

McPin Methods review

Looking ‘beyond the role’: How does employment on a collaborative evaluation impact on peer evaluators?

Background

People who experience mental health difficulties often find it difficult to gain long-term, meaningful paid employment,¹ due to both practical challenges and the stigma that surrounds mental health. Despite the barriers, evidence shows that employment can be beneficial for people’s wellbeing.²

The McPin Foundation is committed to placing people with mental health problems at the heart of all our research. We often employ people who have experienced mental health difficulties to work with us on delivering research and evaluations.

About the evaluation

The ‘Your Experience in Mind’ (YEIM) evaluation was commissioned by national mental health charity, Mind, in 2015. This was the second annual YEIM survey delivered by the McPin Foundation for Mind. Summary findings from 2014 and 2015 are available [on our website](#). The survey aimed to find out how far local Mind services:

- **Promote recovery in people with mental health problems**
- **Offer a person-centred experience**
- **Are culturally appropriate and accessible for Black and Minority Ethnic groups**
- **Offer opportunities to get involved in the design and delivery of mental health services**
- **Provide a different experience from other kinds of services people receive**

In 2015 we employed 25 people in the role of ‘Survey Champion’ to promote the YEIM survey locally and encourage people to take part. This paper describes the mostly positive impact this employment had for some of the people we worked with, including skills development, increasing confidence and gaining further employment. It is based on input from 19 of the Survey Champions and detailed interviews with seven.

The Survey Champion role

The [Survey Champion role](#) was introduced to provide local expertise grounded in lived experience of mental health problems and knowledge of Mind services and support. Survey Champions were involved in shaping the survey to make it appropriate to the settings. The Survey Champions were recruited because they came from these local communities and so they were encouraging participation among their peers. We hoped that as peers, they would find it easier than professional, external researchers to connect with potential participants and to be sensitive to the local context. Survey Champions also produced valuable intelligence ‘on the ground’, updating the evaluation team about key events in their services that might impact on the survey, and providing a better understanding of the local context.

¹ Harnois, G., & Gabriel, P. (2000). *Mental Health and Work: Impact, Issues and Good Practices*. WHO: Geneva.

² Waddell & Burton (2006). *Is work good for your health and wellbeing?* TSO: London.

Motivations for becoming a Survey Champion

We asked people why they wanted to become a Survey Champion. Responses can be arranged into 5 main categories:

Work experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To work towards gaining a career in mental health, or mental health research To learn new skills
Interest in mental health research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Previous interest or experience Belief that research is the best way to improve services
Personal goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain knowledge about mental health To get more involved in Local Mind and get to know staff and other service users To improve own mental health & wellbeing (e.g. build confidence, overcome anxiety)
Altruistic reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To give service users a voice to improve their local Mind To give staff a sense of value for the work that they do
Pay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain an income To do something that feels 'valued'

Experiences of the Survey Champion role

We asked interviewees to choose three words to summarise their experiences as a survey champion. The responses generally reflect a positive experience in the role but acknowledged that it was also challenging at times.

Survey Champions reported that being able to use their lived experience of mental health problems and using the Local Mind was central to the role. People found it rewarding to make bonds with people who had had similar experiences to themselves.

“My favourite aspect of the role is when two people meet and they’re on the same level, you know, me and the client group.”

Survey Champion 01



A selection of the most frequent words used to describe the Survey Champion role

Survey Champions differed in their approach to using their lived experience. Some found that their lived experience was assumed rather than them explicitly disclosing it. Others said that it was not just about their lived experience of mental health, but about their general life experiences including learning disabilities, loneliness and outlook.

People felt that their lived experience was the strongest asset that they brought to the role of Survey Champion. Several told us that service users were more willing to trust them and open up as a result. Others noted that they would *“bounce off each other”* (Survey Champion 06) and this would make it easier for service users to relate to them.

“I think the customers felt more relaxed and could relate to us, rather than someone more higher up in management maybe doing it. I think if the CEO was doing it, I don’t think there would have been as good a response. I think it’s because we are volunteers and we are like them, so they felt at ease.”

Survey Champion 02

Impact on the Survey Champions

Gaining work experience

The Survey Champions we interviewed spoke about the importance of gaining experience in a role that offered payment and a routine. Often, people had had little previous experience in roles where they had been given responsibility and supported to work independently on a project.

“What I enjoy about it is that it’s something that’s unique to me, like it’s my responsibility and it helped to give me a sense of importance in what I was doing. So in my cleaning job, if I’m not there, someone else can do it.” **Survey Champion 06**

Two Survey Champions said that they appreciated the sense of routine which the role gave them. This, in turn, helped them to prepare for employment.

“Well what it helped me do is sort of plan ahead in terms of working out where I needed to be, when I needed to be there, to be able to plan ahead sort of, right I’ll do this this week, that that week, kind of helped me to develop a sense of organisation.” **Survey Champion 06**

Since the YEIM project ended, the McPin Foundation has received reference requests for three Survey Champions. This is, in itself, a positive indication of the impact of the role, suggesting that the experience gained can be valuable in securing future employment.

Case Study 1: Patrick

Patrick took on the role of Survey Champion to pursue a long term goal of building a career in mental health. He hoped that the role would provide relevant experience and skills to enhance his CV. He also wanted to improve his knowledge of mental health, his organisation and his workplace skills.

Before taking on this role, Patrick worked as a cleaner which he did not find challenging or satisfying. Since working as a Survey Champion, Patrick’s local Mind has created a part time paid position for him as a ‘Service User Champion’. His main duties include: visiting local Mind groups to introduce himself and build rapport; encouraging people to raise any complaints or ideas they may have; phoning people to gather feedback about their participation in events; administering feedback forms and envelopes to service users; and compiling feedback data into a report for management.

Patrick feels that the Survey Champion role was a *“direct precursor to the Service User Champion role”* by helping to make his local Mind aware of his skills and capabilities which led them to create this new role with Patrick in mind.

His success in the Survey Champion role made Patrick feel more able to handle a career in mental health research and evaluation. Patrick enjoyed the opportunity to handle responsibility on his own, and feels that this increased his confidence. He felt more comfortable discussing his lived experience, and using this experience in a productive way; something which he feels is now his greatest asset in the Service User Champion role. The Survey Champion role helped him to develop work-based skills, such as planning and organisation, communication skills, and the ability to work flexibly - all of which are essential in his new position. Finally, the role taught him how to build rapport with other service users so that they are confident sharing their feedback. Patrick also feels that other Local Mind users recognise that he did a good job in his role as Survey Champion and they therefore trust him enough to give their feedback again.

Developing skills

Survey Champions described a range of skills that they had learnt or improved from their time in the role. For instance, several spoke about improving their communication skills due to the variety of relationships and communication methods required in the role.

“I’d say probably I improved my communication skills, because I had to communicate with quite a lot of different people by e-mail. I had an e-mail set up for me on the [local Mind] system, so, like, I was communicating with a lot of different staff, and going to organisations. So I would say my skills improved.”

Survey Champion 07

More specific to the role of the Survey Champion, half of respondents commented that they had improved their problem solving and promotional skills. The role required Survey Champions to think creatively about how they could recruit more people to the survey, and to use persuasive skills, for instance through using social media to reach service users who did not regularly attend local Mind services.

“I’ve never really promoted something like that before, so it’s a skill in promoting something, you know... and how do you promote? You know, there’s online, there’s communication, e-mail, there’s posters, there’s going to different organisations. It’s the process of thinking about how will I promote this?”

Survey Champion 07

Finally, two participants who have gone on to pursue a career or education in mental health research discussed how the role had enabled them to improve their research skills. The role had given them experience of collecting quantitative survey data, recruiting people to a study, research administration, building rapport with participants and relaying research findings to lay audiences.

“The skills that I got from the Survey Champion stuff, although it was sort of a short time, I was able to put that into my application. So things like collecting quantitative data, and interaction with vulnerable participants and things like that I was able to write a good chunk on that as well.”

Survey Champion 03

Case Study 2: Natalie

Since the Survey Champion role, Natalie has been accepted onto an MSc in Health and Social Care, which includes a large research component. When applying for the MSc, Natalie cited several skills she had learnt and improved during her time as a Survey Champion. She felt that working as a Survey Champion had given her more confidence in conducting research surveys and recruiting participants. She was able to illustrate her creative approach to recruitment by describing how she used Facebook to recruit local Mind service users who did not regularly attend classes or groups. The Survey Champion role had given her experience in presenting research findings. Her local Mind asked her to present the findings locally and this gave Natalie valuable experience of presenting to a lay audience.

Natalie also feels that the Survey Champion role enabled her to improve other skills including independent working, meeting deadlines and effective communication. She was able to draw on all of this experience in her application for MSc course.

Wellbeing and social benefits

Several of those interviewed said that the Survey Champion role had helped to build their confidence. One person mentioned that because he was “*just himself*” during the Survey Champion role, it gave him confidence in general that people wanted to talk to him and tell him their stories.

“I’d say the survey champion role has had an impact on me, in that it’s given me a bit more confidence. It was something completely different to what I usually do, and so therefore it’s given me more confidence in my ability to do different things. And despite some of my difficulties with memory, learning difficulties, I could do something like that. So I’m quite pleased that I was able to do it.”

Survey Champion 07

A few people spoke about how the Survey Champion role had helped them to improve their self-efficacy, stating that being in employment had made them feel more useful.

“It made me feel good about myself. Although I’m retired, I’m not completely useless – sometimes retired people do get that feeling. It made me feel as though I was actually doing something useful. I think the feeling good about myself has lasted beyond the role too. I’m always pleased when I get an email from McPin, you know, and I think ‘oh yes, that’s who I worked for’ and the certificate made me feel happy as well.”

Survey Champion 04

The Survey Champion role helped some people to begin to overcome obstacles to positive wellbeing, including managing anxieties around public transport, workplace etiquette, and social anxiety. One participant found that taking on the responsibility of the role was helpful; if he felt anxious about getting on public transport the role gave him “*a nudge*” (Survey Champion 06) to overcome his anxiety because he knew that people were counting on him. He also said, however, that this responsibility was flexible and he never felt there was too much pressure on him to get something done.

The majority of Survey Champions enjoyed the opportunity to socialise with other support groups that they would not usually attend. Many felt that the role had enabled them to become more involved with their local Mind and to get to know lots of people on more than a superficial level.

“It was good fun getting to know people. It’s almost like you’re a cog in a big organisation and by doing the survey I became, I got to see all the organisations and that was really nice because there’s a lot to offer and it was nice to tap into that.”

Survey Champion 01

Finally, people felt that their status within their local Mind had changed as a result of the role; they found that during and after the project, other service users and staff at their local Mind treated them with the “*utmost respect*” (Survey Champion 04). One person felt that other staff took them more seriously because they approved of the participant’s success as a Survey Champion.

“I feel that [the staff’s] opinion of me probably improved – because some of them got to know me and it just gave us an opportunity to get to know each other. And I suppose I feel a bit more respected, I guess, because I’ve managed to do something, and I did it quite well, and yeah I feel like I gained more respect and some people that didn’t know me will perhaps have a different view of me now, a more positive view.”

Survey Champion 07

Case Study 3: John

When John's partner took her own life he decided that he wanted to gain more insight into mental health. To pursue this, John left his job in IT management. He took on the role of Survey Champion to find out what sort of careers existed in mental health, and to learn more about mental health by getting first-hand accounts from service users who completed the YEIM survey.

Since the project ended, John has embarked on a number of exciting opportunities. He is working with his local Mind on projects including the creation of emotional wellbeing greeting cards which he is hoping to source funding for, and he is offering his services to lead an IT training course. He is working towards starting a charity focussed on domestic violence, and is in the process of writing a children's book about domestic violence which he hopes will become an essential part of children's reading in schools. John had also arranged a meeting with the (then) mayor of London, Boris Johnson, to discuss what he could be doing to help progress the mental health agenda.

The Survey Champion role helped to expand John's interest in mental health and encourage him to seek further opportunities. He felt that he became more recognised within his local Mind and, as a result, was included in communication about future projects that he might be interested in. John said he had a greater interest in research since the role, and feels more able to approach research critically.

Discussion

There is a growing body of evidence about the benefits of collaborating with people with lived experience to improve research and evaluation. It is also important to consider the potential impact on the people employed in this way and to help shape future roles so that they support and develop people effectively. This paper has drawn on the experiences in one evaluation project. It highlights how valued, paid employment can provide opportunities, develop skills and improve wellbeing.

Employment for anyone can be both challenging and rewarding. In this project, Survey Champions' experiences of the role were largely positive. All those interviewed agreed that they were glad they took the role on. These benefits to the individuals accompany benefits to the project itself. Survey Champions felt that their lived experience of mental health difficulties enabled them to recruit more people to the survey and to have an open and honest exchange, encouraging participants to give detailed responses to the survey. These benefits are further described in a previous [methods review paper](#).

Although we received overwhelmingly positive feedback from those who took part in an interview, we were unable to speak in detail to the majority of the Survey Champions. It is possible that others did not experience the Survey Champion role as positively or gain as much from it as those included here.

About the McPin Foundation's Methods reviews

The McPin Foundation aims to transform mental health research by putting lived experience at the heart of research.

This is the second of a series of brief papers in which we reflect on different ways of collaborating with the public and with people who have lived experience. They are intended for use by researchers, commissioners, and people who want to get involved in research to learn from models we have tried.

If you would like to see our other McPin Methods reviews, or learn more about our work, visit our website:

www.mcpin.org.

If you would like to know more about this project, or about the other work we do, please contact us at:

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