and practical recognition of people's time and contribution.
Trust, continuity and relationships	Section 4 shows that facilitation needs vary by model. Ongoing groups build trust and continuity; ad hoc panels provide focused input; peer research broadens reach and local intelligence; and deliberative or budget-linked approaches support legitimacy and visible influence. Relational pairs need careful matching, boundaries and reflection; national	If Highland wants lived experience to shape future services rather than comment on isolated issues, facilitation capacity will need to support continuity over time. This suggests value in models that allow relationships to develop, while still creating lighter-touch routes for specific issues.

Facilitation condition	What the review shows	Implications for Highland
	models need routes into policy; and online platforms need trusted support to avoid self-selecting digital consultation	
Feedback, visibility and follow-through	Visible feedback loops are essential: they build trust by showing participants what changed and reduce the risk of engagement feeling symbolic. Online platforms can support this through accessible summaries, opportunities and “you said, we did” updates, but only when linked to real decisions and offline routes.	Any Highland model taken into the next stage of research should build in feedback and response mechanisms from the outset, including how recommendations will be reported back, what decisions were influenced, where limits or trade-offs prevented change, and how online and offline routes will be used to make this visible across dispersed communities.
Support, safety and emotional labour	Lived experience work can involve emotional labour for participants and facilitators, especially on sensitive issues. Ad hoc formats need appropriate support, peer research requires safeguarding, training and supervision, and relational learning pairs need clear boundaries, consent, confidentiality and debriefing.	In Highland, facilitation should be designed as a supportive function rather than an administrative one, with attention to preparation, informed choice, trauma-aware practice, debriefing, and the support needs of people involved in community research or repeated engagement.

5.1.2 Scottish Government Participation Handbook

The Scottish Government Participation Handbook provides a useful framework for thinking about how Highland can turn the principles in this review into a workable model for the next stage of the research.

The Handbook emphasises that participation should be purposeful, proportionate and clear about the level of influence on offer, rather than assuming that one form of engagement suits every issue. Its guidance on the spectrum of participation, inclusive participation and engagement strategy is especially relevant here.

For Highland, this suggests a model that is explicit about when people are being consulted, involved or asked to collaborate; plans participation early enough for it to influence decisions; and designs methods around the people furthest from services or government, not around organisational convenience. The National Standards for Community Engagement within the Handbook also reinforce many of the lessons already identified in this report: the need for inclusion, support, clear planning, fit-for-purpose methods, good communication and visible impact. Applied to the Highland context, this points towards a model that combines clear purpose and governance with flexible, locally trusted, and accessible ways for people to participate across a large and uneven geography.

“The [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) are Scotland’s good- practice principles designed to support and inform the process of community engagement, and improve what happens as a result. They describe the main elements of effective community engagement, and set out detailed performance statements that everyone involved can use to achieve the highest quality results and the greatest impact”

5.1.3 Scottish Co-Production Guide

The [Scottish Co-production Guide](#) is particularly helpful in showing how Highland can move from involving people in discussion to embedding a more genuinely co-productive way of working.

The Guide explains that co-production sits beyond consultation and conventional participation because it is concerned not only with hearing people’s views, but with sharing power, valuing different kinds of expertise, and working together to shape priorities, decisions and solutions. It presents co-production as an ethical and practical approach based on doing *with* people rather than *to* them, and emphasises that this depends on relationships, trust, reciprocity, mutual benefit and recognition of people’s existing assets and strengths, rather than treating lived experience only as testimony or need.

The Guide also provides practical advice on how to start and strengthen co-productive work: being honest about what can and cannot change, involving people early, identifying who needs to be part of the process, providing support and fair recognition,

using methods that fit the context, and building in reflection, evaluation and learning rather than treating co-production as a one-off exercise. It also recognises that co-production is rarely perfect or complete from the outset, and that organisations may need to start by maximising co-productive practice where they can, while being honest about limits and avoiding the language of co-production where power is not really being shared. For Highland, this is useful because it supports a pragmatic but ambitious model: one that is clear about purpose and influence, identifies who needs to be involved, reduces barriers to participation, establishes shared expectations and decision-making arrangements, and builds evidence and confidence over time. Applied to the Highland context, the Guide suggests that the next stage of research should test not only which participation methods are most suitable, but also what organisational conditions, facilitation capacity, relationships, support mechanisms and culture change would be needed if the model is to become more co-productive in practice.

Table 3: Co-production principles and relevance for Highland

Guide principle	What it means in practice	Relevance for Highland
Do with, not to	People are involved early enough to help shape priorities, options and decisions, rather than being asked to comment once a direction has already been set.	This supports Highland's need to decide where lived experience should influence the next stage of research: and whether the model is testing consultation, collaboration or more embedded co-production.
Relationships, trust and reciprocity	Co-production depends on building trust over time, recognising mutual benefit, and creating conditions where people feel respected, supported and able to contribute honestly.	In Highland, this strengthens the case for models that allow continuity and relationship-building, while also using trusted local partners to reach people who may not engage through formal channels.
Recognise assets and strengths	People are valued as contributors with knowledge, skills and networks, not only as people describing problems or unmet need.	This aligns with peer research, advisory and co-design approaches that can build confidence, skills and local leadership, particularly in communities experiencing hidden rural poverty.

Be honest about limits and power	Organisations should be clear about what can change, what cannot, and where power is genuinely being shared, rather than using co-production language loosely.	For Highland, this is critical to avoiding tokenism and to making the next stage of research credible, especially if different thematic, ad hoc or embedded options are being tested.
Reflection, learning and support	Co-production improves when time is built in for reflection, evaluation, practical support and adaptation, rather than expecting a perfect model from the outset.	This supports an iterative Highland approach that tests options, learns what works across different communities and themes, and builds the organisational conditions needed for a stronger longer-term model.

5.1.4 Scottish approach to service design

The Scottish approach to service design highlights 7 principles aimed specifically at service, rather than policy design. The first four have clear salience for both policy and service design, while 6 and 7 highlight the importance of learning and sharing best practice.

1. We explore and define the problem before we design the solution.
2. We design service journeys around people and not around how the public sector is organised.
3. We seek the participation of the public in our projects from day one.
4. We use inclusive and accessible research and design methods so people can participate fully and meaningfully.
5. We use the core set of tools and methods of the Scottish Approach to Service Design.
6. We share and reuse research insights, service patterns, and components wherever possible.
7. We contribute to continually building the Scottish Approach to Service Design methods, tools, and community.

Table 4: Scottish Approach to Service Design principles and implications for Highland

Design principle	What the evidence suggests	How Highland could use this
Explore and define the problem before designing the solution	The review suggests that lived experience has greatest value when people help frame the issue, not simply comment on a pre-defined proposal. Peer research, regular lived experience groups and deliberative approaches are especially strong where the aim is to understand how problems are experienced across different places and groups.	Highland could use early scoping engagement to test whether key issues such as transport, housing, early years, financial security or access to services are best explored through thematic groups, geographically focused work, or community research in specific places before settling the model design.
Design service journeys around people, not around how services are organised	Across the models reviewed, the strongest approaches work when they reflect how people actually encounter services and barriers, rather than expecting them to engage through formal organisational routes. Professional-led engagement can help where trusted intermediaries are important, while peer and community methods can reveal more fine-grained experiences of fragmentation, stigma and access barriers.	For Highland, this points towards designing the model around people's real journeys through poverty, family support, health, education and local services, and using trusted VCS partners, outreach routes and local settings to understand where systems feel joined up and where they do not.
Seek participation from day one	A core finding of the review is that early involvement is one of the clearest differences between tokenistic engagement and meaningful influence. Standing panels, co-design associates and peer researchers are particularly useful where lived experience needs to shape the	In the next stage of research, Highland could use a small number of early design conversations or advisory structures to help test the purpose, remit and scope of the model before wider engagement begins, reducing the risk that

Design principle	What the evidence suggests	How Highland could use this
	questions, options and priorities from the outset.	people are only invited in after key assumptions have already been made.
Use inclusive and accessible research and design methods	No single method is inclusive enough on its own. Peer research, targeted panels, deliberative approaches, relational learning pairs and supported online platforms each reach different people in different ways. Across all models, accessibility, support and practical logistics are critical.	Highland could build a mixed-method model with different routes into participation: regular groups for continuity, outreach or peer research for hidden voices, relational learning pairs where private dialogue is more appropriate, and supported online engagement for flexible participation across distance.
Use shared tools, methods and evidence where possible	The review suggests that approaches are strongest when they connect to wider governance, evidence and improvement processes. Deliberative and panel models need clear documentation, feedback and visible routes into decision-making. National models such as Age-friendly Communities, Changing Realities and GPAG show how local lived experience can inform wider learning and policy influence, while multi-method approaches strengthen the evidence base by combining findings rather than treating them separately.	For Highland, this means linking lived experience work to existing partnership structures, using shared questions across engagement methods, drawing on national networks where useful, and ensuring findings inform child poverty, rights, prevention and service redesign agendas rather than sitting separately.

Design principle	What the evidence suggests	How Highland could use this
Share, reuse and build learning over time	One of the clearest findings across the review is that trust grows where people can see continuity, feedback and visible influence over time. Models such as standing advisory groups and repeated engagement structures are especially valuable where there is a need to build institutional memory, while shorter-term approaches are more vulnerable to duplication and extractive practice if learning is not captured and reused.	Highland could use this principle to ensure that the next stage of research does not only test options, but also creates a basis for cumulative learning, with clear feedback loops, shared insight across partners, and a practical route from pilot activity into a longer-term model if that is the direction of travel.

5.1.5 Using multi-methods: the Aberdeen approach

The Community Planning Aberdeen ([2025](#)) report provides grounded taxonomies of implementing lived experience.

It identifies seven methods of lived experience engagement, with the benefits and challenges found when implementing these approaches themselves. For example, it notes that with steering groups, their capacity to provide adequate support was limited, thus increasing the risk of tokenistic engagement.

The methods used are as follows:

- **Narrative interviews** – conducted to gather insights of people involved with the research topic
- **Focus groups** – diverse range of individuals with lived experience met once a month in person to discuss topics of agreed themes.
- **Community media** – involves communities creating or co-creating media such as films, podcasts, radio shows, or magazines. This approach allows individuals to share their personal lived experiences without participating in broader media production, and it can be done anonymously.
- **Regular Lived Experience Group Meetings** – These brought together PWLE, helping build bonds amongst the participants and creating an environment where they feel they can share their experiences.
- **Youth forums** – this approach recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all method for involving young people and provides suggestions for individuals and organizations to consider when engaging them. These include where and when

young people would be most open to answering questions; explaining clearly and using appropriate language; getting to know the young people; and valuing their time

- **Steering groups** – this brings real-life perspectives to policy development, ensuring diversity and inclusion, and providing tailored support and skill development for participants to help shape the policies that affect them
- **Co-design associates** – this involves **closely** individuals with lived or living experience of the issue being addressed who work closely with the project team at every stage to ensure the work is meaningful.

They also detail potential creative visual approaches (e.g. using theatre, video etc. to depict one's lived experience of place) and geospatial methods that could also be used to help embed and understand lived experience.

5.2 What inhibits success

What does not work is equally, if not more well established. In particular, over-consultation without influence, vague and changing mandates, poor facilitation, unchallenged power imbalances, inaccessible formats and insufficient practical or emotional support. There is a core need to avoid tokenistic engagement.

Recent reflection on co-production in Scottish policy also reinforces that failure is not only a matter of weak process, but of the gap between co-production as a stated ambition and what organisations are willing or able to change in practice. The University of Strathclyde's analysis suggests that co-production can be inhibited if:

- participation is a symbolic expectation rather than a route to shared influence,
- third sector organisations are expected to carry the burden of representation without corresponding power,
- there is inconsistency in how far government or public bodies are prepared to act on what is heard.

For Highland, this adds more context to be aware of; unless the next stage is clear about what decisions can genuinely be shaped, who holds responsibility for acting on learning, and how third sector partners are supported rather than used as proxies, the model could reproduce the language of co-production without delivering the conditions that make it credible.

Failure to embed lived experience correctly, can result in efforts made to engage the community as a mere gesture. As the [NSUN states](#):

'Tokenism is built into systems that want the appearance of inclusion without the disruption that genuine power-sharing brings. Tokenistic involvement often looks

like one-off consultations, unpaid advisory roles, or invitations that arrive too late to influence outcomes.'

Tokenism can occur even when there is no bad intent, due to poor design and insufficient preparatory work. Research on engagement in the modern slavery and human trafficking sector found that when organisers arrive late to co-production, the ad-hoc process at the last stage to involve PWLE just resulted in the division between designers and participants. ([Fatherazi et al., 2025, p.9](#)). To achieve true co-production with PWLE, relational groundwork is required.

The contextual conditions of the Highlands increase the risk of tokenism. Standard recruitment processes – open advertisement, online application, centralised meetings – will reach the same connected, accessible communities and risk excluding others. [Health and Social Care's Partnership own 2024-2025](#) annual performance report acknowledges that rural, remote, and island communities continue to experience stark inequalities and that geography plays a defining role in how services are experienced. The rurality of the Highlands, paired with the digital inequality present in the Highlands (there is a 20% disparity between the Highlands and Scotland in general in terms of gigabit capable broadband ([ONS, 2026](#))).

Digital exclusion and self-selection: Section 4.10 shows that online platforms can support reach, transparency and feedback, but they can also reproduce inequalities if they rely on people having confidence, time, literacy, devices, data, broadband and trust in formal systems. In Highland, this risk is heightened by rural connectivity issues and the fact that poverty may involve shared devices, limited data, or reluctance to be visible in small communities. Online engagement should therefore be treated as supporting infrastructure rather than the model itself, with trusted intermediaries, offline routes and assisted participation built in from the start.

Broken Feedback Loops: When people cannot see how their contribution was used (or reasoning for why it wasn't), trust can erode rapidly. Traditional feedback mechanisms can often be too slow to remain relevant in fast-changing organisational contexts, resulting in delayed insights and missed opportunities for timely action ([Carreno, 2024](#)).

Power imbalances: Lived experience involved is least likely at analysis and write-up stages as researchers are often 'reluctant to share power in these domains' ([Hopkins, 2024](#)). [The NUNS](#) frames this as a structural choice built into these systems, with participants expected to be grateful just to be included. This is the perception at risk if one does not embed PWLE effectively and thoroughly.

Dominant voices and poor facilitation: McClelland and Platt's [2021](#) evaluation found that, in practice, some participants can dominate discussion while others struggle to contribute, particularly where facilitation is not strong enough to manage confidence, jargon or uneven familiarity with formal processes. This matters in Highland, where concerns about centralisation and unequal representation across a large and diverse geography shape how people experience participation. For lived experience work to be

credible, facilitation must do more than simply enable discussion: it must actively create balanced opportunities to contribute, ensure different places and perspectives are heard, and prevent existing power imbalances from being reproduced.

Budget erosion: Interview data from ARC South London ([2026](#)) documented that lived experience co-production roles can be the ‘first to be axed’. In the Highlands, where the third sector is already stretched across vast geography, and the council faces budget pressures – including a 7% council increase tax ([BBC, 2026](#)). The resources required for effective co-production will require funding, and long-term cycles to build relational trust. Under budget scrutiny, the importance and effectiveness of the method must be stressed; to avoid it being deemed as a compliance exercise.

Unclear purpose and lack of mandate: Research on co-design with young people with disability ([Chapman, 2026](#)) found a need for a shared language and criticised ‘co-design’ with PWLE to be a buzzword with communities unable to both understand the difference between co-design research and others and then unable to see how they fit into this. The language barrier will result in an unclear understanding of what the research is for.

Emotional Labour: Mah et al. ([2025](#)) discuss the emotional labour sometimes required in co-design. If advisors find the topics of discussion as traumatic or sensitive, they can feel ‘put on the spot’ or uncomfortable, if the conditions and groundwork have not been put in place to help facilitate them and ease these concerns. They also note the emotional labour of the researchers can have when faced with a lack of organisational support, which both links to the aforementioned budget point and affects the quality of work produced (i.e. a lack of translators).

Relational risk without organisational follow-through: Relational learning pairs can create deeper trust and empathy, but they also carry a risk that learning remains private, personal or dependent on individual goodwill. If the insights generated through paired relationships are not connected to wider analysis, governance and service design, the model may improve individual understanding without changing systems. For Highland, any use of relational pairs would need clear consent, boundaries, facilitation and a route for anonymised learning to influence organisational decisions.

6. Evidence and design needs and actions for embedding lived experience in Highland

This section translates the evidence into practical design needs and actions for Highland, identifying the conditions required for lived experience to shape services consistently and credibly.

This draws on the Local Government Association's (LGA) [Seldom heard voices toolkit](#) and Shared Practice's report: [Pathways through participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?](#)

Figure 2: Key considerations identified in Shared Practice's report

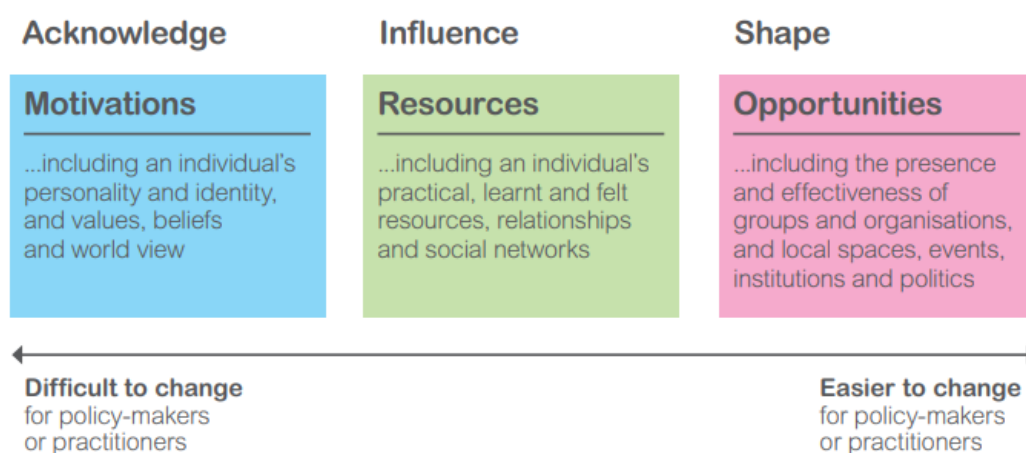


Table 5: Design needs and practical actions for embedding lived experience

Need	Actions
Understand the culture and everyday reality – information is more likely to be understood and accessed if it reflects how people live, communicate and make decisions.	- Learn how people usually share information in their everyday lives - Use communication methods that fit people's routines, not just council systems - Keep language simple, relevant, respectful - Use visuals, audio, and clear examples wherever possible.
Recognise assumptions and stigma – when assumptions go unchallenged, people	- Question assumptions about digital access, family support, confidence, or understanding - Avoid 'one-size-fits-all' approaches

Need	Actions
disengage quietly or appear when problems become urgent.	• Be alert to stigma/prove non-judgement participation – it can stop people engaging • Design access routes that work for people who are anxious, unsure of mistrustful. • In research with homeless communities, several participants felt that councils treated them as ‘just another number’, without recognising urgency, distress or the wider context of their situation. • People unfamiliar with technology may feel embarrassed or ashamed when unable to complete digital tasks.
Maintain professional qualities – small professional behaviours e.g. Returning calls, keeping people engaged, can make the difference between engagement and disengagement	• Be reachable and responsive • Follow up and keep people informed • Be honest about what you can and cannot do • Reduce hand-offs and repeated storytelling wherever possible
Ensure people feel respected and listened to	• Offer human contact, not just systems and forms • Avoid approaches that feel transactional or impersonal.
Draw on networks, partnerships and local knowledge – improves reach, builds confidence, and avoids duplication of effort.	• Work with existing community groups and local connectors/ bridge builders • Share information through trusted places and faces • Value local knowledge alongside professional expertise • Support partnership working rather than duplicating
Consider motivations for participation – participation is often personal, people participate because they want to, and sometimes because they need to.	• view participation holistically, as trying to channel individuals into narrowly defined areas is unlikely to work. • Account for differing and multiple motivations people have for getting involved and match aspirations. • Recognise participation and motivations are changing and dynamic

Need	Actions
Ensure participants benefit – what people value varies and is connected to their motivations for engaging.	• Incentives/ payments • Development of new skills, with certificates where possible • Personal satisfaction from creating change • Personal benefit from creating change • Development of social connections and networks • Understanding of local opportunities • Enjoyment in sessions
Choose the right location –the best run groups are welcoming and safe	• Weigh up online vs in-person, noting challenges to both, perhaps considering combination ◦ ageing populations and digital exclusion can point towards in-person ◦ rurality and significant difference suggests online • consider multiple geographic focused groups (rather than thematic) • Schools, institutions such as places of worship/organisations like community centres provide a range of opportunities to participate.
Understand digital exclusion as more than simply a skills gap.	• shaped by emotional, practical, economic and accessibility barriers. • People often rely on broken, outdated or basic devices that cannot run email, video calls or essential apps.

7. Policy and practice alignment

This section examines how the emerging model for lived experience involvement aligns with the policy and practice frameworks most relevant to Highland, and why that alignment matters for implementation.

It brings together the Scottish Approach to Service Design, the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and child poverty governance to test whether the proposed approach is consistent with current expectations around participation, prevention, tackling inequality and designing services around people rather than organisational boundaries. It also draws on evidence from how people experience the benefits system in practice, particularly the Universal Credit journey, including learning on complexity, stigma, payment choices and digital barriers.

Taken together, these frameworks and practice insights help ensure that any Highland model for embedding lived experience is principled, realistic, aligned with national and local policy, and shaped by the barriers people face when accessing support.

7.1 National policy and legislation

Across legislation and policy, Scotland has a consistent expectation that services and strategies should be co-designed with people and communities, with lived experience treated as a form of expertise.

Table 6: National Policy and relevance to Highland

Act/ policy	Key relevance
Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015	Establishes legal rights to ensure communities influence service design and local strategies, and “do more for themselves and have more say in decisions that affect them”
Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014	Health & Social Care Integration requires authorities to plan services with and for local communities, embedding user experience in service design and delivery, and ensuring care is responsive to people’s needs.
National Performance Framework	Currently under review/ consultation, but remains committed to empowering communities.
Equality Outcomes 2025–2029 (Outcome on Lived Experience & Participation)	“By 2029, there will be better use of lived experience and public participation to inform government policy and decision-making”

7.1.1 Lived Experience of Universal Credit

Complexity

Research indicates that many claimants find the system difficult to understand and navigate. Volume of information, abstract and impersonal language and conditional elements make it hard for claimants to understand how the system works (DWP, [2024](#)). Similarly, UC hesitancy research shows that perceived complexity, unclear eligibility, and features like joint claims act as barrier to engaging with the system (DWP, [2024](#))

Stigma

Evidence indicates that stigma is a core feature of how the benefits system is experienced. Research has found that stigma is ‘structural and systemic’, with claimants feeling monitored, judged, or treated with suspicion. The same research also shows that these experiences can be damaging mental health and lead to people to delay or avoid claiming support despite need (Turn2us, University of Bristol, [2025](#))

Payment choices and financial experience

The design of UC also creates challenges for claimants. Concerns about waiting for the first payment, monthly payment structures, and fears of being pushed into work they are not ready for act as barriers to claiming UC (DWP, [2024](#)). This same study also finds a preference for alternative communication methods such as letters, indicating a mismatch between system design and user desire.

Digital Barriers

Digital access has been consistently identified as a barrier to UC. Academic research shows that digital-first delivery can feel dehumanising and is particularly difficult for people without digital skills, devices, or reliable access (Wright et al, [2025](#)). In the Highlands context, this seems particularly relevant. Digital literacy was also raised by Citizens advice as a barrier to creating and maintaining a UC claim (Citizens Advice, [2024](#))

7.1.2 Scottish Government Population Health Framework

The [Scottish Government and COSLA's Population Health Framework 2025–2035](#) sets out a ten-year collective approach to improving health and reducing health inequalities across Scotland. It is directly relevant to this work because it frames health and wellbeing as the product of wider social, economic and community conditions, not only health and care services. The Framework highlights the importance of prevention, early intervention, equitable access and place-based partnership action, with a strong focus on tackling the root causes of poor health, including poverty, income insecurity, housing, education, work, transport, community conditions and access to services.

For Highland, the Framework strengthens the case for embedding lived experience into service design because it requires partners to understand how people experience the wider determinants of health in everyday life. Poverty, rurality, transport barriers, digital exclusion, housing pressures and unequal access to support all shape health outcomes, so lived experience should be used to identify where systems are not working, where prevention could be strengthened and where partnership action should be prioritised. This aligns with the proposed blended model: using lived experience not as a standalone consultation exercise, but as part of routine planning, prevention, service improvement and accountability across HCPP and related partnership structures.

7.2 Local strategy direction

There are a range of key Highland policies, reports, and approaches that further emphasise the need for embedding lived experience, and bring attention to priority areas, groups, and potential challenges that will be further explored in stakeholder engagement.

The local strategic documents all point in a similar direction: services need to be more joined up, preventative, rights-based and grounded in the experiences of those most affected by poverty and inequality.

Together, they suggest that any Highland model should combine clear governance and decision-making routes with flexible, locally trusted methods for reaching remote and seldom-heard communities, while also creating stronger links between lived experience, shared outcomes, and partnership action.

7.2.1 Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) 2024 -2027

The HOIP is the overarching strategic plan for the Highland Community Planning Partnership. It sets out how partners will work together to improve outcomes, tackle inequalities and maximise opportunities for all people of Highland. The plan responds to significant structural and socioeconomic challenges such as:

- Ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis
 - Rurality and population spread, with many people in remote areas
 - Ageing population and declining working-age population
 - Child poverty and low-income households
- Barriers to growth, including: housing shortages, limited childcare and transport, out-migration of young people.

It has three strategic priorities, across these priorities, the importance of embedding lived experience is clear throughout.

Table 7: Highland Outcome Improvement Plan priorities and relevant actions for lived experience

Priority area	Relevant actions
People – enable people to live independently, safe and well in communities.	• Person centred approach to designing and delivering services. • Ensure practice is trauma informed and responsive to lived experience • Partnership working as key
Place – develop sustainable and resilient communities	• Empower people and communities to be involved in local decision making.
Prosperity – creating opportunities for all people and places to prosper and to thrive economically	• Integrate and align people, investment and financial resources to maximise opportunities for Highland. • Strengthen partnerships with involvement from businesses and social enterprises.

The Highland CPP Annual Report 2024–2025 outlines the first year of delivery of the refreshed 2024–2027 Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP). It demonstrates how partners are working collectively to tackle inequality, improve outcomes, and support sustainable communities in the context of ongoing challenges including the cost-of-living crisis, workforce pressures, and demographic change.

At a local level, Community Partnerships have played a central role in delivering the HOIP, with improved governance, regular engagement, and stronger alignment with strategic priorities. New tools, guidance, and local planning approaches have supported more consistent and effective delivery across Highland’s diverse communities.

Overall, the report demonstrates solid early progress towards a more integrated and collaborative system focused on tackling inequality and improving outcomes. While significant challenges remain; particularly relating to rurality, demand, and capacity—the direction of travel is toward preventative, community-led, and partnership-based approaches that aim to create a fairer and more resilient Highland.

7.2.2 Local Child Poverty Action Report

The local child poverty action work aims to tackle child poverty and promote access to welfare support across the Highland, with a focus on supporting the six priority groups identified in the national Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund (CPAF).

CPAF highlights the importance of engaging lived experience in the design of approaches, ensuring local areas develop local approaches that are aimed at the specific local contextual challenges people face.

In Highland, child poverty practice focuses on three life courses: ‘Getting Started’ (Pre-birth – 5 years), ‘Growing Up (Primary Years), and ‘Moving On’ (Secondary and Young Adulthood). It also prioritises directly supporting and working with parents and guardians.

7.2.3 Highland Children’s Services Partnership Plan 2026 – 2029

The Children’s Services Partnership plan was developed over 18 months by a multi-disciplinary Children’s Services Planning Partnership Board alongside workshops with young people. The plan was developed in alignment with the National Performance Framework Outcomes, which are currently under review.

The plan establishes a shared strategic framework for:

- understanding need
- agreeing joint priorities
- aligning services and resources
- monitoring progress and impact

To deliver on the Strategic Priorities, several oversight groups and committees are accountable for delivery of the priorities and plans using the life course approach e.g. Highland's Child Protection Committee.

Each priority has outcome goals for each life course. Delivery of the plan is supported through themed partnership groups operating within clear governance and accountability arrangements. A data-informed approach, grounded in lived experience and children's voices, underpins delivery of the plan and future improvement activity.

7.2.4 Additional Partnerships: Children's Services Partnership Plan

In order to deliver on commitments and planning for Highland families, a number of strategic oversight boards and committees are accountable for delivery of the priorities and plans using the life course approach. These are:

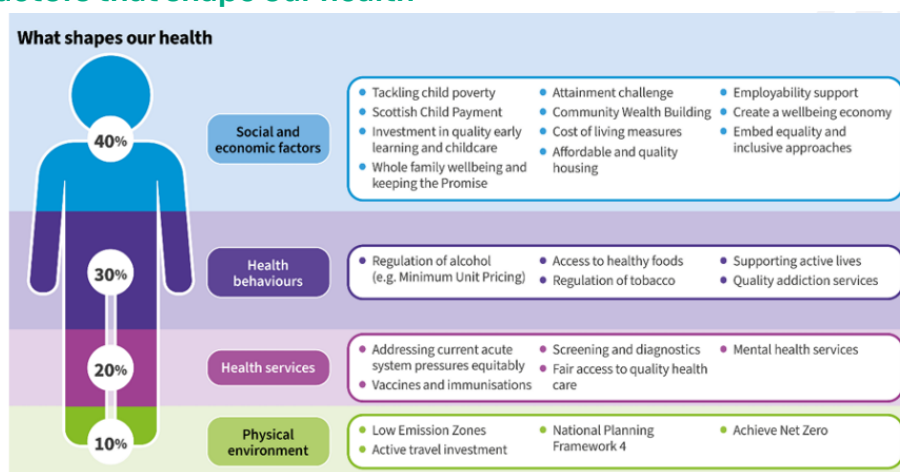
- Highland's Poverty Group
- Highland's Child Protection Committee
- The Promise Board (Corporate Parenting)
- Highland's Rights and Participation Group
- Highland's Health and Wellbeing Board – including mental health.
- Highland Alcohol and Drug Partnership Group

7.2.5 Highland Children and Young People's Needs Assessment

Developed through engagement with over 8,000 children and young people, the needs assessment identifies what people believe their health is shaped by.

It argues that improving outcomes will require coordinated, preventative, and early-intervention approaches across services, with a focus on reducing inequalities and improving access—especially in remote communities. It is important that engagement for this work engages stakeholders from these thematic areas.

Figure 3: Factors that shape our health



Adapted from The Kings Fund (<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/vision-population-health>)

7.2.6 Highland Poverty and Equality Commission – Final Report

The Highland Poverty and Equality Commission's final report, Essential Elements, provides one of the most directly relevant local evidence bases for this review. The Commission was established independently and drew on nine months of engagement across Highland, including outreach visits, community evidence sessions, stakeholder input and direct evidence from people experiencing financial hardship. Its final report identifies poverty and inequality in Highland as real, damaging and costly, but not inevitable, and sets out calls to action across people, place and prospects. The issues it highlights closely mirror the themes in this review: access to transport, digital connectivity and public services; housing affordability and quality; culture and ways of working across services; fair work; early years and education; and financial security.

The report is particularly important for the lived experience model because it shows both the value and the limits of current engagement. The Commission found that many people experiencing poverty feel unheard and excluded from decisions that directly affect their lives, while also being motivated to engage with decision-makers on solutions. This strongly supports the case for moving beyond consultation towards a more embedded, supported and visible model for involving PWLE in service design. For Highland, the Commission's findings reinforce the need for practical participation routes that work across rural and dispersed communities, use trusted local partners, address digital and transport barriers, and create clear feedback loops so that people can see how their contributions influence policy, partnership action and service change.

7.2.7 Annual report of The Director of Public Health 2025 (published April 2026)

Report sets out the key components required for a prevention-focused system that improves outcomes for children in the early years, It reflects the four pillars of population health set out in the Population Health Framework (2025–2035).

It includes five key calls to action, the fourth has clear salience for embedding lived experience.

1. Invest early in the prevention of poor health and wellbeing
2. Take a system leadership role in reducing child poverty and strengthen child resilience
3. Ensure equitable access to high quality health and care systems across geography and demographic groups
4. Support children's rights and embed their voices in decision-making
5. Embed a strategic focus on families and early years as a system priority.

7.3 Appendix 1 resource list

[NHS England: Provider Selection Regime statutory guidance](#)

[Mah et al. \(2025\): Patient and public involvement scoping review](#)

[Berkshire Healthcare: Lived experience](#)

[McClelland and Platt \(2021\): National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group evaluation](#)

[Glasgow Caledonian University: Lived Experience Advisory Panel briefing](#)

[UK Government: Lived Experience Forum report and recommendations](#)

[Scottish Government: Scotland's Climate Assembly research report](#)

[OECD OPSI: The Irish Citizens' Assembly](#)

[Go Vocal: Newham People Powered Places case study](#)

[Barnes et al. \(2024\): Community culture framework](#)

[Policy Lab: Lived experience guide](#)

[SCDC: National Standards for Community Engagement](#)

[Co-production Scotland: Scottish Co-production Guide](#)

[Community Planning Aberdeen: Understanding and Implementing Lived Experience Research](#)

[NSUN: From tokenism to fair pay](#)

[Fatherazi et al. \(2025\): Co-production and lived experience](#)

[NHS Highland: HSCP Annual Performance Report 2024–25](#)

[ONS: Highland local connectivity indicators](#)

[Hopkins \(2024\): Lived experience and power-sharing](#)

[ARC South London: Beyond tokenism in lived experience research](#)

[BBC: Highland Council tax increase](#)

[Chapman \(2026\): Co-design with young people with disability](#)

[Local Government Association: Seldom heard voices toolkit](#)

[Shared Practice: Pathways through participation](#)

[Scottish Government: Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act 2015 summary](#)

[Scottish Government: Health and social care integration](#)

[Scottish Government: Equality Outcomes 2025–2029](#)

[DWP: Understanding the behavioural response to the Universal Credit support offer](#)

[DWP: Universal Credit hesitancy research](#)

[Turn2us and University of Bristol: Stigma in the system briefing](#)

[Wright et al. \(2025\): Digital barriers and Universal Credit](#)

[Citizens Advice: Disconnected – digital exclusion and Universal Credit](#)

[Highland CPP: Highland Outcome Improvement Plan 2024–2027](#)

[Scotland’s Population Health Framework 2025–2035](#)

Appendix 2: Options development and appraisal report

1. Introduction and purpose

This appendix translates the evidence and engagement findings into practical options for embedding lived experience in poverty planning, service design and decision-making across Highland. It helps Highland Community Planning Partnership and partners decide which tool, or combination of tools, should be taken forward.

The central conclusion is that Highland does not need a single fixed participation tool. The strongest route is a phased blended approach that allows partners to match the method to the purpose, place, theme, decision point and level of influence available. This means using standing panels, short-life thematic panels, place-based engagement through trusted partners, peer or community research and a shared insight resource as connected tools within one wider participation system.

1.1 Purpose of this report

- Set out each option in practical terms, including its purpose, who would be involved, what support would be needed and how it would work day to day.
- Compare the options transparently against agreed appraisal criteria, including reach, inclusivity, feasibility, risk, cost, time to implement and likely impact.
- Help the partnership identify which tool, or combination of tools, is most suitable for the Highland context.

1.2 Scope of the options

The options are designed to respond to different experiences of poverty, including income insecurity, fuel poverty, access barriers, housing, transport, digital exclusion and rurality. The report avoids treating these as separate silos and instead considers how a **flexible participation approach** can bring together cross-cutting experiences and insights.

1.3 Highland context and design challenge

Any model for Highland must reflect the area's geography, service landscape and everyday experiences of poverty. Low income often intersects with higher living costs, housing pressure, transport barriers, fuel costs, digital exclusion, childcare pressures

and uneven access to services. Rurality and remoteness can make these issues less visible and harder to capture through standard data or centralised engagement.

The model needs to hear different experiences of poverty without fragmenting participation into separate silos. Income insecurity, fuel poverty, housing, transport, digital access and service navigation are often connected in people's lives. **The options therefore consider thematic engagement where needed, alongside cross-cutting analysis and clear routes into strategic decision-making.**

Standard engagement methods are unlikely to be enough on their own. Online surveys, central venues and formal board-style meetings may miss people affected by travel costs, limited transport, digital exclusion, caring responsibilities, stigma, low confidence, language barriers or previous negative experiences of services. The options therefore include practical support, trusted local routes, hybrid or locality-based participation, plain-language materials, trauma-aware facilitation and clear feedback loops.

Each option also identifies how lived experience insight can connect to existing Highland governance and delivery routes, including community planning structures, thematic partnerships, locality arrangements and service redesign processes. A visible route into decisions is essential to avoid extractive or tokenistic participation.

1.4 Stakeholder engagement implications for the options

Stakeholder engagement points towards the need for a mixed and flexible approach rather than a single participation route. Across interviews and group discussions, partners emphasised that standing panels, thematic work, locality-based conversations, peer research, community forums and existing trusted networks each have a role to play, depending on the purpose of the work, the level of influence available and the people whose experiences need to be heard.

A consistent message was that lived experience work in Highland needs to be rooted in trust. Many stakeholders highlighted the **importance of third sector, community and grassroots organisations as trusted intermediaries**, particularly where people may be reluctant to engage directly with statutory bodies because of previous experiences, stigma, low confidence, language or literacy barriers, or concerns about visibility in small communities. This suggests that any option should build on existing local relationships rather than relying only on open invitations or formal partnership structures.

Stakeholders warned strongly against consultation fatigue and extractive engagement. People are often asked for their views without seeing what changed, and distrust is strongest where communities and third sector organisations feel consultation does not lead to action, shared power or recognition of their expertise. The options should

therefore treat feedback and accountability as core design features: clear “you said, we did, we could not do, and why” processes, visible reporting back, and opportunities for lived experience contributors to review whether the model is working.

Several stakeholders pointed to the value of a shared insight resource or **“library of voices”**, particularly for children, young people and families, with potential to extend across poverty and inequality themes. This could help avoid repeatedly asking the same people the same questions, make existing insight more visible to policy and service teams, and support partners to use lived experience evidence before commissioning new engagement, provided consent, anonymisation, safeguarding and ethical use are built in from the start.

The engagement also reinforces the need for **practical support and realistic resourcing**. Options should account for transport, childcare, food, digital access, interpretation or communication support, accessible materials, payment or vouchers, skilled facilitation, trauma-informed practice and safe spaces. Stakeholders were clear that participation should not cost people money, time or wellbeing without recognition and support.

Finally, stakeholders saw **governance as essential but sensitive**. Many suggested that the Highland Community Planning Partnership is the logical strategic home for the model but cautioned that it should not feel overly council-owned, top-down or bureaucratic. The options should therefore consider governance arrangements that combine strategic accountability through the partnership with delivery, facilitation, recruitment and feedback roles for trusted third sector and local partners.

1.5 Evidence and design principles

This section summarises what has been learned from the desk review, mapping framework and stakeholder engagement, drawing out the practical implications for option design. The combined evidence suggests that Highland does not need a single fixed participation tool, but a small set of connected participation routes that can be matched to purpose, place, theme and the level of influence available.

Suggested design principles include:

- Valuing lived experience as expertise;
- Building from trusted local relationships;
- Making participation accessible across remote and rural areas, including through familiar community spaces, digital access and support where needed, and tailored materials and approaches;
- Avoiding extractive engagement;
- Using plain and relatable language;
- Providing proportionate practical and relationship-based support so people can participate in ways that are safe, accessible and realistic. This should include

preparation, facilitation, expenses, accessibility and follow-up where engagement is time-limited, and ongoing support through trusted local Relationships where participation is place-based or continuous;

- Providing clear feedback loops;
- Ensuring the model has a visible route into partnership decisions.

Stakeholder engagement reinforces several design findings.

1. **Trust is a precondition for participation.** Many people are unlikely to engage through formal, council-led or board-style routes unless the process is supported by people or organisations they already know and trust. Trusted relationships may sit in different places for different people, including community organisations, schools, health visitors, teachers, support workers, advice services, peer researchers, community connectors and other local or statutory services. The options should therefore build on existing trusted relationships across sectors, rather than assuming that trust sits in one part of the system.
2. **Participation needs to be designed around people's lives, not around organisational convenience.** Stakeholders repeatedly described barriers linked to transport, childcare, digital access, working patterns, stigma, confidence, language, literacy, trauma and small-community visibility. This means that each option should specify not only the engagement method, but also the practical support, setting, timing, facilitation and accessibility arrangements needed to make participation realistic.
3. **The model should reduce duplication and make better use of what is already known.** There are many existing examples of lived experience voice being listened to across Highland. Stakeholders highlighted that people are often asked similar questions by different organisations, while existing insight held by services, schools, third sector organisations and participation programmes is not always visible to decision-makers. A shared insight resource, or "library of voices", could therefore be explored as part of the model, provided it includes clear consent, ethical use, anonymisation and quality standards.
4. **Feedback and accountability should be treated as essential infrastructure.** Stakeholders were clear that engagement loses credibility when people do not hear what happened next. Each option should therefore show how participants will receive timely feedback, how partners will explain what changed or did not change, and how lived experience contributors can see whether their involvement has influenced policy, service design, funding or delivery decisions.
5. **Governance needs to balance strategic accountability with independence and local credibility.** The Highland Community Planning Partnership is the logical strategic home for a Lived Experience Model, providing the route into partnership priorities, thematic groups and formal decision-making. However, stakeholders cautioned that delivery should not feel overly statutory, top-down or bureaucratic. The model's public-facing identity should therefore align with Highland CPP, while using plain, accessible and community-facing language that

makes participation feel open and locally credible. A separate standalone brand could be explored, but this would require additional communications resource, design costs and ongoing maintenance. A proportionate approach may be to use Highland CPP as the strategic owner, supported by a simple participation identity and delivery through trusted local partners across sectors.

2. Options for embedding lived experience

Clear message for decision-makers: a blended approach should be the preferred route, with the other approaches treated as tools within it.

The evidence points to a blended participation approach as the strongest fit for Highland. Rather than choosing one option and discarding the others, Highland CPP should develop a Toolkit that helps partners select the right tool for the engagement purpose, decision point, geography, available resource and people who need to be heard. Standing panels, thematic panels, place-based routes, peer and community research, and a shared insight resource should therefore be understood as connected tools within one approach.

2.1 Preferred route: blended participation

What: a blended approach to gathering lived experience insight is the preferred route because it reflects the main conclusion from the desk research and stakeholder engagement: no single approach is sufficient for Highland. It would provide a Toolkit that supports partners to match method to purpose, combine reach with depth, and use different participation tools depending on the issue, community, decision point and level of influence available.

How: It would combine the strongest elements of the other approaches into a single participation system:

- A standing panel would provide continuity.
- Thematic panels would respond to specific decisions.
- Place-based routes would support reach.
- Peer researchers would provide depth.
- A shared insight resource can reduce duplication and support learning.

In practice, to operationalise the blended approach a decision guide or toolkit will be needed to support partners. Partners would first define the purpose of the work, the decision it needs to influence, who needs to be heard and the resources available. The most practical tool, or combination of tools, would then be selected. A standing panel is best for continuity and regular sense-checking; short-life thematic panels are best where there is a specific live decision; place-based routes are best where reach, trust

and rural accessibility matter most; peer or community research is best where deeper insight is needed on sensitive or under-evidenced issues; and the shared insight resource is best used before new engagement is commissioned and to track recurring themes over time.

This also provides a practical feasibility test. More intensive methods should only be used where there is a clear decision route, adequate support and capacity to respond. Where time or resources are limited, partners should start with existing insight, targeted local conversations or a short thematic process, rather than creating new standing structures too quickly. The blended approach is therefore feasible if it is phased, proportionate and matched to need, rather than implemented as all tools at once.

Best fit: a long-term participation infrastructure for embedding lived experience across poverty and inequality work in Highland. It is strongest where partners need a single coordinated Toolkit that can combine regular advice, themed engagement, local outreach, deeper peer-led insight and shared learning, rather than commissioning separate participation activity for each issue.

Main risk: complexity and cost unless the approach is phased, clearly governed and supported by dedicated coordination. Without clear ownership, minimum standards and partner capacity, the approach could become fragmented, over-ambitious or difficult for participants and partners to understand.

Embedding requirements: The blended approach should be embedded as the overall operating framework for lived experience work across HCPP, not treated as a separate project. Implementation of this, however, needs central coordination, partner commitment, local budgets, participant support and feedback systems. These needs were explored and finalised in the sense-checking workshop with partners. The main report shows the model to embed lived experience that developed from these insights.

System change purpose: The blended approach should be framed as participation infrastructure, not only an engagement programme. Its purpose is to change how partners make decisions by building lived experience into policy, service design, commissioning, delivery, resource allocation and review processes.

2.2 Tools summary

Table 8: Summary of participation tools

Participation tool	Best use	Benefits	Challenges or risks	Skills to deliver	Cost, resource and time implications
Standing lived experience panel	Foundation, sounding board, governance route or potential LE partnership for ongoing lived experience work.	Provides continuity, builds trust over time, supports institutional memory and gives decision-makers a regular reference point.	May become narrow, centralised or over-relied on unless linked to wider outreach and rotating participation.	Panel recruitment and support, skilled facilitation, governance literacy, accessible communications, safeguarding, consent and feedback practice.	Medium ongoing cost. Needs recruitment, preparation, facilitation, payment, access support, administration, reporting and feedback after each cycle.
Short-life thematic panels	Focused engagement where there is a live decision, policy choice or service improvement task.	Targeted, time-limited and easier to test early; can bring the right people into a specific issue.	Can feel extractive if there is no clear decision route, visible response or follow-up.	Issue scoping, targeted recruitment, facilitation around live decisions, rapid analysis, clear reporting and decision-maker engagement.	Medium cost per exercise, low ongoing cost. Needs scoping, recruitment, facilitation, participant support, analysis and decision-maker response.
Place-based participation through	Engaging across Highland where reach, rural	Strongest route for local credibility and	Coverage and quality may vary unless supported by	Local relationship-building, outreach, community	Medium to high cost depending on coverage. Needs funded partner

Participation tool	Best use	Benefits	Challenges or risks	Skills to deliver	Cost, resource and time implications
Trusted local partners	access, local trust and hidden poverty are central.	participation through familiar relationships and places.	shared questions, reporting standards and central synthesis.	facilitation, cultural and place-based knowledge, accessible communication, consistent notetaking and synthesis.	time, travel, venues, childcare, food, digital access, outreach and reporting.
Peer and community researcher approach	Specific deeper insight work on sensitive, hidden or under-evidenced issues.	Can reach different conversations, shift power and generate rich qualitative insight.	Requires strong ethics, safeguarding, supervision and quality assurance; can place pressure on researchers without support.	Peer research training, interviewing and listening skills, ethics, consent and safeguarding, supervision, trauma-aware practice, qualitative analysis	High cost per project or participant. Best used selectively unless there is budget for an ongoing researcher network.
Shared insight resource or “library of voices”	Before commissioning new engagement, and for tracking recurring themes across places, groups and services.	Reduces duplication, makes existing insight visible and supports better use of evidence already gathered.	Could become a passive data store or raise ethical concerns if consent, anonymisation and context are weak.	Data governance, consent, confidentiality and anonymisation, thematic coding, insight management, synthesis, quality assurance, accessible reporting for partners.	Medium upfront and ongoing cost. Needs design, consent, coding, data protection, quality assurance, updating, synthesis and user support.

2.3 Tool: Standing Highland lived experience panel

What: Establish a standing lived experience panel linked to poverty, inequality and service access across Highland. Within the blended approach, the panel would provide continuity, build trust over time and create a visible route for lived experience to inform partnership priorities, policy development and service design.

How: The panel would work best with a clear remit, supported recruitment, payment or recognition, accessible participation routes, skilled facilitation and a regular reporting line into the Highland Community Planning Partnership or a relevant partnership subgroup. It should not be expected to represent all experiences of poverty across Highland; instead, it would act as a core reference group that can test priorities, sense-check proposals, identify gaps and trigger wider outreach where specific voices or places are missing.

Best fit: ongoing advice, sense-checking priorities, reviewing communications, testing partnership actions and maintaining institutional memory. It is most useful where the partnership needs continuity and a regular reference point, rather than a one-off view on a single issue.

Main risk: becoming too narrow, centralised or dependent on the same confident voices unless linked to wider outreach, rotating membership and feedback. It may also be seen as tokenistic if members are asked to comment on decisions too late or without a clear route for their input to influence action.

Embedding requirements: The panel should be embedded into governance and planning cycles, with a clear annual workplan linked to HCPP priorities, thematic groups and live decisions. It should receive accessible papers in advance, have a defined route for recommendations to go to decision-makers, and be able to request wider engagement where its members identify gaps in voice or place. Each meeting should generate a short response and action log so panel members can see what changed, what was escalated, what could not be acted on and why. The panel should also have regular review points to check membership, reach, support, influence and whether it is operating as a sounding board, advisory group, governance mechanism or wider lived experience partnership.

The standing panel could play several roles: the foundation of a wider lived experience partnership, a sounding board for lived experience activity, an advisory group within governance, or the lived experience partnership itself. These options should be presented as choices for HCPP and tested through the co-design workshops, rather than assumed in advance.

2.4 Tool: Short-life thematic panels

What: Use time-limited panels or forums focused on specific themes where lived experience is needed to shape a decision, policy or service improvement. Within the blended approach, this tool would bring focused lived experience into priority issues such as transport, fuel poverty, housing, childcare, welfare journeys, digital exclusion, rural poverty, health access, community justice or children and young people's experiences.

How: Thematic panels would be convened only where there is a clear question, decision point or design task. Recruitment would be tailored to the topic, using trusted partners and existing networks to reach people with relevant experience. Each panel would have a defined timeframe, clear expectations and a commitment from the relevant decision-makers to respond to recommendations. These can be prioritised across areas to reach more pressing issues and allow time to be used efficiently.

Best fit: focused service redesign, testing specific policy choices, exploring linked issues in depth and responding to emerging priorities. This works best when there is a clear question, live decision or defined improvement task, and when the people involved have direct experience of the theme being considered.

Main risk: extractive engagement if panels are short, intensive and not followed by visible action or feedback. There is also a risk of raising expectations if participants are not clear about what can change, who will decide and when they will hear back.

Embedding requirements: Thematic panels should be embedded in the lifecycle of specific decisions, not added after key choices have already been made. Each panel should begin with a short brief setting out the decision, the questions to be tested, what can change, who will use the insight and when a response will be given. The findings should feed directly into the relevant service redesign, policy, commissioning or delivery process, with a named lead responsible for responding. A standard template should capture the issue, participants, recommendations, decision response, actions agreed and feedback provided, so learning can also be added to the shared insight resource.

2.5 Tool: Place-based participation through trusted local partners

What: Build participation around local places, using trusted third sector, community, advice, school, youth, health and grassroots partners to reach people where they already are. Within the blended approach, this tool would improve reach, relevance and trust, particularly where people are more likely to take part through familiar relationships, local settings and relatable language.

How: The approach could operate through local or ward-level routes, community partnerships, area place plans, community hubs, food and fuel support settings, family support routes, youth work, employability services, advice services and local forums. It would need shared questions or standards so local insight can be compared and used strategically, while still allowing each area to work in ways that fit its communities. Local partners could provide short insight returns to a central coordination point, which would then produce thematic summaries for relevant HCPP groups and feed decisions back through the same trusted local routes.

Best fit: reaching seldom-heard voices, understanding hidden rural poverty, building trust, identifying local barriers and connecting lived experience to place-based planning. It is strongest where participation needs to happen through familiar settings and relationships, such as schools, advice services, community hubs, health or family support routes, rather than through centralised meetings or open consultations.

Main risk: inconsistent quality and coverage across areas unless local activity is supported by shared questions, simple reporting standards and central coordination. Local partners will also need adequate time and resource so participation is not added to existing relationships without support.

Embedding requirements: Place-based participation should be embedded through local planning, service delivery and community partnership routes, rather than run as occasional consultation. Local partners should have agreed roles, funded time and simple reporting arrangements so insight can move from community conversations into HCPP, locality planning, thematic groups and service improvement work. A shared template should capture common themes, place-specific issues, emerging risks, suggested actions and feedback already provided locally. Central coordination should then synthesise local returns, identify cross-Highland patterns and ensure decision-makers respond back through the same trusted local routes used to gather the insight.

2.6 Tool: Peer and community researcher approach

What: Support people with lived experience, or trusted community members, to gather insight from others in their communities. Within the blended approach, this tool would provide deeper qualitative insight on sensitive, hidden or under-evidenced issues, and help shift power by involving people closer to the communities and experiences being explored.

How: The approach could operate through a small pool of peer or community researchers trained and supported to carry out interviews, listening sessions, community conversations or creative engagement. Researchers would need clear roles, payment, training, safeguarding guidance, consent processes, supervision, debriefing and support with analysis. Work should be commissioned around specific questions or evidence gaps, with a clear route for findings to inform HCPP, thematic groups, service redesign or place-based planning.

Best fit: deeper insight work where trust, lived experience, language, culture or local knowledge are essential to reaching people who may not engage through formal routes. It is particularly useful for sensitive issues, hidden poverty, stigma, small-community visibility, minority experiences, young people's voices, or topics where existing evidence is thin or dominated by professional perspectives.

Main risk: placing too much responsibility or emotional burden on peer and community researchers without enough support. There is also a risk of inconsistent quality, blurred boundaries or tokenism if researchers are asked to gather insight but not supported to shape the questions, interpret findings or see how their work has influenced decisions.

Embedding requirements: The peer and community researcher approach should be embedded as a specialist tool within the wider participation approach, rather than used as a low-cost substitute for professional engagement. HCPP or a delivery partner would need to agree ethical standards, training, supervision, payment, safeguarding, data protection, quality assurance and wellbeing support before any activity begins. Findings should be analysed with researchers, added to the shared insight resource where consent allows, and routed to the relevant decision-makers with a clear response and feedback loop.

9.7 Tool: Shared insight resource or “library of voices”

What: Expand on the shared resource for storing, organising and using lived experience insight across poverty, inequality and service access themes. It would build on existing participation activity, including children and young people's voices, third sector insight, service feedback, peer research, local engagement and thematic work. The purpose would be to reduce duplication, make existing insight more visible to policy and service teams, and ensure partners use what is already known before asking people to contribute again.

How: The resource would need to be embedded into routine partnership business rather than developed as a standalone repository. It should have a clear owner, simple operating process and agreed standards for consent, anonymisation, safeguarding, data protection, thematic coding, quality assurance and feedback to communities. Partners should be expected to check the resource before commissioning new engagement, add relevant insight after engagement activity, and use it in impact assessments, service redesign, commissioning, policy development, place-based planning and performance review. A coordination role would be needed to maintain the resource, interpret findings, identify recurring themes, flag gaps in evidence and route relevant insight to the partnership groups or service leads that can act on it.

Best fit: reducing repeated consultation, supporting impact assessments, informing policy development and making lived experience evidence easier to access across the partnership. It is most useful where partners need to understand what is already known

before commissioning new engagement, or to identify recurring themes across places, services and groups.

Embedding requirements: To avoid becoming passive, the resource should be built into a standard insight cycle: capture, code, review, use, respond and update. Each piece of engagement should generate a short insight summary that can be added to the resource, with clear information about who was involved, the theme, the place, the decision it relates to, consent conditions and any limitations on use. Routine reports to HCPP and relevant thematic groups should draw from the resource to show emerging patterns, evidence gaps and issues requiring action. Feedback to participants and communities should also be recorded so the resource tracks not only what people said, but how partners responded.

Main risk: becoming a static data store unless actively managed, interpreted and connected to decisions. It also requires clear consent, anonymisation, data protection and ethical use standards so people's experiences are not reused out of context or without appropriate safeguards.

3. How a Lived Experience Toolkit could support the approach

A Lived Experience Toolkit should be developed that can help partners decide whether lived experience input is needed; if so, which tool is most appropriate; and assure the quality of the work and test whether it is likely to influence decisions. This avoids treating lived experience as a default engagement activity and instead supports proportionate, purposeful and high-quality participation.

3.1.1 Deciding whether lived experience input is needed and which tool to use

The Toolkit should be used at the start of any policy, service design, commissioning, delivery or review process. It should help partners decide whether lived experience input is required, what level of influence is available, who needs to be heard, and which participation tool is proportionate and practical.

- Is there a real decision or change opportunity? Lived experience work should be prioritised where insight can shape policy, service design, commissioning, delivery, resource allocation, communications or review.
- What level of influence is available? Partners should be clear whether lived experience will inform understanding, shape options, influence a preferred decision, support implementation or review impact.
- Who needs to be heard? The Toolkit should identify whose experiences are most relevant, who is least likely to be heard through existing routes, and whether specific places, groups or poverty experiences need targeted approaches.

- What is already known? Partners should check the shared insight resource and existing partner evidence before commissioning new engagement, to avoid duplication and consultation fatigue.
- What method is proportionate? A standing panel may be appropriate for regular sense-checking; thematic panels for live decisions; place-based routes for reach and trust; peer research for deeper or sensitive insight; and the shared insight resource for evidence review and recurring themes.
- Is there capacity to do it well? Partners should confirm there is budget, coordination, facilitation, participant support, safeguarding, analysis capacity and a feedback route before activity starts.
- What will happen afterwards? The Toolkit should identify who will receive the insight, who will respond, how actions will be tracked, and how participants will hear what changed, what did not change and why.

Partners could use this as a short decision record before any lived experience activity is commissioned. This would make the purpose, level of influence, selected tool, resource requirement and feedback route explicit from the start.

Table 9: Matching engagement methods to purpose

Purpose	Suitable methods	Best used when	Support and risks to manage
Testing priorities and assumptions	Surveys, short consultations, community conversations, pop-up sessions, online idea boards.	The partnership needs to check whether proposed priorities reflect lived experience across places, groups and poverty themes.	Use plain language, offline routes and trusted promotion. Risk of self-selection if only confident or digitally connected people respond.
Understanding lived experience in depth	Peer research, interviews, listening sessions, storytelling, community media, creative methods.	The issue is sensitive, under-evidenced, hidden or poorly understood through existing data and formal consultation.	Requires skilled facilitation, consent, safeguarding, payment, debriefing and trauma-aware practice. Risk of emotional burden if support is weak.

Purpose	Suitable methods	Best used when	Support and risks to manage
Designing or improving services	Co-design workshops, service walkthroughs, journey mapping, Experience Lab-style sessions, facilitated design sprints.	Partners are developing, redesigning or testing a service, pathway, communication product or access route.	Participants need preparation, accessible materials and clarity on what can change. Risk of raising expectations if decision limits are unclear.
Reaching local and seldom-heard voices	Place-based conversations, outreach through trusted partners, community hubs, advice services, schools, youth work, food and fuel support settings.	The priority is to hear from people who are unlikely to attend formal meetings, complete surveys or identify with the language of poverty.	Fund partner time, travel, childcare, food and accessible settings. Risk of inconsistency unless insight is captured using shared questions or standards.
Testing trade-offs or contested choices	Deliberative workshops, citizens' jury-style sessions, facilitated evidence discussions, participatory budgeting where funding decisions are open.	There are difficult choices about priorities, resources, funding or service changes and partners need informed public judgement.	Needs balanced information, independent facilitation and a formal response from decision-makers. Risk of frustration if recommendations are not acted on.
Monitoring experience and impact over time	Service experience panels, pulse checks, feedback loops, "you said, we did" reporting, participant review sessions, shared insight resource.	Partners need to understand whether changes are making a difference and identify emerging issues early.	Requires named leads, action tracking and regular reporting back. Risk of losing trust if feedback is delayed or too general.

3.1.2 Assuring quality and defining success

The Toolkit should also outline how to assure quality before, during and after lived experience activity. It should set out the principles that good participation must meet and what success should look like in practice.

Table 10: Quality principles and success measures

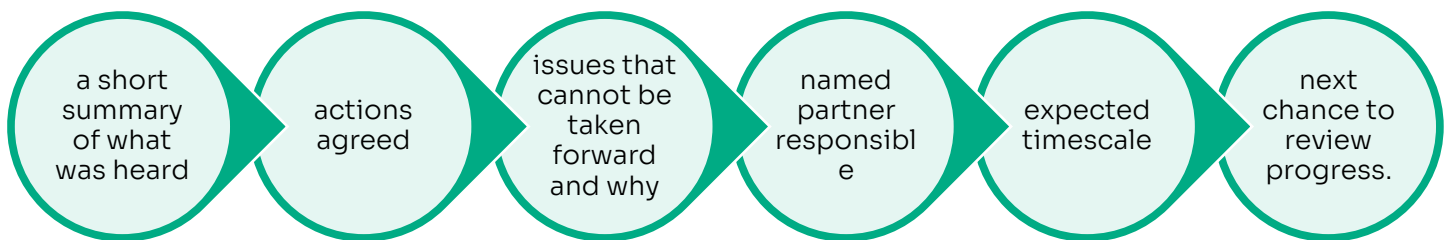
Quality principle	What success looks like
Purposeful	There is a clear decision, policy, service or delivery question, and participants understand how their input can be used.
Inclusive and accessible	People facing barriers linked to transport, digital exclusion, childcare, stigma, confidence, language, literacy, disability, trauma or rurality can take part in realistic ways.
Trusted	Recruitment and support use trusted people, organisations and settings, rather than relying only on open invitations or formal partnership structures.
Ethical and safe	Consent, confidentiality, safeguarding, anonymity, wellbeing, data protection and boundaries are clear and consistently applied.
Properly supported	Participants receive preparation, facilitation, payment or recognition, expenses, access support and follow-up proportionate to the activity.
Analytically robust	Insight is recorded, analysed and reported in a way that preserves nuance, identifies themes and limitations, and links clearly to decisions.
Influential	Decision-makers receive the insight in time to use it, provide a clear response, and show what changed, what did not change and why.
Accountable and learning-focused	Actions are tracked, feedback is given to participants and partners use learning to improve future lived experience work.

3.2 Feedback, accountability and sustainability

Feedback and accountability are central to the credibility of any lived experience approach as people lose trust when they are asked to share their experiences but do

not hear what happened next. Any option must have a clear feedback loop so participants can see what changed, what did not change and why.

Figure 4: Needs for a minimum feedback standard



Feedback loops should be built in from the start of the process. Participants should know what decisions their input can influence, who will receive the findings, how decisions will be made, and when they will hear back. This is particularly important where expectations may be high, where issues are sensitive, or where people have previously felt ignored by services.

Transparency matters even when action is not taken. A credible approach should not only report “you said, we did”; it should also explain “you said, we could not do, and why”. This may include reasons linked to statutory duties, funding limits, timescales, evidence gaps, competing priorities or decisions sitting with another organisation or level of government. Explaining these limits honestly can help maintain trust, reduce frustration and show that contributions have still been considered seriously.

Accountability should operate at several levels. For participants, this means timely and accessible feedback after engagement activity. For partners, it means named leads, action trackers and regular reporting to the relevant governance group. For the wider partnership, it means reviewing whether lived experience is influencing priorities, service design, investment decisions and delivery, rather than being treated as a separate consultation exercise.

Sustainability depends on closing the loop. Visible feedback helps participants understand the value of their involvement and reduces the risk of consultation fatigue. It also gives partners a practical way to track progress, identify where commitments are slipping, and show how lived experience is shaping change over time.

Feedback mechanisms should be practical and visible. At a minimum, each engagement activity should produce a short feedback note for participants, a partner action tracker, named leads for responding to recommendations, and a clear route back through the same trusted organisations or settings that supported participation. Feedback should not rely only on formal reports. It may need to use community meetings, schools, advice services, local partners, short plain-language summaries, videos, newsletters, web updates or direct follow-up calls, depending on who took part and how they prefer to receive information.

Decision-maker accountability should be explicit. For each engagement activity, the relevant partnership group or service lead should provide a response that states what will change, what will not change, what requires further work, and which decisions or budgets the insight has affected. This should be recorded in an action tracker and reviewed through governance, rather than left to individual teams or reports.

3.3 Skills and expertise needed to effectively gather lived experience

People involved in gathering lived experience need the right combination of relational, practical, ethical and analytical skills. This applies to staff, facilitators, local partners, peer researchers and anyone else supporting engagement. The quality of lived experience work will depend as much on how people are supported and listened to as on the engagement method selected.

Skill needs should be built into the approach as a workforce and quality assurance requirement. A practical approach would be to develop a short skills framework, induction materials, facilitation guidance, safeguarding protocol, analysis template and supervision or reflective practice arrangements for anyone gathering or using lived experience insight. Training can also be provided.

Core skills should include

- trauma-aware and empathetic facilitation (i.e., the ability to manage sensitive discussions safely without asking people to retell difficult experiences unnecessarily); active listening; ability to build trust with people who may have low confidence or previous negative experiences of services;
- plain-language communication; group facilitation and one-to-one conversation skills;
- understanding of consent, confidentiality, safeguarding, data protection, anonymity, boundaries and how to respond if someone becomes distressed or discloses risk. This does not mean every person involved needs to be a specialist practitioner, but the Toolkit should set minimum standards, escalation routes and supervision / quality assurance arrangements.
- capacity to turn lived experience into usable insight without losing the meaning of what people have said, requiring skills in note-taking, thematic analysis, sense-making, reporting, identifying patterns and limitations, and linking insight to service and policy design decisions and commissioning.
- understanding of rurality, hidden poverty, stigma, small-community visibility, digital exclusion, transport barriers and the role of trusted local relationships. Local knowledge will be important, but it should be supported by shared standards so insight is gathered consistently and can be used strategically across HCPP. It is expected that partners will have this knowledge.

Different roles will need different levels of expertise. Local partners may need practical guidance and funded time to support conversations through existing relationships. Peer and community researchers will need training, payment, supervision, safeguarding support and debriefing. Strategic leads will need skills in interpreting lived experience evidence, using it in decision-making, and giving clear feedback on what changed, what did not change and why.

3.4 Resourcing and indicative costs

Resourcing should reflect both the strategic, top-down infrastructure needed to make the model credible across Highland and the ward or local capacity needed to reach people in practice.

The model will not work if it is only held at partnership level, and it will not influence decisions if it is only delivered locally without a clear route into governance. Any option therefore needs to identify the resources required at both levels.

At the strategic level: resourcing from the existing Child Poverty Practice Accelerator budget should cover overall coordination, governance support, shared standards, data and insight management, analysis, reporting, quality assurance and feedback into the Highland Community Planning Partnership and relevant thematic groups. This top-down infrastructure is needed to avoid duplication, make insight visible across the system, and ensure partners are accountable for responding to what is heard. These roles are important, but they may not require significant additional staff time if responsibilities can be built into existing partnership arrangements.

At the ward, locality or community level: limited resourcing should support the practical work of engagement: trusted outreach, local facilitation, venue hire, transport, childcare, food, digital access, interpretation, accessible materials, participant preparation and follow-up. Stakeholder engagement highlighted that trusted local partners need time and funding to play this role well; it cannot simply be added to existing third sector or community responsibilities without resource. However, the approach should, via the Library of Voices, reduce the needs for as much participation in the long-term and generate a return on investment.

The approach to **reward and recognition should align with [Scottish Government guidance on paying participant expenses and compensating people for time](#)**, including the principle that people should not be out of pocket and that payment should recognise the expertise, time and responsibility involved in participation. The guidance states that participants should be paid at least Real Living Wage per hour. This should apply consistently across Highland, while allowing local flexibility in how support is provided, such as vouchers, travel arrangements, childcare, digital support or other practical help.

Payment and reward should be treated as a core participation cost, not an optional extra. Partners should understand that payment is fair, necessary and central to the credibility of the approach. People with lived experience are being asked to contribute expertise, time, emotional labour and often practical costs. A consistent approach should include expenses, childcare, travel, digital access, food, vouchers or payment for time, with clear guidance on when each form of recognition is appropriate. This should be planned into budgets from the start so it is affordable and applied consistently, rather than negotiated separately for each activity.

3.4.1 Indicative resource implications by option

Embedding lived experience through the blended approach will incur additional costs. However, it is important to note, that embedding lived experience, if done effectively, will lead to services that better support the needs of Highland residents and therefore can be assumed to have longer term return on investments.

The main costs relate to the level of infrastructure needed to make participation meaningful, safe and influential. Stakeholder engagement highlighted that the approach will need partner commitment, dedicated coordination, participant payment, practical access support, feedback mechanisms and enough local capacity to avoid placing additional unfunded demands on trusted third sector organisations. This is particularly important in Highland, where rurality, transport, digital access and the need to work through trusted local relationships all increase the time and cost of engagement.

The biggest practical tension is strategic influence versus local reach. Strategic governance is needed so lived experience can shape priorities, funding, service design and delivery decisions. Local delivery is needed so participation reaches people across rural, remote and island communities in ways that feel safe and realistic. Bridging these two levels will take time and resource. The main barriers are likely to include travel distance, limited public transport, digital exclusion, small-community visibility, uneven local partner capacity, staff time, coordination across themes and the cost of feeding back properly. These issues should be explored explicitly in the co-design workshops before final implementation decisions are made.

A standing Highland lived experience panel would require a medium level of ongoing resource. Costs would include recruitment, induction, skilled facilitation, administration, participant payment or vouchers, travel and digital support, accessible materials, meeting preparation, wellbeing support and regular reporting into HCPP or a relevant subgroup. It would also need staff time to maintain membership, rotate participation, prepare papers, brief decision-makers and close the feedback loop after meetings. This option is practical if it is kept focused and used as a core reference group, but it is unlikely to provide sufficient reach on its own without additional outreach or thematic work.

Short-life thematic panels would require lower ongoing infrastructure but higher short-term delivery resource for each topic. Costs would include scoping the question, recruiting people with relevant experience, partner time to reach participants, facilitation, participant payment, access support, analysis and a clear written response from decision-makers. This is likely to be a practical and affordable way to test the approach early, because panels can be used only where there is a live decision or defined service improvement task. The main resource risk is repeated one-off activity without coordination, which could increase consultation fatigue and reduce trust if participants do not see what changes.

Place-based participation through trusted local partners would require significant local delivery resource, especially if it is expected to work across Highland's rural, remote and island communities. Costs would include funding partner time, local facilitation, venue costs, travel, childcare, food, digital access, translation or communication support, accessible materials, outreach and follow-up. It would also need central coordination to provide shared questions, simple reporting templates, quality standards and synthesis across areas. Stakeholders were clear that trusted local partners cannot be expected to deliver this as an add-on to existing work. This option may be the strongest for reach and trust, but it is only feasible if local partners are funded for their role and if the scale is phased.

A peer and community researcher approach would require a higher level of support per participant than standard engagement. Costs would include recruitment, training, payment, supervision, safeguarding, debriefing, research materials, data protection support, quality assurance, analysis and ongoing wellbeing support. If used for specific pieces of work, it can be a targeted and proportionate way to generate deeper insight on sensitive or under-evidenced issues. If developed as an ongoing researcher network, it would become more resource-intensive and would need a clearer host, supervision model and budget.

A shared insight resource or "library of voices" would require upfront development and ongoing management rather than large-scale participant-facing delivery. Costs would include designing the structure, agreeing consent and ethical use standards, anonymising and coding material, maintaining data protection processes, quality assuring evidence, updating the resource, producing summaries and supporting partners to use the insight appropriately. This could reduce duplication and costs over time by encouraging partners to use existing lived experience evidence before commissioning new engagement. However, it will only be worthwhile if actively managed and connected to decisions; otherwise, it risks becoming a passive data store.

The blended approach would effectively mean all the above resourcing would have to be considered. This can be made feasible through phasing (see section 3.4.2).

Table 11: Resource implications by option/tool

Option or tool	Relative resource level	Main cost drivers	Practical implication
Blended participation approach	High overall, but manageable if phased	Central coordination, governance, partner delivery, participant support, analysis, feedback and flexible local budgets	Best fit for Highland if implemented gradually rather than launched as a full system at once.
Standing lived experience panel	Medium ongoing	Recruitment, facilitation, administration, payment, access support, preparation, reporting and feedback	Practical as a core reference group but needs wider outreach to avoid becoming narrow or centralised.
Short-life thematic panels	Medium per exercise, low ongoing	Topic scoping, targeted recruitment, facilitation, participant payment, access support, analysis and decision-maker response	Practical early option where there is a live decision, clear timescale and commitment to respond.
Place-based participation	Medium to high depending on coverage	Funding local partner time, venues, travel, childcare, food, digital access, outreach, reporting and central synthesis	Strong for trust and rural reach, but only feasible if local partners are resourced and coverage is phased.
Peer and community researchers	High per participant or project	Training, payment, supervision, safeguarding, wellbeing support, research materials, analysis and quality assurance	Best used for specific deeper insight work unless there is budget for an ongoing researcher network.
Shared insight resource	Medium upfront and ongoing	System design, consent, anonymisation, coding, data protection, quality assurance, updating, synthesis and user support	Could reduce duplication over time, but needs active management to influence decisions.

3.4.2 Phases of delivery

Phase 1 should test the most practical routes first. This should include the minimum infrastructure needed to make participation credible: a clear governance route into HCPP, a named coordination role, shared standards for payment, consent, safeguarding and feedback, and one or two tested participation activities. Early activity should focus on existing insight, short-life thematic panels linked to live decisions, and targeted place-based conversations through funded local partners.

Phase 2 should formalise what has worked. HCPP should review which routes reached the intended groups, what they cost, how well feedback worked, and whether insight was used by decision-makers. This review should determine which tools become part of the ongoing approach, such as a small standing panel, recurring thematic panels, selected place-based routes, peer research for deeper insight, or the shared insight resource.

Phase 3 should scale only where the conditions are in place. Wider roll-out should depend on clear governance, partner capacity, participant support, ethical safeguards, budget and evidence that lived experience is influencing decisions. This avoids creating new structures faster than the partnership can use or sustain them.

Decision points between phases should focus on readiness to proceed: whether the tool is reaching the right people, whether local partners are resourced, whether feedback is timely, whether decision-makers are using the insight, and whether the cost is proportionate. If these conditions are not met, the approach should be adapted before it is expanded.

3.4.3 Benefits realisation and success measures

A benefits realisation framework should sit alongside the phased implementation plan and operating model so partners can assess whether the blended approach is changing how decisions are made, not only whether engagement activity has taken place. It should track benefits across five linked areas: reach, quality, influence, participant experience and organisational change. These measures should be reviewed at each phase gate so HCPP can decide whether to adapt, pause or scale activity based on evidence of readiness, proportionality and impact.

Phase 1 / CPAF-funded pilot to March 2028: establish and test the foundations.

Success should mean the minimum infrastructure is in place and being used in live work. Measures should include an agreed charter or partnership commitment; confirmed governance route into HCPP; named coordination role; shared standards for payment, consent, safeguarding, data protection and feedback; a working selection tool and quality checklist; and one or two tested participation routes linked to live decisions. By March 2028, HCPP should have enough evidence to decide what continues, changes or needs resourcing beyond the CPAF period.

Phase 2 / post-pilot consolidation: formalise what works and deepen decision

influence. Success should mean that learning from the CPAF-funded pilot has been reviewed and translated into a clearer operating model. Measures should include regular use of the selection tool; action trackers showing named partner responses; lived experience evidence included in service redesign, commissioning, policy or impact assessment processes; funded local partner routes where reach depends on trusted relationships; early use of a shared insight resource or equivalent evidence review process; and improved participant feedback on trust, accessibility, support, feedback and being heard.

Phase 3 / longer-term embedding: scale only where conditions are in place. Success should mean lived experience is embedded in routine partnership business and is demonstrably shaping priorities, services, investment or delivery. Measures should include reduced duplication of engagement; routine use of lived experience evidence in impact assessments, improvement planning and commissioning papers; sustained partner commitment and resourcing beyond the pilot; clearer escalation routes for unresolved or recurring issues; evidence that feedback has reached participants through trusted routes; and participant confidence that involvement leads to visible action. The broad test should remain simple: people with lived experience should be able to see how their involvement has shaped decisions, and partners should be able to evidence how lived experience has changed priorities, services, investment or delivery.

4. Conclusion

The evidence points towards a phased blended approach rather than any one specific method as the preferred route for reaching and listening to lived experience voices across Highland.

Given this, there is a need for Highland CPP to develop participation infrastructure that changes how partners make decisions, with standing panels, thematic panels, place-based participation, peer and community research, and a shared insight resource used as connected tools selected by purpose, decision point, audience, resource and level of influence. This report has set out practical options for embedding lived experience in tackling poverty planning, service design and decision-making across Highland. It responds to evidence from engagement, desk research and partnership discussions, all of which point to the need for a flexible approach that can work across different places, themes and levels of decision-making. The model must be grounded in Highland's context, including rurality, remoteness, transport barriers, digital exclusion, hidden poverty, fuel poverty, housing pressures, stigma and uneven access to services.

The proposed approach places equal emphasis on participation quality and decision influence. It recognises that lived experience work will only be credible if people are supported to take part safely and accessibly, if trusted relationships are used, if feedback is timely and visible, and if decision-makers are accountable for explaining what changed, what did not change and why. This means the model should not be

measured only by engagement activity, but by whether lived experience is shaping policy, service design, commissioning, delivery, resource allocation and review. It should be supported by a Toolkit that helps partners decide whether lived experience input is needed and which tool is most appropriate. It should also support them to assure quality and define what success looks like, including purposeful participation, accessibility, trust, ethical practice, participant support, robust analysis, influence, accountability and learning. The Toolkit would help HCPP avoid tokenistic engagement and over-engineered structures.

Implementation will require clear governance and ways of working. Strategic governance should sit with HCPP or a clearly agreed HCPP-linked structure, while operational delivery may be led through a mix of coordination, local partners and trusted routes. A partnership commitment or charter would help set shared expectations, including valuing lived experience as expertise, involving people early enough to influence decisions, paying and supporting participants, protecting consent and wellbeing, avoiding duplication, and reporting back on action. A coordination role, quality assurance function and professional community of practice would help turn individual engagement activities into a coherent system. Resourcing is therefore central to feasibility. The blended approach to participation that supports partners to use different tools depending on needs would be the most comprehensive option if fully implemented, but it can be made practical through phasing.

Early implementation should focus on the minimum infrastructure needed to make participation credible: a clear governance route, a named coordination role, shared standards for payment, consent, safeguarding and feedback, and a small number of tested participation routes. Wider roll-out should only happen where there is evidence of reach, partner capacity, participant support, ethical safeguards, budget and influence on decisions.