LX Lens

The Lived and Living Experience and Expertise Lens

The LX Lens Essentials

A practical guide to stronger projects involving lived and living experience and expertise.

For LX staff, project workers, managers, commissioners and allies who want lived and living experience work to be meaningful, supported and useful.

CLEAR PURPOSE

HONEST INFLUENCE

SUPPORTED PARTICIPATION

SHARED MEANING-MAKING

ACCOUNTABLE FOLLOW-THROUGH

Purpose

The LX Lens exists to help lived and living experience and expertise (LX) become more meaningful, supported and influential in the projects that shape people's lives.

How to use this document

The LX Lens Essentials is designed to help you:

- explain why LX matters
- introduce potentially useful language for LX
- think about participation, power and influence
- notice where a project may need more clarity, support or follow-through
- decide your next steps

You can use it:

- before starting a project
- when reviewing a project that already involves LX
- when explaining the value of LX in your project to managers, commissioners or partners

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This document is for education, reflection and project guidance only. Full disclaimer and selected sources are included at the end.

Opening note

Good intentions matter.

But effective projects involving lived and living experience and expertise need more than goodwill.

They need a clear purpose.
They need honest influence.
They need supported participation.
They need shared meaning-making.
They need accountable follow-through.

This paper is for people trying to make LX work more meaningful, supported and useful: project workers, managers, leaders and allies who need a clearer rationale and practical starting point.

It draws particularly on mental health, alcohol and other drugs, suicide prevention, co-design, evaluation and public service reform, with practical roots in Australia and Aotearoa | New Zealand.

The ideas are offered as adaptable guidance for any project where people affected by an issue should meaningfully shape what is learned, designed, decided or changed.

This paper will help you understand:

- what LX means, why it matters and where it adds value
- how to think about participation, power and influence
- where to start if you want to strengthen your own project

The aim is simple:

> To help good intentions become clearer, safer, more meaningful, and more useful in practice.

What is LX?

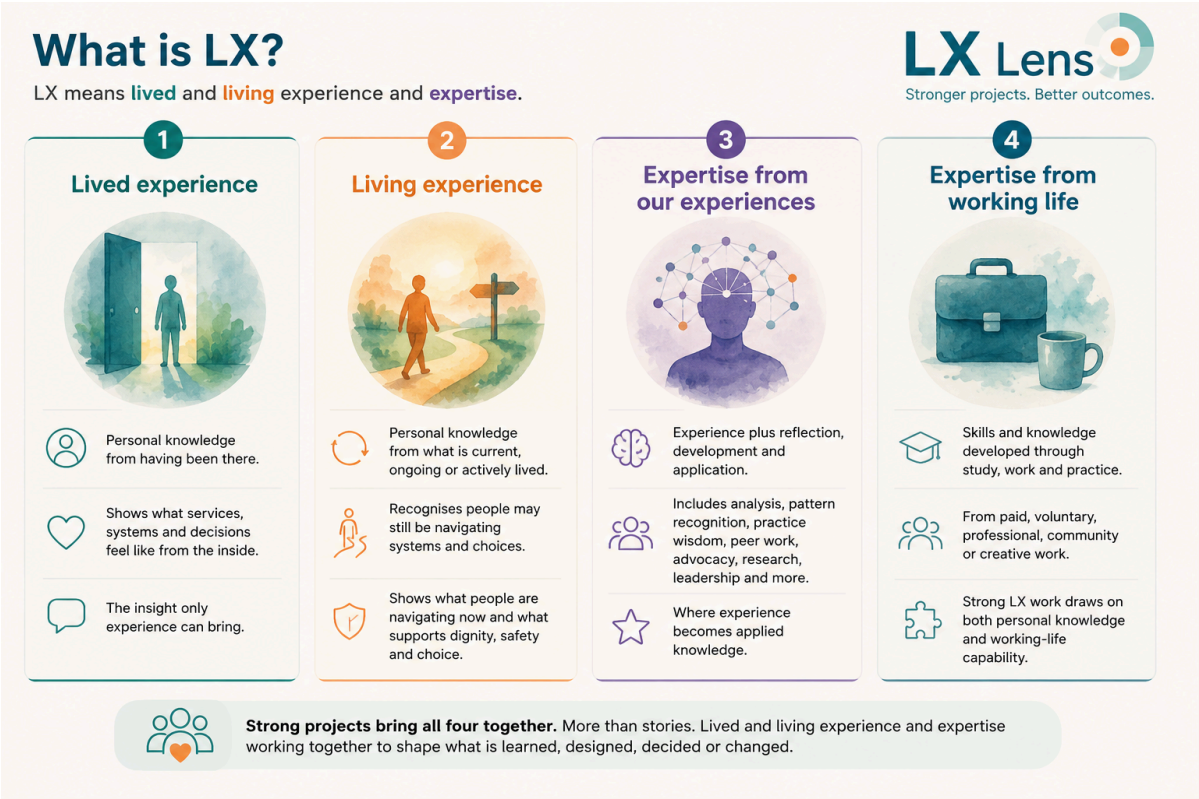
In this paper, LX means **lived and living experience and expertise**.

The phrase is deliberately broad. Projects often involve people in different ways, at different stages, and with different kinds of knowledge.

Some people bring direct personal experience. Some bring current or ongoing living experience. Some bring expertise developed through reflection, peer work, advocacy, research, leadership, community work or professional practice.

The LX Lens brings these together because effective projects need more than stories. They need lived and living experience and expertise to meaningfully shape the work.

The Four Aspects - Lived | Living | Experience | Expertise



Why LX matters

The case for LX is practical, ethical and increasingly expected.

Lived and living experience and expertise matter because projects are stronger when they are shaped by the people most affected by what is being learned, designed, delivered or changed.

This is especially important in mental health, alcohol and other drugs, suicide prevention, housing, justice, disability, health and public service reform, where services and systems often make decisions that directly affect people's safety, dignity, rights, relationships and daily lives.

The case for LX can be made in three simple ways:

1. We have to, because
   Law, policy, standards, commissioning requirements and public service expectations increasingly require meaningful involvement.

2. It works, because
   Projects are often clearer, more relevant, more trusted and better able to identify risks when people with LX help shape them.

3. It feels right, because
   People should have meaningful influence over the services, systems and decisions that affect their lives.

These three reasons overlap. LX is not just a compliance requirement, a design method or an ethical position.

At its best, it is all three.

We have to

In many public service settings, involving people with lived and living experience is no longer optional. Health, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, suicide prevention, disability, justice, housing and social service systems are increasingly expected to involve people, families, carers, communities and service users in planning, design, delivery, evaluation and reform.

In Aotearoa | New Zealand, Te Tāhū Hauora's *Code of expectations* sets expectations for how health entities work with consumers, whānau and communities in the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of health services.

In England, NHS statutory guidance on working in partnership with people and communities supports public involvement and describes genuine co-production as people with lived experience working as equal partners alongside health and care professionals to agree issues and develop solutions.

In Australia, national lived experience workforce guidance recognises lived experience workforces as a formal part of mental health system development, with attention to roles, values, professional principles, implementation and support.

Internationally, WHO Europe's 2025 roadmap on transforming mental health through lived experience offers a structured framework for integrating lived/living experience expertise into mental health systems and workforce.

So the question is increasingly not whether LX should be involved.

The better question is: **how do we make involvement meaningful, supported and useful rather than tokenistic, vague or extractive?**

It works

Projects are often clearer, more relevant, more trusted and better able to identify risks when people with LX help shape them.

People with LX may help a project:

- understand what things feel like in real life
- identify barriers, risks or unintended consequences earlier
- design services, products, policies or resources that are more usable
- build trust and legitimacy with communities
- interpret findings more accurately
- challenge assumptions and professional blind spots
- strengthen implementation because the work better fits people's lives, needs and contexts

This is not just a values claim. It is also a design and quality claim.

A 2023 systematic review by Veldmeijer et al. of mental health care innovation found that involving service users and people with lived experience through design approaches can add value, while also arguing that future work needs to involve people as partners and decision-makers and report collaboration more clearly.

This matters because a project can collect input from people and still fail to use it well.

Gathering views is not the same as sharing influence.

The co-production guide by Roper et al (2018) states that co-production can involve people in defining the problem, designing and delivering solutions, and evaluating outcomes. It also argues that co-production raises the bar from seeking involvement after an agenda has already been set, toward consumer leadership from the outset.

From my own 25+ years of experience, meaningful LX involvement is strengthened by early involvement, access to materials in draft form, regular team participation, genuine invitations to contribute, opportunities to shape data collection and analysis, and clear explanations of how input was used or why it was not used.

The same logic runs through the LX Lens: effective LX work is not a decorative extra. It can improve the quality, relevance and usefulness of what projects produce.

But this only happens when LX is designed into the work properly.

Good intentions do not automatically create good involvement. Without clarity, support and accountability, LX can become a tick-box, a late-stage endorsement exercise, or a request for people to share painful knowledge without enough influence over what happens next.

It feels right

LX also matters because people should have meaningful influence over services, systems, policies and projects that affect their lives.

This is about dignity, trust, inclusion and democratic participation. It is about recognising that people are not just recipients of services or sources of feedback. They are knowledge holders, leaders and partners in change.

The co-production guide frames co-production as being grounded in both democratic rights and the unique knowledge and skills of service users. It also names the extreme power differentials often experienced by people in mental health contexts, making power central rather than peripheral.

This is especially important in systems where people may have experienced coercion, exclusion, stigma, discrimination, poverty, criminalisation, surveillance, diagnostic overshadowing, cultural unsafety, service harm, family separation or loss of autonomy.

In those contexts, LX work is not just about improving services.

It is also about changing the quality of the relationship between systems and people.

Good LX work can help projects feel:

- more honest
- more accountable
- more human
- more inclusive
- more connected to real-world consequences
- more able to hold complexity, disagreement and uncertainty

This does not mean LX involvement is always easy, smooth or comfortable. In fact, meaningful LX involvement may challenge assumptions, slow decisions down, reveal tensions or make hidden power more visible.

That is not a failure of the work. Sometimes that is the work.

And good LX work does not guarantee perfect outcomes.

But it can make projects feel more honest, more relational, more accountable and more connected to the people they are meant to serve.

The real question is quality

The strongest case for LX is not simply:

> Include people with lived experience.

That is too vague.

The stronger case is:

> Involve the right people, for the right reasons, at the right time, with the right support, in ways that can genuinely shape the work.

This is where many projects get stuck.

They may have goodwill. They may genuinely care. They may invite people in. They may run a consultation, form an advisory group or add a lived experience representative to a steering committee.

But the work can still be weak if it is unclear:

- why LX is needed
- what contributors can influence
- what is already decided
- what kind of lived or living experience is relevant
- how people will be supported
- how input will shape interpretation, findings or decisions
- how contributors will hear what happened
- who is accountable for responding to what is learned

The shift is from:

Is LX present? to Is LX fit for purpose?

This is the heart of the LX Lens.

A simple way to remember the case

LX matters because it helps projects move from:

From	Toward
Good intentions	Clear purpose
Token input	Genuine influence
Inviting people in	Preparing and supporting people
Collecting stories	Shared meaning-making
Consultation without feedback	Accountable follow-through
“We involved lived experience”	“LX shaped what we learned, decided or changed”

The aim is not perfect involvement.

Projects are always shaped by limits: time, money, law, policy, scope, governance, politics and organisational readiness.

The aim is honest, useful involvement.

That means being clear about what is possible, where the limits are, and how people with LX can meaningfully shape the work within those limits.

Good LX work does not ask people to decorate decisions already made. It invites people into the parts of the work where their knowledge can make a real difference.

This work has roots

LX work has roots in many overlapping traditions.

These include, but are not limited to, psychiatric survivors, recovery, MadPride, service user/consumer, family/carer, harm reduction, peer advocacy, disability justice, Indigenous self-determination, human rights, and participatory research.

In mental health, people with direct experience of psychiatric systems have long challenged being treated only as patients, cases, risks or diagnoses. In alcohol and other drugs, the practices of recovery, harm reduction and drug user activism have challenged systems to listen to people who use drugs, people in recovery and affected communities. In suicide prevention and postvention, people with lived and living experience have pushed services, systems and society to respond with greater humanity, safety, nuance and accountability.

The language has shifted over time: psychiatric patient, service user, consumer, survivor, carer, family, peer, lived experience, living experience, affected others, lived expertise.

Each term carries history, politics and context.

Co-production also has diverse roots.

The term was coined by Elinor Ostrom and colleagues in the 1970s and later shaped by Edgar Cahn's work on the 'core economy', alongside influences from co-design and community development.

The LX Lens does not try to settle every language debate. It starts with a practical question:

> What knowledge is needed for this project, who holds it, and how can they meaningfully shape the work?

Participation is more than one thing

Projects may involve people in many different ways:

Choose the level that fits the project, then be honest about what people can genuinely influence.

Strong LX work does not always mean full co-production or LX-led work. It means being honest about what people can genuinely influence.

Many people use Arnstein's ladder to distinguish non-participation, tokenism and higher levels of participation such as partnership, delegation and citizen control.

It also notes that consultation or informing can sometimes be an honest description when full co-production is not feasible.

The IAP2 public participation spectrum is also useful because it distinguishes different levels of public impact, from informing and consulting through to involving, collaborating and empowering.

The LX Lens uses this simple principle:

> Choose the level of involvement that fits what the project needs to learn, decide or change. Then be clear about what people can genuinely influence.

Quick honesty check for your project

Before naming the participation approach, ask:

1. What are we inviting people with LX to influence?

   Ideas, scope, design, data collection, analysis, recommendations, decisions or implementation?

2. What is already decided?

   What is fixed, out of scope, constrained by law, policy, funding, time or governance?

3. What will happen with what people share?

   How will input be considered, checked, used and fed back?

Consultation is not the problem.

The problem is calling consultation co-design and inviting people to shape decisions that have already been made. Or asking them to share deeply personal knowledge without a pathway for influence.

Power, influence and boundaries

Meaningful LX work is not just about inviting people into a project. It is about being clear what power, influence and support they actually have.

People with LX may be asked to contribute to projects where organisations, funders, clinicians, researchers, policy teams or consultants already hold most of the decision-making power.

If this power is not named, it still operates. It simply becomes harder to challenge.

This does not mean every project can offer unlimited influence. Boundaries are often real. Law, policy, funding, procurement, governance, contracts, safety and ethics all matter.

But hidden limits cause harm.

Strong LX projects are honest about:

- what is already decided and what is still open
- what contributors can and cannot influence
- why limits exist
- who will make final decisions
- how contributors will hear what happened with their input

For example, a six-month local service improvement project may only be able to name the need to change drug laws without being able to achieve that. But it may still be able to involve people with LX in shaping the project purpose, naming risks (including if drug laws stay the same), designing engagement, interpreting findings, strengthening recommendations and influencing local practice.

Clarity about limits is not a failure of LX work. It is one of the conditions that makes LX work safer and more meaningful.

The five LX Lens areas

The LX Lens looks at five areas that help projects involve lived and living experience and expertise more clearly and meaningfully.

Continue your LX Lens journey

Take the LX Project Strength Test

See what may already be strong, what may be unclear, and what to strengthen next.

It is free, takes around three minutes, and gives you an instant tailored report about your project.

Take the LX Project Strength Test

Explore The LX Lens

Visit the website for practical guidance, emerging tools and ways to strengthen LX projects.

Visit thelxlens.com

Interested in strengthening a project?

Contact Gareth at mistergarethedwards@gmail.com

Coming soon

The LX Toolkit is in development and will include practical templates, prompts, project diagnostics and guidance across the five LX Lens areas.

About the author

Gareth Edwards is an independent LX consultant, leader and writer with more than 25 years' experience working across mental health, alcohol and other drugs, suicide prevention, homelessness, human rights, community development and public service reform.

His work helps people and organisations involve LX more meaningfully through project design and review, service architecture, workforce development and organisational transformation.

He created **The LX Lens** to help people design and deliver projects that move beyond good intentions towards clearer purpose, genuine influence and stronger outcomes.

Find out more at thelxlens.com

Contact Gareth by email on mistergarethedwards@gmail.com

Selected sources and further reading

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Disclaimer

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Stronger LX projects.
Better outcomes.

Helping organisations **strengthen** the role and **influence** of lived and living experience and expertise.

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