



Article

Seeking to Have a Voice in Driving Change: Domestic Abuse Survivors' Reflections on Acting as 'Experts by Experience'

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Abstract

Collaborating with service users with lived experience of systems and processes, including the Criminal Justice System, can help tailor services, which in turn might increase accessibility, engagement, and satisfaction. Despite domestic abuse survivors often expressing a desire to be involved in developing and improving services, opportunities to do so have traditionally been limited, and their experiences of providing a 'victim voice' have not been extensively explored. The present paper outlines findings from interviews conducted with five survivors who took part in a range of collaborative engagement activities with criminal justice practitioners and other service providers (e.g., housing and social services) as 'experts by experience'. During the interviews they reflected on their experiences and considered opportunities for increased involvement of survivors in developing services and support provisions moving forward. Key themes from thematic analysis of the interview data included the importance of survivors' voices being heard, with their experience acknowledged and their contributions valued, as well as the need for effective facilitation and management of collaborative opportunities. More broadly, notable personal benefits were described by all participants, including feeling empowered by being given the opportunity to have a voice in driving change.

Keywords: domestic abuse; victim; survivor; lived experience; 'expert by experience'; collaboration; police; criminal justice system

1. Introduction

"We're survivors¹, and we just want to make the world a better, happier place. . . for survivors to be free, and to share what we've been through. . ."

-Quote from a domestic abuse survivor

With the value of incorporating lived experience in the design and delivery of services being increasingly recognized, so-called 'experts by experience' are gradually being involved in more collaborative activities (Dembele et al. 2024), including in the development of policy and practice (Stone et al. 2025). However, to date there has been little research exploring their experiences of being involved in such activities, or of the impacts and outcomes for them (Fiolet et al. 2025).

The present paper explores domestic abuse (DA) survivors' experiences of being involved in collaborative activities, and their reflections on acting as experts by experience; what it meant to them, what—from their perspective—the key outcomes and impacts were, as well as whether—and how—they would like to be involved in such activities moving



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forward. It considers some of the practicalities around how to effectively and meaningfully involve ‘experts by experience’ in partnership activities and collaborations, towards making recommendations for best practice in such endeavors.

2. Background

‘Nobody chooses to be a victim. Victims are not born but made through the actions of a person or a circumstance. Victims need understanding, support and empathy. Victims need empowerment. And equally importantly, victims need justice.’

-Natalie Queiroz—Victims Advocate
([West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner 2025](#))

2.1. Benefits and Risks of Collaborating with DA Survivors

There is considerable value in incorporating lived experience both in the design, development and implementation of research ([Dembele et al. 2024](#)), as well as in informing or improving service delivery ([Stone et al. 2025](#)). Over time, there has been a shift towards more collaborative, inclusive and democratic methods in health and social care services ([Lamb et al. 2025](#)), including through the active involvement of people with lived experience in service development ([Stone et al. 2025](#)). Whilst slower on the uptake, more recently similar approaches have been employed in considering issues in relation to policing and criminal justice (see, for example: [Abbott et al. 2024](#); [Murray et al. 2021](#); [Wydall et al. 2023](#)). Governments worldwide are increasingly engaging service users to reform public services and enhance public value, with survivors of gender-based violence—including DA—amongst those seeking to be heard by governments and gradually being engaged to improve policy outcomes ([Wheildon et al. 2023](#)).

[Barlow and Walklate \(2026\)](#) suggest that those with lived experience can offer an important window into understanding the full picture with regard to the nature and forms that DA can take, the impacts that it has, and barriers to accessing services, support and justice. This, they argue, is why giving space to their voices is important in considering how policing or criminal justice policies and practices might be developed or improved. [Abbott et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that the unique experience of those who have been through abuse offers unparalleled insights into systemic issues, and that by embracing this expertise we can collaboratively develop systems and processes that are more attuned to the distinct needs and realities of those experiencing DA. Lived experience voices and the authenticity of their insights are, as they discuss, instrumental in driving meaningful change ([Abbott et al. 2024](#)).

Many women who have experienced DA express a desire to be involved in developing and improving services ([Hague et al. 2003](#)), often because they want to ensure that no one else has to go through what they have experienced ([Wheildon et al. 2023](#)). DA survivors have argued for greater levels of involvement in the construction of knowledge that underpins policy and practice ([Dembele et al. 2024](#)), and many feel that they should be able to contribute to multi-agency forums and DA services as an automatic practice and right ([Hague et al. 2003](#)).

The value of listening to the voices of DA survivors and incorporating these meaningfully into policy and practice reform is now somewhat established. For example, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner’s Victims Strategy makes reference to the fact that when victim-survivors are heard, their experiences shape policy, funding, and service design, helping to remove barriers to reporting, engagement, and access. It also refers to the fact that drawing from lived experience in this manner challenges harmful stereotypes, whilst promoting dignity, respect, and fairness ([West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner 2025](#)).

Others have highlighted the fact that such involvement fosters positive outcomes for survivors themselves, more broadly in terms of transforming negative experiences into positive outcomes and advocating for both themselves and others like them (Macafee and Reeves 2024), but also with regard to their own personal and professional development (The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020). The few qualitative studies exploring survivors' experiences of participating in collaborative research or policy development report mainly positive experiences, leading to feelings of growth and positive reinforcement (Fiolet et al. 2025). Wheildon et al. (2023) refer to emerging evidence from the fields of health and social care which reveals significant benefits for lived experience participants in contributing to policy and practice developments, including improved feelings of hope, self-esteem, understanding and connection, as well as other health benefits. Collaborations can provide survivors with a safe space to disclose their abuse and speak honestly about their experiences (Dragiewicz et al. 2023), which has been suggested to be both therapeutic and empowering (The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020).

In their summary of findings from a large number of interviews conducted with victims of gender-based violence, Hester et al. (2025) found that many of those who had experienced abuse actively sought ways of creating positive outcomes and forms of 'justice' for themselves; this included engagement with social justice and other means of empowerment through activism. Jumarali et al. (2021) also refer to empowerment through the sharing of lived experience to achieve certain goals, suggesting that this is a core tenet of a trauma-informed approach, and McGeown et al. (2023) refer to collaboration—particularly with marginalized and less privileged communities—as a trauma-informed approach to empowerment which can provide crucial opportunities for building self-efficacy, confidence, skills and worth.

Whilst there may be benefits to survivors sharing their lived experiences to help inform and drive change, there can also be risks associated with them doing so; however, these are less established. Researchers have highlighted the risks associated with involving survivors in collaborative activities that are especially likely to manifest where power imbalances exist and supposedly inclusive processes may, in practice, exclude (Wheildon et al. 2023).

Macafee and Reeves (2024) discuss how collaboration in research, policy design, and service delivery is continuously challenged by power imbalances and a lack of understanding as to how to mitigate the sense of disempowerment some may feel in collaborative roles and spaces, noting that for many of those with lived experience their capacity to meaningfully contribute to change is often limited by them feeling unsafe and powerless in such settings (Macafee and Reeves 2024). Clayson et al. (2018) suggest that a key facilitator of effective collaboration is the reduction of traditional boundaries between 'professionals' and 'service users', to allow for a more equal exchange of knowledge. Warwick-Booth et al. (2022), too, note the importance of parity of expertise, and the recognition that all knowledge must be valued equally in collaborative endeavors (Warwick-Booth et al. 2022).

One way in which power imbalances arise is through the fact that whilst academics, researchers, practitioners and charity staff usually receive remuneration for their time and involvement in collaborative activities, as these are often undertaken as part of their professional roles, it is common that the contributions of individuals whose inputs are based on lived experience go unrewarded (The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020). One of the survivors—or 'experts by experience'—interviewed as part of the development of The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework (2020) said that being expected to give up their time for free to repeatedly revisit their trauma whilst everyone else in attendance was being paid felt almost like they were being exploited.

There are mixed views in the literature as to the importance of those with lived experience being provided with financial compensation for their contributions. Whilst

for some this may help them feel like their contributions are valued, fostering a sense of 'worth', many say that financial compensation is not a motivating factor (Lamb et al. 2025). In the consultation undertaken in developing [The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework](#) (2020), whilst some survivors said that they were happy to volunteer their time for one-off media engagements or advocacy, there was a general consensus that those contributing expertise based on their lived experience should be compensated for their time when they are engaged in consultation, advisory, project, research or advocacy work.

There are also questions as to what form any such remuneration should take, as what is suitable (e.g., cash vs. vouchers, regular salaried payments vs. one-off payments) might depend on individual circumstances, as well as the nature of the contributions made. Further, whilst payment may be made with good intentions in recognition of the value of contributions, it could also have negative impacts, for example, by jeopardizing benefit payments or other entitlements ([The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework](#) 2020).

More generally, [Perry and Mullins](#) (2023) question the traditional approach of what they refer to as £ 25 and a biscuit, often used in public or service-user engagement. They propose a shift away from mere tokenistic involvement, for example, where checkboxes are ticked, where practitioners and policymakers claim to have 'consulted' with service users or community representatives despite talking to them and not with them, and where those who volunteer lived experience are rewarded with basic refreshments or a voucher. Instead, they suggest that what is needed is a transformative paradigm, emphasizing the need for frameworks which genuinely prioritize and elevate engagement to a distinct and meaningful position ([Perry and Mullins](#) 2023).

Whilst power dynamics, resource limitations and questions regarding appropriate recompense—as well as other factors such as differing stakeholder priorities and certain logistical hurdles—can present challenges to collaborations, these are not insurmountable. If appropriate strategies for implementation are developed, based on the needs of those involved, with a focus on mutual respect and understanding and with open communication and regular feedback to facilitate alignment and consensus building, then this intricate web of challenges can be navigated to ensure that collaborations are inclusive, impactful, and effective ([Abbott et al.](#) 2024).

It is important that individuals with lived experience are able to engage safely and effectively when being involved in collaborative efforts ([Stone et al.](#) 2025). As such, [The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework](#) (2020) notes the importance of providing support for people with lived experience both during and after any engagement activities. However, what effective support in such contexts might look like remains to be determined.

2.2. Acting as 'Experts by Experience'

Meaningful collaborations place 'experts by experience' at the center of developing policies, practices, and services ([Morgan et al.](#) 2025), recognizing the importance of lived experience in co-creating knowledge to shape evidence-based practice ([Morris and Haider](#) 2022). [Abbott et al.](#) (2024) discuss how the empowerment derived from active participation in decision-making processes serves as a potent catalyst for change, underscoring the notion that collaboration is not merely a conceptual framework but instead a substantiated instrument for meaningful involvement of lived experiences in a manner distinct from other forms of tokenistic consideration of the 'victim voice', which might sometimes feel like tick-box exercises to DA survivors ([Abbott et al.](#) 2024). However, little is known about how it actually feels to act as an expert by experience, or the motivations and experiences of those who contribute to collaborative efforts on the basis of their lived experience. Concerns have also been raised regarding risks, and whether or how these might manifest in terms of re-traumatization ([Wheildon et al.](#) 2023).

In one of the few studies to explore survivors' experiences of being involved in a collaborative partnership, [Fiolet et al. \(2025\)](#) found that whilst having their voices heard was important for some, for most the stronger desire was to create meaningful change for others. Many felt reassured that their previous experiences of violence—though negative—were able to make a difference; this contributed to a sense of empowerment ([Fiolet et al. 2025](#)).

[Warwick-Booth et al. \(2022\)](#) report on findings from an evaluation of a co-production project implemented by Rape Crisis England and Wales (RCEW) with lived experience community representatives. Most of those involved described participation as empowering, and—in some instances—important in their own recovery.

It is not known whether there are any negative impacts of acting as an expert by experience; although it is likely that the nature and extent of different engagement outcomes—both positive and negative—will vary as much as the lived experiences of those undertaking such consultancy activities. It is therefore important that any potential negative outcomes are identified, and that the perspectives of those who have experience in collaborative activities are represented in the development of effective strategies and best-practice recommendations for the successful incorporation of lived experience into service design and delivery, policy and practice development and research.

2.3. Seeking to Have a Voice: The 'SEEKERS' Project

In 2023 we set up a collaborative partnership called 'SEEKERS' (Sharing Experience, Expertise and Knowledge for Effective Responses and Support), bringing together DA survivors, advocates, third sector parties and organizations, police/criminal justice professionals and academics/researchers ([Hammond et al. 2025](#)).

The aim of the partnership is to provide co-learning and development opportunities which incorporate and utilize different forms of lived experience, alongside specialist insights and expertise, with the aim of better understanding issues and challenges associated with the criminal justice processing of DA cases, and how best to support victims as they navigate this process. The primary goal of the partnership and the activities undertaken is to try to ensure equitable access to justice for all DA survivors.

SEEKERS has been developed in partnership with the charity Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS). WAITS is a Birmingham-based charity that has been working to empower women by giving them a voice for more than thirty years (<https://www.waitsaction.org/> (accessed on 10 October 2026)). Whilst their focus is on collaborating with and supporting women who are experiencing, or have experienced, DA, they support any woman in need, and specialize in supporting women from Black, Chinese, South Asian and minoritized backgrounds.

An important component of the SEEKERS project activities has been the creation of spaces in which DA survivors are able to share their experiences, discuss some of the issues and challenges with other stakeholders, and work as partners to help co-create recommendations to help resolve issues around current DA policies and practices. This has been in the form of co-hosted conferences (<https://www.bcu.ac.uk/news-events/news/domestic-abuse-survivors-want-more-support-to-access-justice-system> (accessed on 10 October 2026)), as well as through consultancy activities, including with police and criminal justice policymakers (<https://www.waitsaction.org/staff-trustees/seekers-board> (accessed on 10 October 2026)). Throughout, SEEKERS centers survivors as experts by experience.

The SEEKERS partnership has always very much focused on members of the group working together, as equals whose experience and expertise are acknowledged appropriately. All members of the partnership play a role in planning, developing and delivering associated work, including in organizing and running any events or sessions. Any DA

survivors involved with WAITS have been given the opportunity to be involved in the project, to whatever extent they want or feel comfortable with. Some have been involved in all the different activities, whilst some have taken part in particular elements of the SEEKERS work or in certain events. It is always made clear that the choice is theirs as to how and in what ways they want to be involved, including in terms of whether they speak at events or participate in any activities. If they prefer not to actively take part in a session or activity, they still have the option of being involved in developing the content or focus of the activity, or to have their ideas incorporated into the delivery of the session in whatever way(s) they would like, and they also have the chance to provide feedback on any thoughts, suggestions or recommendations afterward via established feedback channels, to ensure that they have full control over how and what they contribute.

All activities have been undertaken on a purely voluntary basis; this applies to all members of the partnership, including professionals and practitioners, as well as researchers/academics involved. The project has not received any formal funding, and so there have not been any payments made to contributors, including the DA survivors. However, where possible, we have provided vouchers as a notional token of our thanks for their help and support in running events.

Alongside the SEEKERS partnership activities, we have sought to provide opportunities to support the DA survivors involved in their personal and professional development as ‘experts by experience’. This includes holding dedicated preparation sessions in advance of activities, as well as post-activity debrief sessions. There have also been coaching, public-speaking and empowerment workshops that have been offered to the women as part of the SEEKERS project, and throughout they have received specialist support from WAITS.

2.4. The Present Study

The present paper explores findings from interviews undertaken with DA survivors who have been involved in the SEEKERS project about their experiences of taking part in collaborative activities as ‘experts by experience’.

Primary areas of focus were the impacts and outcomes for them, as well as how they felt about providing expert consultancy based on their experiences. In addition, practicalities around those with lived experience being involved in collaboration and partnership activities were discussed, along with ideas for how such activities might be developed going forward.

The following research questions are addressed:

1. What are DA survivors’ experiences—both positive and negative—of participating in collaborative activities?
2. How important is it to survivors that their lived experience is heard and taken into account in informing policy and practice developments in relation to DA?
3. How can we better support victim-survivors of DA in sharing their lived experience and providing expert guidance/consultancy in relation to the development of responses to DA?

The overall aim of the research is to understand how to better facilitate and support consultation and collaboration with experts by experience, to optimize the benefits—for them and for those they are working with—and to ensure that lived experience is used effectively in driving meaningful change.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

Semi-structured interviews were employed based on their suitability in exploring complex, personal, and potentially sensitive experiences. They allow participants to express

their views in their own words, while enabling the researcher to guide the conversation around key themes relevant to the research questions. The flexibility of this approach supports the emergence of rich, contextualized data and allows for responsiveness to individual participant perspectives and needs (Fylan 2005). This was considered particularly important in the present study, as we acknowledge that experiences and impacts for the women taking part in these activities are likely to have varied greatly. Whilst we wanted to capture data in relation to the research questions outlined, we also acknowledged that there would be an abundance of other information that the participants might provide which would generate rich insights into the importance and value of incorporating lived experience perspectives when developing criminal justice responses to DA.

In developing the interview guide, we referred to published research exploring the use of experts by experience and some of the issues noted by those who had previously undertaken collaborative or co-production work with both survivors of DA and those with lived experience in other areas. Questions were deliberately broad and open, to encourage participants to reflect and provide their own accounts of their experiences.

Areas of coverage in the interviews included the following: participants' own accounts and recollections of activities undertaken as part of the SEEKERS project; their views regarding the importance of people like themselves being involved in developing responses to DA; whether they felt they were 'experts' and should be treated as such; factors that had facilitated their undertaking consultancy activities, including support received; perceived barriers to acting in a consultancy capacity or engaging in collaborative partnership activities; and what they felt was 'best practice' in terms of people like themselves being involved in consultancy or collaborative activities.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

An invitation to participate in the study was distributed via WAITS to all DA survivors who had been involved in activities undertaken as part of the SEEKERS project. The invitation included contact details for the research team, and individuals were asked to get in touch with the team if they were interested in taking part in an interview. If they expressed an interest, they were then sent an information sheet, outlining the nature of the study and the aims, along with information regarding what would be required. They were also sent the interview schedule to enable them to make an informed decision as to whether to take part, and to allow them to prepare for the interview, including considering what information they might want to share. If they then indicated they would like to participate, they were asked to complete and return a consent form. Once the consent form was received, the interview was scheduled based on their availability. They were made aware that they could change or cancel the scheduled interview at any time, and that they did not have to take part if they changed their minds and no longer wanted to participate.

Of the nine DA survivors who were invited to take part in the study, two could not participate due to other commitments or a lack of availability, one chose not to take part, and one did not respond to the invitation. In total, five survivors took part in the interviews.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, conducted online through MS Teams. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team who had not been directly involved in any of the SEEKERS activities prior to the interviews taking place, to ensure that the women taking part in the interviews were not potentially influenced by existing contacts or relationships and to reduce the risk of potential bias.

Interviews were conducted online to enable the women to take part at a time and in a place that was convenient for them. The charity WAITS was able to provide facilities

(private spaces/interview rooms) and computers for the women to use to take part in the interviews if needed or if they preferred. The interviews lasted between 20 and 35 min, with a mean duration of 30.37 min.

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. Participants were told that they could have their cameras on or off during the interview; if they chose to keep their cameras on, then video was also recorded, and this was made clear to participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcriptions were fully anonymized. Recordings (including video recordings) were deleted once transcription was complete, with only anonymized transcriptions being retained and used for analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach recommended by [Braun and Clarke \(2019\)](#) was used to identify overarching themes reflected across the interviews, following the guidelines provided by [Byrne \(2022\)](#). In RTA, processes of coding and theme development are flexible and organic, often evolving throughout the analytical process ([Byrne 2022](#)). Given the nature of the data gathered here, this was viewed as the most appropriate analytical approach to take, particularly as there are insufficient grounds to pre-define potential themes for coding. In a reflexive approach, themes are not predefined in order to 'find' codes but rather are produced by organizing codes around a relative core commonality, or 'central organizing concept', that the researcher interprets from the data ([Braun and Clarke 2019](#)). As such, the research questions were addressed here within a paradigmatic framework of interpretivism and constructivism, using an inductive, open-coding approach similar to that employed by [Byrne \(2022\)](#), in order to best represent meaning as communicated by the participants.

The six-phase process outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) was employed iteratively; initially, the first author familiarized themselves with the data, re-reading each of the transcripts multiple times. They subsequently identified initial codes, developing accompanying descriptive labels, and considered aspects that might potentially represent developing themes. All data items which might be useful in addressing the research questions were represented within these. Codes were then reviewed with further re-readings of the transcripts, with this process being repeated until we were confident that they were representative of the diversity of positions held by the participants (c.f. [Byrne 2022](#)). Transcripts were then coded, and the coded data analyzed to group and combine codes according to shared meanings, collapsing multiple codes into single codes where they shared similar underlying concepts or features, so that initial themes and sub-themes were formed. These were then recursively reviewed in relation to the coded data items and entire dataset, with reference to [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) proposed questions that researchers should address when reviewing potential themes. A thematic map was then developed, and final themes were agreed, named and defined. Subsequently, deep analysis of the underlying data items was undertaken, and data items to be used as illustrative extracts for each theme were identified. The first and second authors then sought to interpret these extracts in relation to their constitutive themes, in order to create the analytic narratives presented subsequently in the findings section.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Participation was entirely voluntary, and this was made clear at all stages of the research. Participants were provided with detailed information about the nature of the study, including the interview schedule, prior to consenting to take part in the study. They were strongly advised not to take part in the study if they felt that they might be adversely affected by doing so. Only those who gave full informed consent were able to take part in

the interviews, with consent being obtained both through the use of a consent form prior to the scheduling of the interview, and then again verbally at the start of the interviews.

Participants could stop taking part at any time during the study if they chose to do so. This was made clear to them both in the information sheet and again at the start of the interviews. They were also informed that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not wish to answer, and they were encouraged to ask questions or seek clarification if anything was unclear.

Participants were encouraged to ensure that they were in a secure environment where they could not be overheard when they took part in the interview. As noted previously, the charity WAITS was able to provide quiet spaces/interview rooms for them to use if they wished.

No data or information was collected from participants that could be used to identify them or which might compromise their anonymity as part of the interviews. If they gave any details during an interview which might identify them or any other person, then this was redacted in the interview transcripts prior to analysis. Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym which was used post-interview to identify their data. Participants were told that they would need to provide this if they subsequently chose to withdraw from the study for their data to be removed.

A debrief was provided to all participants at the end of the interviews, which summarized the research aims, reiterated their rights and the procedure for withdrawal if they chose to request their data be removed from the study. It also provided contact details for any questions or to report any issues that had arisen over the course of their participation in the study, including procedures for making a complaint if they chose to do so.

Participants were given a specific date up to which they could request their data be withdrawn and were informed of how to withdraw both in participant-facing documents and at the end of the interview. No participants requested that their data be withdrawn.

Sources of support were signposted both on the information sheet and in the debrief, and participants were encouraged to seek support if needed. Support was also available to all participants via WAITS at any time if required, and they were advised to contact their allocated support worker directly if needed. Participants were asked to contact the research team if they would like to receive information about the findings of the research, with information on how to do so provided on the debrief.

4. Findings

An overview of themes identified is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of Themes and Definitions.

Theme 1: The Importance of Hearing Survivors' Voices Emphasis: Why it is important that survivors are involved in developing policy and practice. Sub-Theme 1.1: Lived experience as a basis for informing policy and practice This specifically reflected perceptions of the value of survivors' being included in collaborative activities for developing policy and practice in the area. Sub-Theme 1.2: Turning negative experiences into positive change This was distinct from Sub-Theme 1 as the focus here was on the value for them personally, as opposed to broader benefits.
Theme 2: Feeling Like the Experience of Survivors is Recognized and Valued Emphasis: Survivors' experience and expertise being recognized appropriately. Sub-Theme 2.1: Acknowledgment of experience In this sub-theme, the emphasis was on the need for recognition and respect of lived experiences and acknowledgment of the unique insights and contributions that survivors can provide. This was distinct from Sub-Theme 1.1, as here the emphasis was on others recognizing and respecting their expertise and experience, rather than on them themselves recognizing their value. Sub-Theme 2.2: Beyond tokenism and box-ticking... This sub-theme reflected the view that what was needed was meaningful collaboration; that beyond recognizing the expertise of survivors (Sub-Theme 2.1), appropriate recompense and opportunities for taking lead roles and being treated similarly to others (e.g., professional stakeholders) would ensure survivors could contribute to collaborative activities on an equal basis.

Table 1. Cont.

Theme 3: The Inclusion of Survivors' Voices in Collaborative Activities

Emphasis: Practicalities around creating and supporting opportunities for Survivors to be included in collaborative activities. This was distinct from other themes and sub-themes in that the focus here was on practical issues and consideration of what survivors needed in terms of access and support when engaging in such activities.

Theme 4: Being Empowered Through Having a Voice

Emphasis: Here, broader impacts and outcomes relating directly to empowerment of survivors were emphasized. This was distinct from Sub-Theme 2.1 in that direct reference was made to substantial change from feeling powerless to feeling empowered and recognition that they had power to inform and influence positive change.

4.1. Theme 1: The Importance of Hearing Survivors' Voices

The first theme reflected participants' views regarding the importance of survivors' voices being heard. A first sub-theme related to using lived experience as a basis for informing policy and practice developments, and the potential value of doing so. A second sub-theme related to turning negative experiences into positive change, in which broader perceived benefits of hearing survivors' voices as a means of helping others were discussed.

4.1.1. Sub-Theme 1: Lived Experience as a Basis for Informing Policy and Practice

Participants felt that it was very important that lived experience was used to inform developments in policy and practice, recognizing that people with lived experience had important insights that others, including professionals, might not have:

"I feel like it's really important to get the voice of those who have experienced it, because it gives more insights. . . you know—people understand, like: 'OK, this is exactly what we need to do', instead of just doing everything from the top. . . When you hear from, as they say, 'the horse's mouth', you would be able to understand what the problem actually is, and how to tackle it. . ." (SEEKER E)

"From my lived experience, I could explain to them. Show them. Tell them. Let them know what signs to look for. . . look for the signs and understand, investigate properly." (SEEKER A)

Participants also discussed how their experiences, for example, of the police and criminal justice system, could help tailor or improve responses:

"It's important for us as woman to voice our concerns about how the police are treating those that have experienced domestic violence. . . If they don't know, then it's up to us who've been through it, who can show them: 'well, this is what you've done. . . But if you do it this way, then things can improve'. If they don't know, how can they be better?" (SEEKER D)

Participants identified the potential value for police and other professionals of learning from those with lived experience as part of such collaborative activities:

"The police. . . they said they're learning from us more than they're learning from their work; because here there's life experience, and we're telling them straight this is [the] support we need and this is how it works. . ." (SEEKER C)

"Conferences like this. . . are very enlightening, because. . . I remember there were a few professionals who were there who were hearing the lived experiences people like myself, and they were. . . they were shocked. They were like: 'oh, we didn't know it was this bad. . . that things were this bad'. So enlightening the professionals. . . giving them constant workshops and giving them constant training. . . really helps, shedding more light on what's going on with people and how to help them" (SEEKER E)

Participants talked about opportunities that there may be for further collaborative work, and contributions that they or others like them might make in more directly informing policy or practice developments, including training or CPD opportunities. They noted that many professionals or practitioners working with victims of DA do not necessarily have the experience or skills to respond effectively to DA in all its nuanced forms, and that lived experience offered a means of addressing these issues:

“If they could change the training. . . where they know exactly what it feels like. Because they actually don’t know. . . You can phone the police and then they come to you and they’re more concerned for the person who’s done the violence than approaching the victim. . . When I went through my domestic violence and I called them, they were more concerned with the perpetrator than asking me how am I feeling, how am I doing. . . I think every single police person needs to go for training. . . needs to be put on training courses to find out what domestic violence is and what the victims suffer, so that [they get an] understanding of what the victims go through. . . so they can show empathy. Once the training is implemented then they will know better, and do better.” (SEEKER D)

Across the board, those interviewed felt that lived experience was integral in terms of improving policy and practice in relation to DA and tackling broader system issues. Many of the survivors who had taken part in the events and activities said that they would welcome the chance to continue to contribute to collaborative activities in driving meaningful change:

“So much more needs to be done. . . so much more needs to be heard. [We need to] Get our voices in the public eye, in Parliament, in government. . . Make changes, make laws that are going to benefit every single person who is going through domestic violence. . . because it’s sad to know that a lot of people go through domestic violence. . . [and] they end up dying. And that’s when they want to do something about it. Now we want to prevent it, before it gets to that point.” (SEEKER D)

4.1.2. Sub-Theme 2: Turning Negative Experiences into Positive Change

Several of the participants spoke about what they perceived to be the benefits of undertaking consultancy as lived experience experts in terms of turning negative experiences into positive outcomes, such as helping inform development and change for the benefit of others:

“I saw the amount of impact [it had]. . . how much you want to hear from us, and how interested they were in using our story. . . to make society better.” (SEEKER E)

Feeling heard, and feeling believed, was seen as particularly important, as many of them reflected on the fact that previously they hadn’t felt like they had been heard or taken seriously:

“I think the biggest issue. . . for people who are victims of domestic abuse. . . is finding someone who actually believes your story. . . who actually feels motivated enough to help you.” (SEEKER E)

“If I could get the opportunity to speak with other people and share my lived experience. . . I’d do it just for somebody to understand.” (SEEKER A)

For several participants, what was also important to them was providing a voice for others who were perhaps not being heard:

“It’s really important for people with lived experiences to share their voice. . . because no matter how little it is, it makes a big difference for yourself and for other people as well.” (SEEKER E)

“Everybody deserves to be listened to. Some people are strong, and some people are weak. . . it’s for those ones that are strong to help those ones that are weak to find a voice in themselves and to speak out. SEEKERS. . . is a voice; for all of us.”(SEEKER D)

Participants also spoke of how they felt that by speaking out they might also directly help others, including through them acting as positive role models:

“I’ve survived. I’ve been in a place where I thought I wasn’t going to survive, but I’ve survived, and I’ve come a long way and have so much confidence. . . I can help others know that you’re not alone. There are people out there who will help. There are people out there who will listen to what you are saying. . . that you are valuable and that you will make it. So don’t give up.” (SEEKER D)

4.2. Theme 2: Feeling Like the Experience of Survivors Is Recognized and Valued

The second theme related to the experience of survivors being recognized and valued, for example, in developing services, or in informing policy or practice. A first sub-theme related to feeling like their experience and expertise were acknowledged appropriately. A second sub-theme focused on them being given opportunities for meaningful involvement, moving beyond tokenism or feeling like they were being used as part of a box-ticking exercise.

4.2.1. Sub-Theme 1: Acknowledgment of Experience

Whilst it was very important to those interviewed that their experience was acknowledged, and that what they had been through provided them with valuable insights and credible opinion to share, a number of the participants reflected on not wanting to be seen or labeled as a ‘victim’. For example, SEEKER A shared, “The system and everything else. . . it makes us. . . it victimizes us, I feel.”

Reflecting on how they viewed themselves, many indicated that they preferred the term ‘survivor’ to be used in describing people who have been through DA, as they feel that it is more representative of their status.

More broadly, there was a strong belief that everybody, no matter what their background, job role or experience, deserved to be treated fairly, and as equals:

“At the end of the day, we’re all human beings, and we all deserve to be treated fairly. There’s no one better than no one. We’re all equal. Whether you’re whether you’re in a low paid, a high paid job, whether you’re not working, we’re equal. We’re human. . . and we all have a voice, and we should be treated respectfully, regardless of our background, regardless of our careers, regardless of our race.” (SEEKER D)

When asked how important it was to them that their voice, perspective, and opinions were respected, they all suggested that it was very important. Similarly, they responded that it was very important to them that they felt like they were treated as equals and with respect when being involved in any collaborative activities:

“We’re working together, so everyone deserves equal respect.” (SEEKER E)

“The SEEKERS. . . we know how to listen to each other, and we value each other’s opinions. It’s very important to value others’ opinions, and listen to others, and be respectful.” (SEEKER D)

Whilst participants felt it was important for their experience to be acknowledged, and the value of their contributing to discussions around how best to respond to DA recognized, they did not necessarily feel that they wanted to be seen as ‘experts’. Some discussed how the concept of an expert is quite vague, and not necessarily representative:

“I don’t think anyone should be called an ‘expert’, because... for example, the professionals who are in that position to actually make a change... during the conference, they learned new things. They said: ‘oh, these are the things we never knew before!’” (SEEKER E)

4.2.2. Sub-Theme 2: Beyond Tokenism and Box-Ticking...

There was a general consensus amongst participants that they did not want to feel like they were being ‘wheeled out’ as part of a box-ticking exercise, or that their involvement was tokenistic. For them, it was important that if they were contributing to such activities, that these contributions had an impact:

“If I lend my voice for a particular purpose, I expect that it’s used positively for that purpose.” (SEEKER E)

“The one major thing that I learned was that my voice mattered.” (SEEKER E)

A common element of the discussions was that the women wanted to know what was happening on the basis of the discussions and activities that had taken place, and many of them emphasized the importance of being kept informed about developments:

“I would like to know what my contribution is doing.” (SEEKER A)

“It would be nice to know, like... what I’ve said—what was the outcome [was] of what everyone said... it would be good to have feedback. Feedback is important, because with feedback... you can see: they listened to that, and they listened to that...” (SEEKER D)

Some felt that being kept informed regarding impacts that their involvement had might motivate them to continue to be involved in such activities in the future:

“It would... motivate me to do more and also feel comfortable knowing that my voice is making a change.” (SEEKER E)

Related to recognition of their contributions and the value of their involvement or use of their ‘expertise’; whilst many of those contributing their time and experiences as part of the SEEKERS activities said that they would do so whether or not they received payment, some survivors indicated that it would be helpful and appreciated if they were to receive some form of recompense:

“I think it’s rewarding that if you’re able, just to help somebody... [But] If you’re paid it’d be good—It’s a bonus.” (SEEKER B)

“I would do it absolutely for free, because I knew that it’s making a change... but then if I’m paid, I also wouldn’t mind!” (SEEKER E)

“I think it’s important... because not everyone is working, and with the cost of living... you know. It’s a nice way of saying ‘thank you!’” (SEEKER D)

Some noted that they might be likely to incur costs as a result of attending events or being involved in different project activities, and suggested that it was important that this was taken into account:

“Sometimes you want to go somewhere and, you know, lend your voice or do something that would make a change. But then in reality, you can’t. You can’t afford it”. (SEEKER E)

Whilst none of the participants directly said that they felt they deserved to be paid for their contributions, there was recognition that it may be appropriate for them to receive recompense for their time and contributions:

“We are. . . struggling. . . because it’s very difficult, because on benefits you look after your child, you have to pay for your transport, you have to pay service charges even for the refugee and that’s going up. I think if we’re getting paid for the hours that would be very, very. . . help[ful] for everybody.” (SEEKER C)

We have—where it has been feasible to do so—given the SEEKERS vouchers as a ‘thank you’ for their involvement in the different activities undertaken as part of the project. They noted that this had been appreciated, mostly in terms of the recognition and them feeling valued, rather than it being about payment for their contributions:

“We come to the conference and I think. . . they’ve put on all these things for us, but [are] also showing appreciation and saying, you know—‘thank you for coming’, and you know the bus fare is given or a voucher. . . it’s like—it makes you feel more appreciated. Even though you do feel appreciated. But it’s really good. . .” (SEEKER D)

It was noted that direct payments for any contributions may not always be appropriate, as this could potentially jeopardize eligibility for benefits or other welfare payments, including access to refuge/temporary accommodation:

“We can’t earn money. . . we can’t work [when we’re] on benefits. So that’s the biggest barrier. . . if you’re living in a refuge, you can’t work—if you’re on benefits. I think it would be helpful if we get vouchers.” (SEEKER C)

4.3. Theme 3: The Inclusion of Survivors’ Voices in Collaborative Activities

The third theme identified related to factors that might facilitate the inclusion of survivors’ voices in collaborative activities; in particular, how survivors felt their voices needed to be included, and how they could be supported to take part in those activities.

Participants spoke of the importance of creating opportunities and spaces where people with different experiences and expertise can come together to work together to develop solutions and drive positive change:

“I think. . . it’s so valuable to have [the] organizations coming together and working together.” (SEEKER B)

“We can work together as a team to find a solution—not just for ourselves, but for other people.” (SEEKER E)

They noted the broader benefits for everyone involved in working collaboratively, including in terms of learning and in developing personally and professionally:

“Everyone learns when we work together. The lived experience people and the professionals working together and sharing information. . . learning and evolving every time.” (SEEKER E)

Several important areas for consideration when developing and facilitating opportunities for collaboration were discussed. This included thinking about who was involved and what they might contribute.

Some referred to the value of having different stakeholder groups involved, and how they each contributed in different ways. Others discussed how many of the issues are inextricably interlinked, emphasizing why it was important to have broader representation amongst participants, rather than a narrow or specialized focus:

“I think all the problems, all of everything. . . all of them are connected. A housing problem, let’s say. . . a police situation can lead to a housing problem, a benefit situation can also connect back to a housing problem. So it all it all, it’s all connected. . .” (SEEKER E)

If you're . . . solely focused on, say, housing, and you solve the housing issue, there would be a benefit issue somewhere waiting to pull you back into that housing issue that you just solved. But when everyone is working together, we are able to solve everything together." (SEEKER E)

Participants also spoke about what had helped support them in contributing to collaborative activities on the basis of their lived experience, and what they thought might help others to do the same. As part of the SEEKERS project, survivors were offered a number of opportunities to undertake additional training or support, for example, coaching workshops to help build confidence. Several of the participants said that these had been very helpful in preparing them for undertaking collaborative activities with other stakeholder groups (for example, in speaking at the conference):

"We have workshops. . . for confidence building and, you know, we also have, like, options to get trained for public speaking. We have people come into WAITS to give us, like, confidence building workshops—public speaking trainers. . . to be able to, you know, talk about our live experiences as victims of domestic abuse. . ." (SEEKER E)

"Coming from someone who never does public speaking or even want to talk to anybody about anything at all. . . the support that I got. . . was very, very helpful. It helps you get over whatever that you've gone through, at least a little bit, and, you know. . . feel comfortable to take up new challenges and come out of your comfort zone. So that support is really, really important." (SEEKER D)

4.4. Theme 4: Being Empowered Through Having a Voice

The final theme identified encapsulated broader personal benefits for the survivors of being involved in the SEEKERS project and associated collaborative activities. All the survivors found the experience of being involved in such activities personally rewarding, with many highlighting positive impacts for them merely from being involved and taking part:

"Being part of the SEEKERS board. . . it's so rewarding. I feel like I've got somewhere—I'm actually doing something that is rewarding. . . that I can share my experiences with others as well." (SEEKER D)

"It really made a positive impact for me, because I've not really [been] the type for public speaking before. I tend to avoid public speaking. . . the conference, it was my first time ever doing anything as big as that. It helped my confidence. I felt more comfortable talking because I felt the encouragement both from the audience and [the team from] WAITS in general, and the SEEKERS as well. Everyone was very encouraging, so it gave me the confidence. . ." (SEEKER E)

"I've grown a lot. . .so much. I'm not afraid to speak what's on my mind. And to encourage the other ladies as well, which I'm quite good at. . ." (SEEKER D)

A number talked about how their involvement had helped build their confidence, for example, through giving them insights that could facilitate their own development in a variety of ways:

"We're building our confidence, and we're learning more. I'm learning when we're doing the conference. I'm getting to know how the system is. . ." (SEEKER C)

"When you're going on a conference or when you're working with professionals, other professionals. . . working with the team [SEEKERS] gives you really good professional insights on how it's going to be, what to expect. . . what to do, and how to prepare yourself." (SEEKER E)

Perhaps most importantly, for some the experience was described as cathartic, and they referred to it as helping them with the process of recovering from the abuse that they had experienced:

“SEEKERS... you can see as a healing process as well, because that way that way you’re speaking with other members of the SEEKERS board who have experienced domestic violence and... it’s like you’re not alone. You have other people supporting you, you’re supporting each other. You’re listening to that person’s story and then you can share your story with them if you desire to do so. So it’s important to speak... because when you speak, you’re releasing whatever’s inside of you. You’re releasing that pain, that hurt, and that person is listening, and you can console each other. You can comfort each other. So it’s so important to speak out, not to buckle up things in, because if you buckle up things in, you can tend to explode. It’s better to release and speak out. It’s important.” (SEEKER D)

Others talked about feeling stronger, and said that they had regained a voice or felt empowered as a result of being involved in the project:

“I feel like helping other people makes me stronger.” (SEEKER A)

“Forming the SEEKERS, giving us our voice or helping us get our voice back... it’s really, really good...” (SEEKER E)

“My journey with SEEKERS... It’s been amazing! So rewarding...” (SEEKER C)

“Just to be a part of this is amazing.” (SEEKER B)

Ultimately, they wanted for the work that we have been doing to continue, and to expand, to create more opportunities and to benefit others in the future:

“To go out there and let people know what we are doing... you know: to just share our experiences to help those that don’t have a voice have a voice... The SEEKERS—we do have a voice, and it’s so important that—you know—this group will develop and will be successful, and hopefully it will reach the whole world...” (SEEKER C)

“I’m just hoping that, you know, with the SEEKERS... that it’ll go globally, so others who’ve been in... experienced violence have opportunity to have SEEKERS where they live in their country and do what we do. So it’s in every nation, everywhere. Global. That will be phenomenal.” (SEEKER D)

5. Discussion

“Any time that I’m called upon to say something that would help victims of domestic abuse, I would... I would do it without thinking twice. Because now I know that my voice matters and it actually makes a change...”

-Quote from a DA Survivor

The findings from the present study add to the limited but emerging international evidence recognizing the value of using lived experience knowledge to improve outcomes (c.f. [Fiolet et al. 2025](#)); not just in the broader sense of ensuring that services are designed and delivered in a manner that best meets the needs of service users, or in terms of developing effective policies and practices, but also for those involved, in terms of the positive developmental opportunities it offers. All the DA survivors interviewed here reported positive experiences.

Interestingly, some of the potential issues surrounding DA survivors being involved in collaborative partnerships that have been noted elsewhere (e.g., [Wheildon et al. 2023](#))

were not discussed by the participants here. This is not to say that such issues did not arise; more direct questioning regarding such issues might have generated additional discussion in this respect. It could, though, be that some of the factors which have traditionally been used as a basis for not undertaking collaborative activities with survivors do not actually present the kinds of barriers they have been presumed to. We would suggest that one of the key findings here is that there are no substantial issues with survivors being involved in collaborative partnerships, provided they are willing to be.

The findings emphasize the importance of a collaborative, inclusive, and ethical approach to the design of activities, following processes that are cognizant of the needs and realities of those participating, as O'Brien Green and Morton (2021) discuss. Participants spoke of the importance of being seen and treated like equals, and of safe spaces in which they felt that they could speak openly, and where their opinions were valued and respected.

If the needs of those sharing their lived experience for collaborative efforts can be met, then potential risks—such as those identified previously—might be managed or mitigated appropriately; if not, then rather than improving services, there is the risk that poorly planned and implemented collaborations or partnership activities may engender public dis/value (Wheildon et al. 2023).

The importance of ensuring that the collaboration process remains inclusive, efficacious and transformative has been emphasized by many, including Perry and Mullins (2023), Abbott et al. (2024), and Fiolet et al. (2025), amongst others. To do this, several suggestions for best practice are summarized below. These are based on both the findings presented above, as well as findings from previous research.

5.1. Recommendations for Best Practice in Collaborating with 'Experts by Experience'

1. Any collaborative activities should represent a collective endeavor (Abbott et al. 2024), with equality of opportunity for all involved with regard to designing and implementing the activities. This is how we move beyond 'tokenistic' engagement methods to meaningful inclusion (The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020).
2. Following from the above, it is important that those seeking to implement collaborative initiatives recognize the importance of conducting work or research with people, not on people (The Women Advisory Board in collaboration with Vamstad et al. 2025). Participation should be a 'transformative', rather than merely 'informative' process (Perry and Mullins 2023).
3. Recognition and respect of the experience and expertise that people bring to the table is key, with different forms of knowledge valued equally and by all.
4. Relatedly, Wheildon et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of role clarity in any collaborative activity. This was also discussed by the women interviewed in the present study. They eschewed terms like 'victim', which was somewhat expected based on previous research, but also terms such as 'expert', as they felt that, as a term, this was ill-defined and misrepresentative. It is suggested that at the onset of any collaborative activities a clearly defined set of terms of reference be developed, which includes categorization of participants based on different forms of experiential insight and expertise. As part of this process, all participants should receive information about what is expected of them throughout the process (see, for example, Dembele et al. 2024), as well as how to raise any issues or report any concerns with regard to conduct or delivery of the activities.
5. As Dembele et al. (2024) note, it is important to build trust and confidence through effective development and nurturing of partnership activities. As part of this, having clear, co-developed terms of engagement and regulations is important, particularly for ensuring the safety of participants in the physical and psychosocial spaces where

- activities are conducted. Working spaces, both physical and online, need to be safe and welcoming. Creating safety takes time and ongoing attention, but as [Dembele et al. \(2024\)](#) discuss, this is imperative to ensure that people feel included, safe to express themselves without fear of judgment, and have real opportunities to contribute.
6. Relatedly, [Dembele et al. \(2024\)](#) also discuss the need for engagement structures that are flexible and where different levels of involvement can be accommodated. They note the demanding nature of involvement for some, including both physical and emotional efforts and investment. [The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework \(2020\)](#) also makes reference to the importance of flexibility in roles and forms of engagement in enabling meaningful participation. This includes the need for ongoing negotiation of how people with lived experience can contribute over time ([The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020](#)). For some lived experience collaborators ongoing and consistent engagement is sought, including more formal or longer-term opportunities. For others, more periodic participation may be preferred, especially if juggling other jobs, providing care for loved ones, or caring for themselves ([Dembele et al. 2024](#)).
 7. In terms of reimbursement and recompense, any costs incurred as a result of participants contributing to collaborative or consultancy activities should be covered as a minimum. An honorarium or appropriate recompense should be provided to those contributing to collaborative efforts as experts by experience where feasible, as this serves as a signal that the value of lived experience is considered equal rather than an ancillary component ([The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020](#)). This should be agreed in advance, in discussion with those involved, to ensure that it is appropriate, and that the amount provided and manner of payment are suitable given the individual's personal circumstances. Terms of payment should, again, be agreed upfront, and any requirements for payment to be made need to be clear and transparent.
 8. Being kept informed of outcomes or impacts was very important to the survivors interviewed here, and this accords with what has been found by others. Evidence suggests that a desire to make a difference is a key driver for why people with lived experience decide to engage in collaborations or consultancy activities ([The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020](#)). It is therefore important that participants are given regular and timely information about how their feedback has led to change. In their review of the incorporation of the voice of the victim in policing policy and practice developments, [Allnock et al. \(2023\)](#) noted that whilst many participants recognized the importance of a feedback loop to inform victim-survivors of any actions taken, this was often lacking in practice. They gave several suggestions as to ways in which actions might be communicated, for example, by emailing electronic leaflets to respondents highlighting any changes made or creating a network where two-way interactions between victim-survivors and police could take place ([Allnock et al. 2023](#)). They also note that sometimes feedback cannot be actioned, as suggestions for change may not be appropriate or achievable, or limitations in wider police resources may mean that some recommendations for practice reform are unrealistic. However, even if this is the case, there should be transparency around the reasons for which any advised changes or recommendations are not implemented. Further, it is important that expectations around potential policy or practice reform are managed appropriately during all stages of the consultancy process ([Allnock et al. 2023](#)).
 9. The chance for ongoing or future involvement is often important for those contributing to collaborative activities (in any capacity). All the participants here expressed a desire to continue to be involved as partners in the SEEKERS project. Planning for future

- development should be implemented in any collaborative endeavors, with consideration given as to how to ensure ongoing contribution and legacy for involved partners.
10. Several teams who have undertaken collaborative or co-production efforts have noted the importance of training and support for those involved (e.g., [The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework 2020](#); [The Women Advisory Board in collaboration with Vamstad et al. 2025](#)). [Dembele et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize the importance of formal structures for orientation, training, and support for building participants' skills and confidence, enabling them to express their views and influence decision-making, this being central to meaningful participation. They suggest that ongoing evaluation of training needs and tailored support should be integral to all collaboration arrangements ([Dembele et al. 2024](#)). [Fiolet et al. \(2025\)](#) suggest that future research should seek to determine the knowledge and skills lived experience researchers would like to acquire for them to feel adequately prepared to engage in opportunities for collaboration.
 11. [Wheildon et al. \(2023\)](#) also highlight the importance of training those who work with community representatives as part of consultancy or co-production efforts, to ensure that they understand the benefits of sharing power and accepting lived expertise. It is suggested that CPD opportunities be provided for practitioners working with experts by experience, including DA survivors, to enable them to work effectively with these partners in any collaborative arrangements.
 12. Finally, following the suggestions of [Allnock et al. \(2023\)](#), it is recommended that there is a shift from focusing solely on how those with lived experience can benefit services or policy and practice development, to considering how such practices can benefit those with lived experience. A focus should be on training and professional activities to facilitate their development and maximize personal gain from their involvement. This might include helping them to recognize the skills, experience and expertise that they have acquired to help them develop their CVs or showcase these skills in applications or interviews, or providing testimonials for them to keep as evidence of the significant contributions that they have made.

5.2. Looking to the Future...

Moving forward, to increase the uptake of collaborative efforts in the development of criminal justice policies and practices, it is imperative that research seeks to further evidence the importance and value of including experts by experience in reforming services to ensure that they are more accessible and inclusive, and that they better meet the needs of those who use them ([Hammond et al. 2025](#)).

As [Allnock et al. \(2023\)](#) discuss, data and evidence to show the impacts of survivors' voices on policing or criminal justice practices are not routinely collected, nor are they easy to collate. Formal or independent measures of impact are, for various reasons, difficult to establish or hard to implement. Thus, establishing that recommendations and associated actions have had a positive outcome or impact is hard... but this does not mean that we should not seek to further exemplify how and in what ways those who share their lived experience as part of collaborative or consultancy activities are helping to drive change. The findings presented here emphasize how important this is to those who give their time and invest personally in seeking to improve systems, advocating for others who are going through what they have gone through, and giving a voice to many who otherwise might go unheard.

Future research might also consider both institutional and individual readiness to work effectively with those with lived experience; this would help in understanding the system changes which might be required to support increased use of collaborations going forward ([Dembele et al. 2024](#)). As [Allnock et al. \(2023\)](#) discuss, there is growing recognition

that a proactive approach to including survivors' voices in service development is far more effective than working reactively; this needs to be emphasized to those involved in service development and delivery. In addition, appropriate governance structures are needed to support lived experience inclusion practices and protect them from change and flux within services (Allnock et al. 2023).

6. Conclusions

Collaborating with those with lived experience of criminal justice systems and processes is a cornerstone in empowering survivors and fostering positive change within the criminal justice landscape (Abbott et al. 2024).

The voices of experts by experience can provide the foundations for driving meaningful and lasting change in relation to systems, policies, and practices, so long as they are given the opportunity to speak and to be heard, and their expertise is appropriately recognized.

It is our hope that what we have achieved here is the amplification of the voices of DA survivors, and to emphasize what—for them—is important in terms of effective collaboration and co-production in this arena.

“My experience is a part of... helping to make the system better. My experience, and the help of professionals who are in that position to actually do something, would actually change the system...”

-Quote from a DA Survivor

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CJS	Criminal Justice System
DA	Domestic Abuse
WAITS	Women Acting in Today's Society

Note

- ¹ The terms ‘victim’ and survivor’ are both used in this paper, and to an extent are used inter-changeably. ‘Victim’ is a term commonly used throughout the criminal justice system; however, we recognize that many of those who have lived experience of domestic abuse prefer the term ‘survivor’. Both terms are useful in different contexts; however, we respect the fact that they have different meanings for different people, and that some may not be comfortable or happy with the use of either (or both) of them. It is not our intention to cause any offence by way of our use of terminology, and we would like to extend our apologies to anyone who is uncomfortable or unhappy with any of the terms used here.

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