

Community Participation Handbook

How to set up and manage a Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP)



Acknowledgements

Somerset HDRC (2026) Community Participation Handbook: How to Set Up and Manage a Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP), Somerset Council, Somerset, UK.

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Who is this for?

This handbook is intended **for teams who want to increase meaningful community collaboration within their work**. These teams could be found within the Council, NHS, universities, and the Voluntary Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector.

Why should I use it?

- Helps you to design **meaningful projects/services** that reach and engage with your intended community audience.
- Supports **community voices to shape and steer your work**, so that it reflects local needs and is valued by your community.

Where has this come from?

The handbook draws on the experience of the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset (HDRC Somerset) Community Participation team working in collaboration with **Breaking Barriers LEAP members**. These members helped to write and co-design this handbook.

It is a living document. We actively seek feedback from those who have used this handbook to create their own LEAPs to learn about how we can strengthen best ways of working.

How to Use this Handbook

This handbook is designed to **provide practical guidance on how to set up and run a Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP)** and explains:

- What a LEAP is and how it works
- When using a LEAP is the right approach
- How to recruit and support members
- How to keep the partnership positive and meaningful over time

It is divided into sections designed to help you set up and manage a Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP) with people who have lived experience.

You do not need to read this handbook from start to finish. It is designed so you can dip into the sections that are most relevant to your work.

Use the hyperlinks below to access the sections relevant to you. If you come across a term you are not familiar with, you can find clear definitions in the Glossary at the back of this handbook.



**You do not need to get everything right straight away.
What matters most is listening, learning and being open to change.**

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1. What is a LEAP?

A Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP) is one way of working closely with people from the community who have direct experience related to your project or service and who can:

- Share relevant lived experience
- Work alongside your team over time
- Help shape decisions, ideas and ways of working

LEAP members are not consulted once or asked to comment at the end. Instead, they are involved throughout the life of a project and treated as equal partners.

A LEAP is just one method of working with the community. The HDRC has developed other mechanisms, which can be used alongside or independently of a LEAP, depending on the specific project or service. **One example is a Community Organisation Advisory Partnership (COAP).** For more information about what method would be best for your team, contact the HDRC Somerset Community Participation Team: participation@somerset.gov.uk



1.1 LEAP members

LEAP members bring their own knowledge, insight and perspectives to help you understand what works well, what does not, and what could be done differently. Each person's experience is valued and heard.

LEAP members are not expected to be experts or professionals. What matters is their experience and their willingness to share it in a way that feels safe and supported.

1.2 How can a LEAP help you?

A LEAP could support your team in several areas to help inform, advise and steer your project. This might include:

- Helping to develop a project's design and approach
- Supporting the design of documents and materials
- Providing advice and guidance on ways of working in partnership with communities
- Raising awareness of the project and helping to share project findings
- Encouraging participation from the community
- Checking that project findings and recommendations are relevant and meaningful

Ideally, each LEAP should agree on a preferred title that reflects the identity of their partnership. They may choose the name LEAP or jointly decide on an alternative title (e.g. "Somerset Stars", "Somerset Voices", Somerset Together for...", "LEAP forwards together").

Lessons from Breaking Barriers

LEAP members noted that the project has changed their perception of the Council in a positive way, and that it was refreshing to see the Council wanting to learn from the community and actively encourage feedback. Other LEAP members stated that it has helped them to understand more about the issues people are facing in Somerset.

1.3 How does a LEAP work?

A LEAP is a small group of up to 10 members with lived experience related to your project. A smaller number of participants makes sure the meetings remain accessible to all members, ensuring they are heard and able to participate effectively.

We suggest meetings are held every 4 to 6 weeks or at least quarterly and last around one hour. Meetings might take place:

- Online
- In person
- Or using a mix of both

The format of meetings should be agreed together with the LEAP, making sure it works for everyone involved.

It is important that LEAP members feel their time and input are valued. Guidance on how to recognise and reward LEAP members is available in our **Public Contributor Recognition section**. These options should always be discussed openly with members rather than assumed.

Where possible, a LEAP should be sustained beyond the lifespan of one project. Longer-term partnerships help build and maintain trust with communities, support shared learning, and strengthen meaningful community participation in decision making over time.

Case Study: Breaking Barriers

The Breaking Barriers Project, facilitated by the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset (HDRC Somerset), explored the experiences of people living in Somerset with long-term health conditions and/or disabilities who are currently economically inactive.

At the heart of this approach was the Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP), set up to help inform, guide and advise on various project aspects. Members brought invaluable insight from their lived experience. They co-developed the research and data collection approach, reviewed and sense-checked study findings and recommendations, and co-designed recommendations to improve accessibility and inclusive recruitment.

You can view the full Breaking Barriers Report **[here](#)**.



1.4 How does a LEAP differ from other stakeholder engagements

LEAPs share some similarities with other forms of stakeholder engagements such as Experience Body Panels and Public Consultations. Here, members periodically provide input on particular issues or service areas and may have limited influence, with contributions often gathered at specific points in time.

A LEAP, in contrast:

- is a smaller, more collaborative group
- works in ongoing partnership with your team
- members are experts through lived experience, and their contributions are treated as equally important with space for everyone to be heard

What this approach enables

Goes beyond feedback

A closer relationship helps shape and inform decision-making, without a predetermined outcome, and with opportunities to adapt throughout.

Provides depth

Lived experience of using local services helps ensure decisions reflect real world needs, not assumptions.

Members build on one another's ideas, and shared experiences encourage deeper reflection and more nuanced insight.

Improves sustainability

Members actively co design and co produce solutions, rather than commenting on plans that are already well developed.

Ongoing involvement supports solutions that last, rather than short term fixes or one off insights.

Strengthens inclusion

Materials and approaches are sense checked for accessibility, reducing barriers to participation

Reaches under-served communities, showing their contributions are important and can influence outcomes.

Builds trust

Member input directly shapes the work rather than being filtered or diluted, allowing for more authentic and meaningful insight.

Seeing how contributions are used helps people feel their voice genuinely matters.

Action points:

- **Membership** – Should ideally contain no more than 10 community members connected to your topic or service.
- **Purpose** – Carefully consider how a LEAP could help you, and what capacity you have to host.
- **Collaboration** – Are you able to work with your LEAP as ‘partners’ rather than being consulted at set stages?
- **Identity** – Ensure your LEAP can choose their own name to provide a sense of identity and ‘buy-in’.

2. Identify the need and capacity for a LEAP

Before deciding to set up a LEAP, teams should reflect on how to work in genuine partnership with people who have lived experience. This includes being prepared to listen, reflect, change, and work collaboratively.

It is important to be flexible from the outset. This helps to avoid the partnership becoming a tick box exercise and ensures the collaboration remains meaningful and accessible for LEAP members.

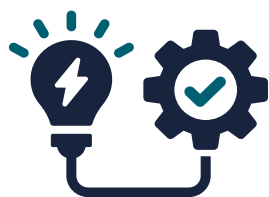
2.1 Where can a LEAP add value?

There are many scenarios in which establishing a LEAP could be beneficial to embedding community voices and experiences within your work. We have given some examples below, but this is by no means an exhaustive list.



Policy development and review

When creating or revising policies (like housing, social care, or public health initiatives) having input from people who have actually lived through those experiences will help to ensure the policies are practical and truly meet community needs.



Service design and improvement

When designing or improving services, like mental health support, disability services, or community engagement programmes, feedback from individuals with lived experience can help tailor services to be more accessible, effective and compassionate.



Changes to service provision and infrastructure

In situations like urban planning, public consultations or changes to local infrastructure, having people with lived experience can ensure that your team further understands the real-world impact of proposed changes on residents.



Research and evaluation

When conducting research or looking at how well services are working, a LEAP can ensure the work reflects real experiences, shapes the right questions, finds easy and respectful ways to gather feedback, supports access to people who might not usually take part, and helps translate results for residents



Don't forget: reflect on the activities you are currently undertaking within your project/service and consider how a LEAP could inform and steer these areas of work

2.2 What does LEAP involvement look like?

Before establishing a LEAP, consider how you will engage the LEAP within your project or service, and the level of involvement you would like them to have. For example:

- What are the **key tasks or activities** of the LEAP? Will they be able to jointly agree their roles and responsibilities?
- How much **influence** will LEAP have on the work? Will this change over time? How can expectations be managed?
- Would **success look like** a co-produced resource or material, or sense checking and providing feedback?
- **How flexible** are the outcomes and involvement of the LEAP, and can you be responsive to feedback? (for example, if members wish to be further involved)

Ideally, the final purpose and objectives should be agreed with LEAP members, who may also contribute additional ideas to strengthen the work.

2.3 Do you have time and resources to manage a LEAP?

Have a clear consensus with the commissioning team/decision makers about the ability to work together as equal partners. LEAPs are highly rewarding but need to be facilitated sensitively, with capacity and appropriate resources to ensure relationships can be built and trust remains unbroken.

- **What are your roles and responsibilities** in supporting the LEAP? (You are a group member).
- **Have you mapped out project timelines or the number of meetings required?**
Be up-front and manage expectations around project longevity, opportunities for engagement and intended activities for prospective members. We suggest meetings are held at regular intervals within a set timeframe (for example, every 4-6 weeks).
- **How do you plan to support continued engagement with LEAP members?**
Do you have capacity to manage the extra admin?
- **How do you plan to recognise and reward members?** Have you considered both financial and non-financial options, such as opportunities for learning, development or other forms of recognition?

It is important to be clear about capacity from the outset while still allowing some room for the work to grow. Without this, a LEAP can drift towards becoming a tick box exercise rather than a meaningful partnership. A LEAP often requires a degree of flexibility, not only in terms of how long the group may run, but also in how its focus and contributions may shift as relationships strengthen and insights emerge.



Don't Forget: Members should receive acknowledgement, appreciation, reward and recognition for their time and effort. How you go about doing this, or what form the reward and recognition might take, will depend on your capacity and the needs/preferences of LEAP members.

Ask your LEAP members what kind of compensation would be most suitable for them.

2.4 Are you clear how the group will be run?

- **LEAP members should be respected and treated as equal partners**, not exploited through ad-hoc arrangements. It is important that communication is clear, consistent and relationships are managed effectively to ensure trust is not damaged.
- **Establish a process to support the coordination of meetings.** One approach could be through the use of Doodle Polls so that members can vote on times that work best for them. You may find that members prefer to agree the next meeting date at the end of each session. Speak with your LEAP to decide on a process which is accessible for everyone.
- **Who will be the main point of contact?** Ideally nominate one person for this role to ensure consistency with communication. They should have capacity to hold 1-1 calls and answer questions from prospective members during the onboarding stage.
- **Who will facilitate meetings?** Having two facilitators allows one to lead the meeting and cover the agenda, while a second supports engagement. This ensures everyone has an opportunity to speak and messages in the chat are addressed.
- Ask prospective members whether they would benefit from co-developing a group agreement (**‘Working Together Principles’**) for participation and allocating time during the first meeting for this.



Avoid sharing responsibility for the LEAP between multiple team members to keep consistency and familiarity for the group, further supporting engagement. Two team members should be adequate to cover leave or other changes within your team.

Consider selection carefully to prevent avoidable changes in leadership later down the line. Big or frequent changes may cause unnecessary disruption and distress for members.

Facilitators should be a reassuring, approachable, and (where possible), have experience working with communities and people with relevant lived experience. They should make time for questions from prospective members with care and sensitivity (especially during the early development stage) and hold one-to-one calls with prospective members, if required.

2.5 How will you reflect on your partnership?

Begin thinking early about how you will evaluate members' experiences and perspectives as part of your LEAP.

- How will you check that the partnership process is working? In particular, how will you gather and review the experiences and perspectives of individual LEAP members so that you can collectively identify and implement any necessary actions when needed?
- Explore existing evaluation tools, such as our Stronger Together Scorecard and 'Spidergram' to get a sense of approaches that might work well for your group.



Don't Forget: Check for additional guidance in the **Checking if the partnership is working section** and review evaluation tools in the **LEAP resources section**.

2.6 Are there any specific needs that you might be able to anticipate, and do you have capacity to accommodate them?

Facilitators should come into the process with an informed awareness of the demographic they are working with, including the types of hardships and barriers participants may face. This helps avoid a "them and us" dynamic in which participants feel positioned at odds with facilitators. Remember:

- LEAP members should feel that their experiences are recognised and understood, and that they are stepping into a space they can genuinely shape one made accessible through thoughtful preparation and awareness from the outset
- It is crucial not to make assumptions about engagement barriers.
- Facilitators should remain open, responsive, and guided by lived experience when identifying and addressing accessibility needs.

We recommend signposting LEAP members who need extra support to community groups, charities, or support workers who can help them access safe internet spaces or attend in person meetings.

Action points:

- **Purpose** – Be clear about what you want the LEAP to support and why now. Consider activities you are currently undertaking and how a LEAP could support.
- **Structure** – Agree how often you will meet (for example every 4–6 weeks) and whether meetings will be online, in person or hybrid.
- **Support** – Name the main point of contact and build in regular check-ins.
- **Public Contributor Recognition** – Be clear about how members will be recognised and rewarded.
- **Evaluation** – Agree how you will check the partnership is working for everyone.

3. Recruiting and onboarding your LEAP

At this stage, you can start thinking about how to recruit for, and onboard, your LEAP. This section involves information on how and where to advertise, as well as how to smoothly bring in interested community individuals into the partnership.

3.1 Creating your advert

You might like to start thinking about an advert that could be shared with the community you wish to reach. All adverts should go through the communications/design team to ensure they are accessible and adhere to brand guidelines.

Aim to keep the advert thoughtful and inclusive. LEAP members felt that real-life photos could imply the advert is intended for people who look like those pictured. They suggested that computer graphics conveying diversity are a better option (it is important to bear in mind that not all diversity is visible – so inclusive language and a clear message is key).

Please see the **LEAP resources** section for an example of a LEAP advert.

Key checks:



Make sure the advert will be seen by your intended audience, using the right medium and platforms (digital and/or print)



Is the language accessible and clear (BSL, Easy Read, colour-blind friendly)? Avoid jargon, technical terms, and acronyms where possible.



Be clear about eligibility, including who can join, location requirements, and that no prior experience is needed



Clearly state how meetings will take place and their anticipated frequency



Highlight the main benefits and motivations for joining



Check the advert with your communications team before it is shared

Lessons from Breaking Barriers:

LEAP members from the Breaking Barriers study have fed back on what would make them think about joining a future LEAP. Some of the themes that arose from this discussion included:

- To challenge existing narratives
- To have a voice and share their lived experience to make a real difference
- To have their contributions valued and recognised

One LEAP member mentioned how it can be a unifying experience, stating that they find it “very interesting to cross paths with different people who share some form of experience”



3.2 How and where to advertise and promote the LEAP

To attract a diverse range of LEAP members, including people from under served communities, it is important to work with trusted local organisations and existing networks. These groups already have strong relationships with residents and can help to widen awareness of LEAP and encourage participation.

Are you currently engaged with any community groups or individuals within your existing work? If you're not quite sure where to start, the list below offers examples of different avenues or locations that could help get your message out:

Print & Physical

- Newspaper adverts
- Local radio
- Supermarket / shopping centre boards
- Local libraries
- Posters in waiting areas
- Lamp post posters / letterbox leaflets

Community & Local Venues

- GP surgeries / NHS/ Health Connection Hubs
- LGBTQ+ groups
- Community and faith hubs
- Wellbeing groups/Mental Health Community Teams
- Job centres / Citizens Advice / social prescribers
- Colleges / youth groups/Schools

Digital & Online Spaces

- Social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, BlueSky)
- Online community boards / Facebook pages
- Local library information screens / mailing lists
- Expert by Experience newsletters
- Service mailing lists / service forums
- QR code posters
- Videos/pages

When advertising your LEAP, consider the following points, particularly if you are trying to reach people who don't go to groups or access support:

- Where and how opportunities are shared. This can affect who feels able and confident to get involved. Sharing opportunities through familiar settings and trusted networks was discussed as a way to help people feel more comfortable engaging and to support more meaningful participation.
- Use clear, accessible and respectful communication. Avoid jargon and being clear that people do not need prior experience.
- Focus on lived experience rather than adopting an overly 'neutral' tone. This can help reassure potential participants that they are entering a space grounded in shared understanding and encourage confidence in choosing to take part.

We recommend seeking out groups or spaces that are relevant to your intended audience before attempting more overly broad advertising. This helps to attract individuals who are genuinely interested in the work, rather than those who may view participation primarily as a way of obtaining compensation.

Local community groups can help here. Attend events to meet with potential organisations who may be working with your community of interest. Spark Somerset is the infrastructure organisation who support the sector and could help link you with appropriate community organisations.

3.3 Taking it to the Community

An introductory session can act as a taster for prospective members and can help build and grow community networks. Some points to consider here are:

- This does not need to be a formal event - it could take place in any setting where people already are, and it could also be held online or in a hybrid format.
- Organise multiple events or use different formats if your audience is spread across Somerset.
- Physical locations should be disability friendly and accessible via public transport. For support with identifying suitable locations, use resources such as [AccessAble](#).
- Always be clear about eligibility for becoming a LEAP member
- Prepare simple, easy to digest materials (such as short PowerPoint slides) outlining what the LEAP is, what you are trying to achieve, and how people can get involved. An engaging video explaining the purpose of the LEAP and potential benefits for members could also be a useful addition.
- Take time to talk things through, answer questions, and address concerns. For example, you may need to clarify that joining a LEAP will not affect someone's benefits and reassure people that there are no hidden agendas or ulterior motives.

What we learnt from Breaking Barriers

One example shared by a community organisation representative was the importance of aligning events with the community you are trying to reach. For example, to engage the Polish community, they invited Polish speakers and held events in a community centre already working with local people. Approaches like this help ground the project in the community and support trust building.

3.4 LEAP Brief and Agreement

Once you have taken your project to the community and gathered interest, the next stage is to have a Brief and Agreement for prospective members to sign.

Briefs should be given out to prospective members once they have registered their interest in joining the LEAP and will largely reflect your answers to the reflective questions in part 3 and 4. It should include:

- An outline of your project.
- The proposed role of the LEAP.
- Expectations and benefits of being involved (along with recognition/appreciation details that may involve compensation).
- Clear information for your designated contact to ask any questions.

If prospective members are happy and wish to join, it is advised that you send and receive a signed LEAP Agreement from them as confirmation of their commitment and understanding of expectations. The agreement should reflect the responsibilities and role of both parties.

An example **Brief and Agreement** has been provided in the **LEAP resources** section for reference.

3.5 Responding to interest and bringing people on board

Once you start sharing your LEAP opportunity, people from the community may get in touch to ask questions or say they are interested in joining.

This stage is about being open and welcoming, giving clear information, and making sure people feel comfortable deciding whether the LEAP is right for them.

Create some basic material about your LEAP that you can refer to when discussing the project and the role of the LEAP with prospective members.

Some questions to think about include:

- **That all feelings and expressions are welcome:** the group aims to be a safe space.
- **Expected time commitment:** how often will the group meet and in what format? (even if this is provisional– format may be subject to change with LEAP feedback)
- **The meaning/focus/purpose of LEAP:** overall project/expected outcome e.g. is it long term or project specific?
- **What members should expect from the group:** What does the group cover? Can they make a difference? What is expected from them?
- **Who will be involved and who will they be working with?** What teams will they be working with, and will new members be able to join once established?
- **What are the incentives?** How are they recognised and rewarded?
- **Are they eligible to join?** E.g. if it's okay to be a service user whilst on the LEAP?
- **Can they bring a supporter along?**

During this stage it is essential that you take the time to answer any queries. We recommend that you provide opportunities for a prospective LEAP member to have an initial chat (either on the phone or Teams) so they can ask any questions to the LEAP lead, raise any concerns, and make sure their involvement is appropriate.

This is also a good opportunity to find out more about prospective LEAP members and their individual preferences, e.g. you could ask them: “What would you like to get from joining the group and the overall experience?”.

By this point, you need to have agreed a point of contact for the LEAP members and have signed off on the activities LEAP members will engage with, along with any additional requirements you may have (e.g. preparation time before meetings).



Don't Forget:

- How to refer another member; who to refer them to; time frame for referrals
- The possibility of this branching into other projects
- That they don't need previous experience of being a LEAP member

3.6 Adjustments, commitments and boundaries

It is important to understand the needs of all LEAP group members. Ensure you ask individuals what support they might need or how to make the group accessible for them – helping them feel seen, heard and valued, while also outlining existing capacity and expectations.

If they are not sure about what might be helpful, work out together what adjustments they might need. Offer ideas of what other people have found useful (for example, they may like to be introduced to the group during the first meeting, keep their camera off or simply join in using the Teams chat rather than speaking).

You might also like to ask:

- What aspects of yourself that you can tell us to help us help you?
- What prompted you to join this group – are you up for sharing today? (give them the opportunity to share in the future)
- Do you have capacity/availability to attend the group. Are there specific days or times they cannot do?
- Do you have preferences for online / hybrid / in-person meetings?
- Would you like to be pre-warned about any potentially triggering content?
- Do you have any access requirements for in-person meetings?

It might be helpful to assert boundaries and communication expectations so that members are clear that meetings and correspondence will only occur during your working hours.



Don't forget:

Every day looks different for each LEAP member and that is fine.

Action points:

- ☐ **Language** – Use clear, jargon free language emphasising lived experience.
- ☐ **Demographics** – Understand who it is you want to recruit, and how you can reach them.
- ☐ **Design** – Ensure any adverts or materials are as accessible as possible.
- ☐ **Transparency** – Be upfront about your project, its aims and objectives, and how members will be involved.
- ☐ **Accessibility** – Understand who is interested in joining and how best you can support them.

4. Managing and sustaining a healthy LEAP

While a LEAP is very rewarding, it requires time, planning, and ongoing support to sustain. As LEAPs bring together people with lived experience of often challenging topics, careful consideration is needed to ensure that needs are accommodated and best practice is followed.

This section explores how you can best manage and facilitate the smooth running of a healthy LEAP, including how to run meetings, how to recognise and reward attendance, and how best to evaluate participation throughout.

4.1 Preparing for the first meeting as a group

Once LEAP members have signed the agreement and are onboarded, it is time to prepare for your first meeting. LEAP members should feel as comfortable as possible. You may wish to consider organising an informal 'icebreaker' session first. This will allow people to meet each other, test any IT or apps, like Microsoft Teams, and ask any questions.

We suggest that you compile some information to send out to LEAP members prior to the meeting. This can reduce anxiety around the first session and encourage attendance. Some points to consider here are:

- **Reassure:** That members are entering a friendly and safe environment where they will be heard and listened to. Reassure them that they won't be put on the spot.
- **Expectations:** Who is expected to attend; how to access the meeting; and how introductions might work.
- **Structure:** Clear meeting or workshop timings with flexibility to make accommodations (e.g. adding breaks).
- **Conversation Points:** Share these in advance so that members have an idea of what to expect.
- **Composition:** Whether members shared lived experience or live in the same area, and the gender balance (some individuals may feel uncomfortable if they are the only self-identifying gender identity in a group).
- **Contribution:** Make clear that there is no obligation to speak - it is okay to use Teams chat, contribute after the meeting (e.g. by email), or keep cameras off.
- **Preparation:** Provide access to materials beforehand so that members feel better prepared (they can decide how they wish to use that information).



Don't Forget:

Make sure you have flagged any adjustments members have identified and that the LEAP lead and co-facilitator(s) are aware. This can help avoid uncomfortable and distressing situations occurring such as a LEAP member who has asked for a member of staff to introduce them on their behalf and then being put on the spot and asked to introduce themselves.

Consider developing 'individual passports' outlining specific accommodations or keep a list of preferences for each member. Examples can be found in our [Resources Section](#).

4.2 The first meeting

Share your intentions around the culture of the group and some basic ways of working together (that could be developed further with input from the LEAP members). To collate and discuss these topics, we recommend co-producing some **'Working Together Principles'** as a group outlining the culture and agreed actions of the LEAP.

Depending on the demographic of your LEAP members, it may also be beneficial to check-in with members individually after the first meeting to see how they feel it went and consider whether there was anything that they feel could be changed to improve engagement for next time.



Don't Forget

Ask your LEAP members what would make the group an effective and safe space. This could form the basis of a group discussion, but don't forget to provide opportunities for members to speak individually or privately afterwards.

4.3 Sustaining your LEAP

The feedback from members before, during, and after the initial onboarding period and first meeting will provide the basis for how your LEAP will progress, but there are some universal points to consider:

Make tasks meaningful: Members are more likely to say yes to tasks and activities when they feel they are meaningful.

- **Show members how their input is making a difference:** Keep members 'in the loop' about project findings and provide regular progress updates. Let them know that their contribution is valued and is being actively used.
- **Make meetings manageable:** Tasks should be broken down into smaller steps (to avoid information overload) and meetings should have a clear aim and objective to support attendance and engagement from members.
- **Communicate clearly:** The average reading age in the UK is around 9 to 11 years. This is not about intelligence, but about how information is written and shared. Avoid jargon and acronyms and explain terms clearly.
- **Be open and honest:** The host of the project should be honest and transparent with members. Reassure members that differing opinions will be encouraged, listened to, and respected.
- **Keep it familiar:** Reducing disruption helps reduce anxieties around attendance. Let members know in advance any changes to the structure, time, or who will be joining.

- **Be responsive:** Get back to members queries quickly and reiterate appreciation for their time and effort.
- **Send reminders:** LEAP members should be reminded of the meeting plan or purpose ahead of time especially if the meeting was scheduled well in advance
- **Check-in regularly:** Ongoing feedback and reflection while working together helps pick up any issues and makes your LEAP responsive.
- **Give space:** Allow time at the end of meetings for members to bring up any questions or thoughts.
- **Be flexible:** LEAP members are not additional staff in your team, but it can be valuable to allow scope for members to contribute more outside of sessions if they wish to do so
- **Manage expectations:** Inform members what the scope of the project is and what can realistically be changed



Don't forget:

Be open to feedback raised by LEAP members. Reflect on what could be changed in consultation with the group. Where changes are or are not possible, inform members why or why not.

4.4 Keeping your LEAP safe

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topics discussed, and the fact that LEAP members share insights from their lived experience, it is crucial that a trauma-informed approach is embedded and maintained throughout your work together. The National Institute of Health and Research (NIHR) has produced Trauma Informed Guidance, linked in the resources section, which gives a useful overview of how to develop this approach within your work.



4.5 Checking if the partnership is working

It is important to discuss with your team about how you feel the LEAP is going, alongside the feedback received from members throughout your time working together. This provides a chance for members to voice their opinions on what is working well and what could be done better.

To have maximum impact, it needs to be carried out at various points throughout the facilitation of the LEAP, which allows changes to be made quickly in response to feedback.

Some useful questions to consider are:

- Who is it working for?
- Who defines what working well 'looks like'?
- Who decides what 'success' looks like?

Once you have considered these questions, meet with your members to gather feedback, and decide/co-produce what tool would work best for them. Please see the **resources section** for some examples of tools that you might want to use.

Any tools considered should be feasible and workable within your specific project/service. You may choose to use an existing tool, adapt/use parts or co-produce a new tool together.

We recommend that most LEAPs would benefit from the Stronger Together Scorecard and Spidergram which can be used to:

1. Monitor how the LEAP is working for everyone – identifying areas that might need to be strengthened;
2. Check how well you are applying the different **Layers of Community Participation** in your role, from planning to communication, helping highlight areas for ongoing improvement.

If you would like to use a tailored Spidergram for your LEAP or would like a more detailed discussion about evaluation methods, please contact the HDRC Somerset team at Participation@somerset.gov.uk for further assistance.



Don't forget:

- **You need to decide together**, with members of your LEAP, how you would like to evaluate working together and build this in frequently.
- **Be receptive to feedback and avoid treating it as a critique.** Contributors may not be accustomed to giving feedback or may not always express it diplomatically; nevertheless, it is important to value all feedback and avoid responding defensively. Be open to change and recognise feedback as a positive opportunity to strengthen the group, with adaptation a natural part of the group's development.
- **Collectively identify solutions:** It is not the role of the LEAP co-ordinator to identify rectifying actions but rather the LEAP as a collective.

4.6 Public Contributor Recognition

Ask your LEAP members what kind of compensation would suit them best. Do not assume that participants expect a financial reward. Any recognition or reward should be discussed openly with members to ensure it is appropriate, meaningful, and accessible.

We recommend that **participants are always provided with the option of being brought onto payroll**. In line with HMRC regulations, gift-vouchers are not suitable for regular meetings where there is an expectation of ongoing involvement in activities. **We recommend a rate of £20 per hour** for meetings attended, and the same amount to be paid for any other work that LEAP members may be involved with outside of regular meetings.

Where it may not be feasible to offer payroll, we recommend considering non-financial forms of recognition that supports personal development. This could include:

- Training opportunities.
- Work placements.
- Shadowing roles.
- Providing references for applications.
- A Certificate of Recognition.

LEAP members should not be expected to cover any out-of-pocket expenses in order to take part in your work. This includes costs such as travel, as well as access needs relating to physical or mobility requirements, sensory and communication needs, medical and dietary needs, and cognitive or support needs. This may also include reimbursing caring responsibilities where appropriate, such as childcare or the cost of a sitting service, to ensure that participation does not create additional personal or financial barriers.

For up-to-date guidance on compensation, including costing, and the HDRC Certificate of Recognition, please see our **LEAP resources** section.



Don't Forget:

- **Apply transparent and consistent policies**, aligning with internal or national guidance and keeping members informed as guidance evolves.
- **Acknowledge contributions in outputs**, agreeing in advance how members wish to be recognised (e.g. name) when sharing findings, reports, or presentations to maintain trust and transparency.

4.7 Closing ‘the Loop’

It is important to demonstrate the impact / change from a project that the LEAP has been involved with. Ideally, your LEAP will be involved in designing and sense checking how outcomes will be shared with the community, ensuring involvement throughout.

Consider creating a standalone session or celebration event with your LEAP to reflect on and review findings, share learning and show members how their input has shaped the final outcomes of the project.

Action points:

- **Clarity** – Be clear about the purpose, expectations, composition, timelines, and tasks of the LEAP. Reiterate these and inform members of any changes.
- **Contributions** – Let members know how they will be contributing, what this looks like, and the outcome of these.
- **Acknowledgement** – Decide with your LEAP on how members will be recognised and rewarded.
- **Feedback** – Build in opportunities for evaluation and feedback throughout the project and at the end.
- **Flexibility** – Be open to different ways of working and communicating

Thankyou!



for taking the time to read this handbook. It is a co-production ‘in-progress.’ This document will be continuously revised and updated, and we appreciate comments and feedback from colleagues who use this in their work in order to do so.

If you have questions, would like advice, or want to share feedback on this handbook, please contact the HDRC Somerset team at:
participation@somerset.gov.uk

We encourage you to think about how your LEAP could continue beyond a single project. Building long term relationships helps strengthen trust with communities and leads to better, more inclusive ways of working.

“I would highly recommend anybody try it... you really just have to bring yourself to the table... be passionate about the project you’re involved in.” – **LEAP member**

5. LEAP resources

We have put together a list of additional resources and templates mentioned throughout this handbook below. Some of these are existing resources on our website, while others need to be requested from the HDRC team for access.

*For any document that is dated (i.e., March 2025) please ensure you have the latest version.

Getting Started

- **Is a Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP) right for my team?**

Recruitment

- **HDRC Somerset Example LEAP Advert**
- **HDRC Somerset Template LEAP Brief & Agreement**

Meetings and facilitation

- **NIHR Trauma Informed Guidance 2024**
- **Health Adjustment 'Passports' (including Easy Read version)**
- **LEAP Working Together Principles Example – Breaking Barriers**
- **LEAP Working Together Principles Session Plan ppt**
- **HDRC Somerset Distress Protocol Template**

Evaluation

- **HDRC Somerset Layers of Community Participation Infographic**
- **Stronger Together Scorecard** – to be used for scoring the Layers of Community Participation
- **Spider Diagram Template** – If you would like to use a tailored Spidergram for your LEAP or would like a more detailed discussion about evaluation methods, please contact the HDRC Somerset team at **Participation@somerset.gov.uk** for further assistance.

Public Contributor Recognition

- **Somerset HDRC Public Contributor Recognition Guidelines May 2026** – Please contact the HDRC Somerset team at **Participation@somerset.gov.uk**
- **NIHR Remuneration Policy for Public Contributors**

6. Glossary

COAP	Community Organisation Advisory Partnership
Community-based participatory research approach	A collaborative approach that actively involves community members in the research process. It emphasises the importance of local knowledge and perspectives, fostering partnerships between researchers & communities.
Co-production	A collaborative approach where people who use services and those who provide them work together as equal partners to design and deliver services.
CP workstream	Community Participation Workstream, based within the Somerset HDRC.
Impact evaluation	Measures the effectiveness of a partnership against its intended outcomes.
LEAP	Lived Experience Advisory Partnership
Lived Experience (or experts by experience)	<p>Someone who has direct knowledge or experience of living through a particular situation or event.</p> <p>One example of this could be someone who has lived experience of a long-term health condition or disability.</p>
Love2Shop	A multi-retailer gift voucher and prepaid gift card service that allows users to shop at over 90 popular retailers both in-store and online.
NIHR	National Institute for Health Research
Process evaluation	Examines how the partnership operates and is implemented in practice. It helps to understand the internal dynamics and factors like the quality of engagement that influence the partnership's effectiveness.
Sense checking	The process of confirming the real-world significance of findings and relevance of recommendations with community partners and participants.
HDRC Somerset	Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset. The HDRC is an active 5-year programme, funded by the NIHR, aimed at reducing health inequalities in Somerset. It aims to embed a culture of using evidence in decision-making with local government.
VCFSE	Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise Organisations

Somerset HDRC (2026) Community Participation Handbook: How to Set Up and Manage a Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP)