

CO-PRODUCTION CASE STUDY: Strategy Language Project

The project

During 2019, the British Red Cross (BRC) developed its new Corporate Strategy, steering the direction of BRC services and activity for the next 10 years. Our aim was to be people centred by bringing in the voices of different groups from within and outside the BRC to make sure that the strategy reflected each of these groups' needs. We ran 'experience rooms' with our leaders, we held staff and volunteer workshops throughout the year, we interviewed supporters and potential supporters, we spoke to our partners and we went directly to people who have received our support. **This project** enabled PWLE to influence the **language** used in our Strategy: how we describe people we aim to support, our impact and our ways of working. We heard from **90 PWLE** of H&SC and M&D via 9 workshops, 6 interviews and a short survey, and conducted secondary analysis of over 50 interviews with PWLE of natural and man-made disasters (N&MD) from BRC's [Visible in Emergencies](#) innovation project.

Why we involved people - expected benefits:

Language is important: it affects how people and communities see us and their willingness to work with us; how charities and statutory organisations see us; how funders see us; and how our staff feel about our work and the people we support. The language we use in our Strategy will also impact how we communicate internally and externally and, potentially, our working practices.

Speaking to people who have accessed our services, or who have had experiences that the BRC seeks to respond to, seemed critical in developing the most appropriate language. Hearing directly from PWLE helped us to understand the potential impact of using particular words on the people we work with, choose language that encourages a positive feeling about BRC and encourages staff to treat the people we support with dignity and respect.

How were people recruited to participate?

We approached staff and volunteers across services and regions, including members of the Co-Production Champions Network, the Diversity and Inclusion Practitioner Network, Voices Network leads, Volunteer Representatives, and operational managers' networks. People introduced colleagues supporting local influencing groups with PWLE or who had contact details of people who have accessed BRC services and consented to being contacted. Established groups were invited to workshops and the Co-Production Team invited individuals who have accessed BRC services to join telephone interviews. The people involved heard about the purpose of the project, what would be explored, feedback mechanisms, and their likely influence.

How people were involved and influenced the process

Telephone interviews and participatory workshops were facilitated by operational teams and/ or our Co-production Team. People were asked what they thought about particular words and phrases used in the Corporate Strategy like "deprived", "affected", and "human-centred." We asked about alternative words they would prefer and explored why, and used a fictional character to explore the concept of "connected communities": what the term means to them, and how connected communities can be created or supported. We explained that findings would be presented in a report and shared with colleagues leading efforts to develop our Strategy.

Support and preparation provided

We provided background information about the Strategy and explained why language choices felt so important, and provided context for how the words and phrases were being used in the draft Strategy. We organised workshops and interviews at participants' convenience.

Key insights

We learnt a huge amount and the findings influenced the language now used in our Strategy. Insights look likely to influence other work where language choice is a key consideration. The full report is on our [Co-production RedRoom](#) page.

Key findings and their impact on decision-making:

- People consider language important, felt valued when asked their opinions on it, and felt we should routinely engage people in shaping the language we use publicly. *BRC committed to engage people around the language we use in many other areas of work.*
- People prefer positive, empowering language that acknowledges people have resources and gives hope. *We now use positive language in our Strategy to describe our impact.*
- “Deprived” feels judgmental, can cause shame or embarrassment and is rarely used by people to describe themselves. *This term has been removed from our Strategy narrative.*
- “At risk” is a preferred term, since it focuses on people’s circumstances rather than labelling people themselves. *This term is now being used throughout the Strategy.*
- “Human-centred” feels like jargon. People prefer “people-centred” and agree we should focus on people’s unique circumstances. *“Human-centred” has been removed from the Strategy: “Person-centred” now features in our goals and as a workforce “capability”.*
- People prefer simple language, to avoid alienating people. *This features in our “Language Principles” now being promoted across the organisation.*



“Language used publicly should always be the product of engagement with the very groups you are referring to” (Voices Ambassador, Glasgow)

Challenges

- **Some words and phrases explored were unfamiliar to participants:** Useful learning in itself, this required staff to offer basic definitions, whilst avoiding over-influencing people’s feelings. For workshops involving young people we consulted staff who know the group to establish which words they were likely to know already and adapted our plan accordingly.
- **Recruiting PWLE of N&MD was challenging:** A lack of established groups of PWLE linked to Crisis Response (CR) services, or contact details of people who have accessed CR services and provided consent to be contacted may partly result from the short-term and acute nature of support provided in CR Response. We therefore undertook secondary analysis of interviews with PWLE of N&MD undertaken by BRC’s Innovation Hub.

Key learnings

Staff commitment to involving PWLE in influencing our work is essential: the projects’ success depended entirely on staff willingness to introduce colleagues, provide contact details for PWLE, recruit PWLE to workshops, co-facilitate workshops, and adapt workshop plans for groups.

Being clear about the scope of influence is critical: particularly a project like this in which decisions made have such wide-reaching implications. People expressed feeling valued and appreciating feedback when they were updated of how Strategy language had been altered.

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