

“Our Stories, Our Voices: The Power of Lived Experience” *with Gifted Women*

January
2025

Engagement Insight Report



All imagery used in this report was created by the workshop participants

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Executive Summary

Healthwatch Plymouth were invited to a drop-in workshop with a group of women working with 'Gifted Women' - a charity for women who are rebuilding their lives after substance misuse, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system - to learn more about their experiences with local health and social care services.

Key Findings

The following key findings have been identified from this engagement activity, based on the views of these women in Plymouth:

- Women who experience multiple disadvantages face additional barriers to accessing health and social care including distrust in 'professionals' based on past experiences.
- The absence of a shared patient record system forces women to repeatedly recount their story.
- Women with past histories of addiction are being prescribed addictive medication in primary care.
- Participants felt their problems were too complex to communicate in a ten-minute Primary Care appointment.
- Participants identified a need for an intermediary, who can understand their full needs, who is then able to liaise with Health and Social Care services on their behalf.
- When health professionals went "above and beyond" for an individual, it made a difference beyond resolving the immediate problem.

Recommendations

Healthwatch have the following recommendations:

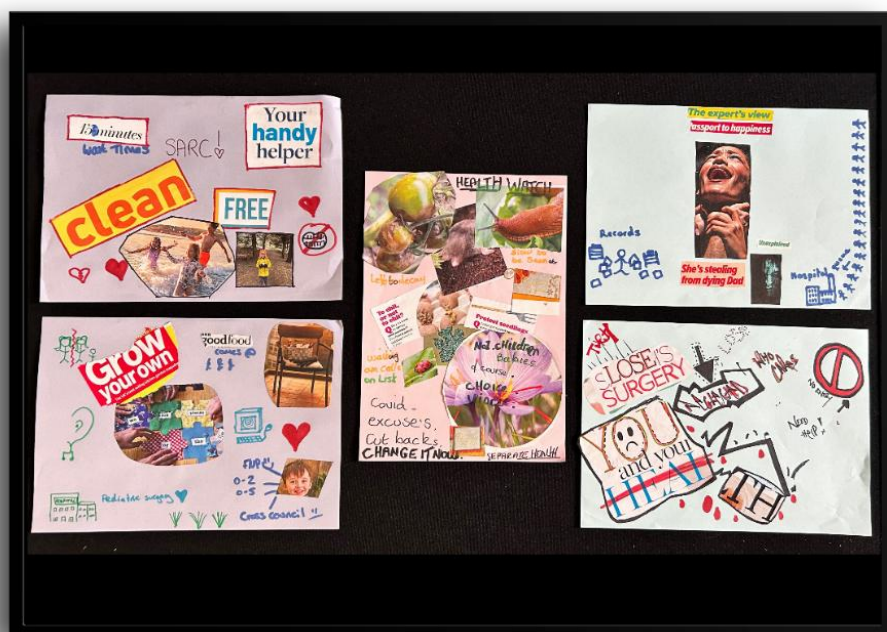
- All GP practices within Plymouth make use of trauma training through the Trauma Informed Plymouth Network.
- Livewell's FUSE programme be widely adopted by all Health and Adult Social Care providers for individuals with multiple disadvantages so that their complex stories are more easily understood.

- Changing Futures ‘Your Story’ project is adopted by all Health and Adult Social Care services to support service users with a complex story to tell.
- Patients with a history or risk of addiction should be identified before prescribing addictive medication, with alternative treatments considered whenever possible.

Introduction

Women navigating health and social care services in Plymouth shared their deeply personal stories, highlighting their view of systemic failures and sharing the strength they’ve shown in rebuilding their lives.

Despite having faced delays, judgment, and a lack of support, these women are proud of their resilience and are passionate about helping others. Through a trauma-informed focus group, we gathered insights into their health and adult social care journeys. This report amplifies their voices, urging Plymouth service providers to listen, learn, and act.



“Strength through symbols” collage, representing the participants feelings of using local health and social care services, created during the workshop.

About Us

Healthwatch in Devon, Plymouth, and Torbay (HWDPT) are the three local independent consumer champions for people using health and social care services across Devon.

Local Healthwatch organisations were established as independent bodies run by local people, for local people. They are part of a national network of Local Healthwatch in England that was set up under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

Healthwatch engages with the local community effectively and gives residents of Devon, Plymouth and Torbay a stronger voice to influence and challenge how health and social care services are provided for them.

Background

Healthwatch Plymouth were invited to a drop-in workshop with some of the women working with Gifted Women, to learn more about their experiences with local health and social care services. Many of the women we were meeting have experienced trauma, often leading to what Gifted Women refer to as 'multiple disadvantage'. This can be a combination of substance misuse, homelessness, contact with the criminal justice system, removal of children into care, domestic and sexual abuse, and mental ill health.

Many women across the UK are caught up in a cycle of addiction, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system, facing a lack of opportunities and often a history of trauma and abuse at the foundation. Even when working hard to break the cycle, women can struggle to find work and support to reach their full potential. Gifted Women is a charity for women who are rebuilding their lives after substance misuse, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system, with fresh starts and pathways into the world of work. They recognise that employment, training and further education can be key factors in lasting change and seek to journey with women as they progress into these opportunities.

Further information about Gifted Women can be found in Appendix A.

Our Approach

Listening to lived experience, particularly from the most vulnerable in our city, is not just about addressing individual needs – it is about creating a system that works better for everyone.

By integrating peer-led support programs and empowering women to take active roles in service design, providers can build on this resilience to create a system that feels more inclusive, supportive, and effective.

Our key objective for the workshop was to create a respectful and empowering space for women to share their health and social care experiences, with emphasis on finding out what the women wished health and care providers knew about their experiences using services.

Knowing that the participants had complex backgrounds, with high levels of anxiety, we wanted to ensure our workshop was trauma-informed, clear & structured, that participation was mindful of participants' emotional responses and acknowledged that there is no right or wrong way to tell your story.

The two-hour session incorporated creative and reflective activities to encourage meaningful storytelling. It began with a welcoming introduction and safety agreements to establish trust and set the tone. Activities included a “Strength Through Symbols” exercise, where participants used visual and creative tools to represent their experiences, and storytelling prompts that allowed for deeper exploration of challenges and successes.



Participants engaging in prompted storytelling.

The session concluded with a collaborative “Wish Board” activity, where participants shared their hopes and recommendations for service providers. This structured approach ensured every voice was heard, while fostering a sense of community and collective strength.

Key Findings

This Healthwatch Plymouth insight report draws on the experiences that we recorded during a workshop with women who experience multiple disadvantages currently working with Gifted Women.

These conversations took place on Friday 10th January 2025.

A total of five individuals participated in the workshop at Mutley Baptist Church during their regular Friday drop-in session, along with Emily Quick, Employability Advocate at Gifted Women. Whilst this is a relatively small number of participants, we acknowledge that this is a group whose voices are hard to reach and seldom heard.

The following key findings have been identified from this engagement activity:

- Women who experience multiple disadvantages face additional barriers to accessing health and social care including distrust in ‘professionals’ based on past experiences.
- The absence of a shared patient record system forces women to repeatedly recount their story.
- Women with past histories of addiction are being prescribed addictive medication in primary care.
- Participants felt their problems were too complex to communicate in a ten-minute Primary Care appointment.
- Participants identified a need for an intermediary, who can understand their full needs, who is then able to liaise with Health and Social Care services on their behalf.
- When health professionals went “above and beyond” for an individual, it made a difference beyond resolving the immediate problem.

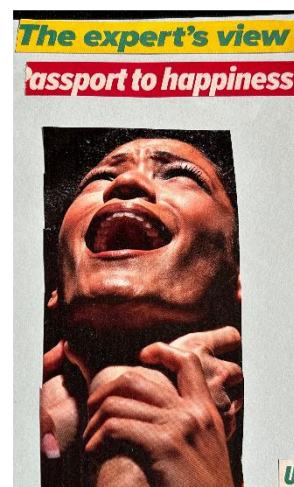
Our Findings

Barriers to Access

The focus group highlighted significant barriers to accessing health and social care services, underscoring systemic challenges that left participants feeling unsupported and disillusioned. As one participant highlighted, accessing health and social care is a *"Passport to happiness"*.

Participants repeatedly emphasised delays in accessing essential services, particularly for ADHD referrals, mental health support, and GP appointments.

They felt the long waiting times exacerbate health issues, erode trust in providers, and perpetuate feelings of being overlooked. As one participant shared, *"Stop waiting times getting longer"*. These delays are not isolated experiences but reflect a broader national concern.



Compounding these access challenges is a deep-seated mistrust of professionals and institutions, shaped by years of unmet needs, dismissive attitudes, and perceived systemic failures. The participants' remarks, including *"Nobody cares"*, *"We need help"*, *"Health is broken"*, encapsulates this sentiment, highlighting how inconsistent care

contributes to a cycle of frustration and disengagement. As one woman mentioned, during a historical visit to a GP, she had asked for a HIV test and been told *"do you know how much these tests costs?"*. She had been raped but had not disclosed this to the GP in question.

The participants also shared significant concerns about the lack of privacy when contacting their GP surgeries, particularly when required to disclose personal issues over the phone. Many expressed fears that reception staff might recognise them or have connections to someone in their personal lives, in particular those who have experienced domestic violence in the same communities, heightening their sense of vulnerability. For these women, and those with histories of trauma, child services involvement or addiction, this perceived risk of breached confidentiality undermines trust and deters them from seeking the care they need.

Lack of centralised patient records and repeating their story

The lack of centralised patient records was also commented upon. Participants expressed their frustration at being forced to repeatedly recount their stories to providers who seem disconnected from their histories.

One participant shared her particularly complex history, including spending 16 years in prison, during which she received minimal – if any – health or dental care. Upon release, four years ago, she faced immense challenges accessing the support she needed. She has spent years on a waiting list for a hip replacement and only recently received a diagnosis of PTSD. She suggested that having an automatic referral process to Primary Care and Mental Health Services upon discharge from prison could have been life changing. She also expressed that as her story was so complex, 10 minutes was not enough time for her to explain her needs to primary care professionals. This prevented her seeking help for multiple conditions for years due to not knowing where to begin. Her story highlights the gaps in continuity of health care for individuals transitioning from prison into the community.

Importance of person centred health care

Participants emphasised the need for health and social care services to adopt a person-centred approach, where care is tailored to individual needs rather than applying a one size fits all model. One participant commented that *“Professionals need to understand that everyone is different”*.



A specific concern raised by participants was the prescribing of addictive medication to individuals with histories or a family history of addiction. *“Stop giving addicts addictive medication”* and *“My partner was given Tramadol and is now dependent on it”*.

The participants also felt that providers failed to allocate sufficient time to understand the complex health issues that women with ‘multiple disadvantages’ like themselves present with. As one participant explained, *“I wish I had more time to explain the problem in detail”*. Many women shared that they feel overwhelmed by the number of issues they need to address in a single GP appointment, leading to a reluctance to fully open up, for fear of *“wasting the GP’s time”*.

There was general discussion around the need for an intermediary for complex patients, to whom they can tell their whole story and who can then liaise with the GP or other services. This idea of a dedicated liaison role could help ensure that participants complex needs and backgrounds are understood and communicated effectively and concisely, ultimately saving time for medical professionals whilst also improving the quality of care they receive.

What worked well

Amidst the challenges, participants shared moments of positive experiences with health and social care providers. These moments often stood out because they involved providers who listened, acted promptly, and treated the individual with care and respect. Participants praised those working with their children, in particular on the Children's ward at Derriford Hospital, Paediatric Occupational Therapists and emergency CAHMS involvement.



Another participant described how it was noticed by a Consultant at Derriford Hospital during Breast Surgery that she had been waiting for a year for a GP referral to Dermatology. The Consultant went out of her way to take pictures of the rash and directly referred the participant to Dermatology. These moments of going *"above and beyond"* left lasting impressions, as well

as deep gratitude, from women who had experienced multiple disadvantages.

There was also praise for Sexual Health in Plymouth (SHiP), which participants described as clean, helpful, easy to access and left having a good experience. Plymouth SARC (Sexual Assault Referral Centre) was also praised by one of the participants as being *"excellent"*.

Other women highlighted the role of compassionate providers in building trust. In particular, several participants highlighted the '[Royal] *Navy Doctors*' at Derriford hospital as being *"excellent"*, *"thorough"* and *"caring"*.

Resilience and community strength

Despite barriers, participants took pride in their resilience and personal journeys. Many women spoke about their determination to overcome challenges and their passion for helping others in similar situations. This

sense of community and mutual support was a recurring theme, highlighting the power of peer connections in fostering hope and healing.

Participants emphasised the strength they've drawn from their shared experiences, even when trust in the system has been broken. This mistrust of professionals often leads women to rely on their peers for guidance and support, showcasing the role that community-driven solutions can play in addressing gaps.

Participant Wishes



Gifted Women's Wish Board, sharing their "One Wish" for providers to hear

The participants were invited to share their "One Wish" for providers, focusing on what they know providers need to hear. A recurring theme was the desire for providers to take the time to hear their stories fully and recognise their lived experiences. As one participant expressed "*Listen to our stories – we know our bodies*". These wishes underline the participants desire for support that addresses the root causes of their challenges rather than relying on temporary fixes.

Gifted Women Wishes

- ★ Understand their mental, physical and emotional health
- ★ Listen to patient/service users' story properly. "We know our bodies"
- ★ More students training to alleviate pressure for patients regarding mental health
- ★ Stop pumping people full of medication for mental health and over prescribing antibiotics and pain meds
- ★ They would try hard for complicated patients
- ★ Non-judgmental; Solutions manageable not pharmaceutical
- ★ Stop giving addicts addictive medication.

Our Observations

Healthwatch Plymouth have the following observations from this engagement:

- It has become apparent that not all GP practices are trauma informed. There is scope for Primary Care providers in Plymouth to access the readily available and free trauma training provided by the Trauma Informed Plymouth Network (TIPN), ensuring all patient-facing staff are trauma informed. In particular, Dr Elpitha Bruce, of Adelaide and St Levans Surgery, is leading on trauma informed GP services in Plymouth, and could be consulted on best practice in this area.
- The participants we spoke to have complex stories that cross over several themes and service lines. This complexity involves multiple providers both within and outside of health and social care, meaning it is difficult for them to make individual providers aware of the whole situation of their lives. The women that we talked with identified a need for an intermediary, who can understand their full needs, who is then able to liaise with Health and Social Care services on their behalf. We note that an existing offer, under Livewell's FUSE (Frequent Users Support Empowerment) Programme is already available.

- The participants felt that repeatedly communicating complex stories to services was overwhelming, especially under time constraints. We note Changing Futures 'Your Story' project (formerly known as the 'Passport Project') is an avenue to promote culture change in assessment practice in services that support people experiencing multiple disadvantages.

Our Recommendations

Healthwatch have the following recommendations:

- All GP practices within Plymouth make use of trauma training through the Trauma Informed Plymouth Network.
- Livewell's FUSE programme be widely adopted by all Health and Adult Social Care providers for individuals with multiple disadvantages so that their complex stories are more easily understood.
- Changing Futures 'Your Story' project is adopted by all Health and Adult Social Care services to support service users with a complex story to tell.
- Patients with a history or risk of addiction should be identified before prescribing addictive medication, with alternative treatments considered whenever possible.

Thank you

Healthwatch Plymouth would like to thank the women of Gifted Women for their courage, openness and honesty in sharing their stories.

Appendix A

Gifted Women is a charity for women who are rebuilding their lives after substance misuse, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system, with fresh starts and pathways into the world of work. Many women across the UK are caught up in a cycle of addiction, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system, facing a lack of opportunities and often a history of trauma and abuse at the foundation. Even when working hard to break the cycle, women can struggle to find work and support to reach their full potential. Gifted Women creates space for women to ignite a spark and forge a fresh pathway. They recognise that employment, training and further education can be key factors in lasting change and seek to journey with women as they progress into these opportunities.

Women within Plymouth and surrounding areas can self-refer or can be referred to them by organisations across the city to take part in a trauma-informed programme of employability training and confidence building spanning up to 18 months. Their group work programme is a journey of discovery and personal growth for each woman, where she can set her own individual goals and work towards them in a supportive environment where both peers and practitioners are there to cheer her on.

As a key part of their employability programme, they link up with local employers to provide meaningful work experience placements which are tailored to women's strengths and ambitions, enabling women to put all their learning into practice and experience being part of a team.

They know that loneliness and isolation are commonly felt amongst women they work with, and so they provide lots of social opportunities to build confidence and grow women's support network. This includes a weekly drop-in group for their community where women can meet others, have fun, build confidence and access support. Their aim is to see women thriving in employment or be enrolled in further education and this is achieved in the woman's own time and at a pace that feels realistic and sustainable. They are privileged to journey with women through the ups and downs along the way.

For more information about Gifted Women, please see

<https://www.giftedwomen.co.uk>

Appendix B

Workshop Title:

"Our Stories, Our Voices: Shaping Health and Social Care Together"

Objective:

Provide a respectful and empowering space for women to share their health and social care experiences, with an emphasis on answering the question:

"I wish Health and Care providers knew..."

Session Overview (2 Hours)

1. Welcome and Setting the Tone (10 mins)

- Warm Welcome:
"Thank you all for being here today. Your voices and stories are powerful, and we're here to listen and learn from you."
- Healthwatch mission: To make sure people's experiences help make health and care better. Background info about Healthwatch and our remit/purpose.
- Explain what is meant by "Health and Social Care": What services fall into this category. Public Health – Plymouth City Council, NHS – Primary and Secondary Care, Hospitals (UHP), -Livewell (Mental Health): Livewell, Derriford, Mount Gould, GP, Pharmacy, Plymouth City Council, Harbour, Hamoaze House,
- Purpose:
"Today's workshop is about sharing your experiences with health and social care. We want to know: what do you wish providers truly understood about your journey?"
- Open with a facilitator briefly sharing a story about why they care about this topic. Emphasise shared humanity and the value of their input. Add in a story about how local Healthwatch has created change based on lived experience.

2. To ensure everyone felt heard and valued we offered the following Safety Agreements:

- Respect and honour each other's experiences without judgment.
- Choice to participate in the way that feels best for you, and there is no pressure to share or speak unless you're comfortable.
- There is no pressure or expectation to share more than you feel comfortable with saying in a group session. You don't feel you have to go into something that might be difficult. However, offer the option of following up with them separately after the workshop.
- Group agreement to anonymity and keeping everything shared within the group (Emily Quick, Employability Advocate at Gifted Women present from a safeguarding perspective).
- There are no stupid questions or wrong answers.

3. Icebreaker: Strength Through Symbols (15 mins)

Activity Instructions:

- "Think about a word, image, or symbol that represents your journey using local services. Use the materials to create a collage or sketch. This is your space to reflect on what empowers you."

4. Storytelling Prompts: Direct and Empowering (20 mins)

"Storytelling is a way to share what matters most. There's no right or wrong way to tell your story. Take your time and share what feels meaningful to you."

- "Here are some prompts to get you started:"
 - "When was a time you felt truly heard in your health and care experience?"
 - "What is one thing you wish had gone differently?"
 - "If you were in charge of health and care services in Plymouth, what's one thing you would change?"

Activity Instructions:

- Hand out the post it notes, plus the three questions.
- Give participants 10 minutes to reflect, write, or sketch their responses.

COMFORT BREAK – 10 minutes

5. Story Sharing: Celebrating Strength (40 mins)

Activity Instructions:

- Each participant has up to 5 minutes to share their story.
- Stories are transcribed or recorded.

6. Wish Creation: Your Voice, Your Power (15 mins)

Activity Instructions:

- Provide blank cards and nice pens/markers. Invite participants to write or draw their “one wish” for providers, focusing on what they know providers need to hear.
- Create a “Wish Board” where these cards can be displayed anonymously.

7. Closing (10 mins)

- Collective Themes: Highlight common threads from the stories shared.
- Gratitude:
“Thank you for your courage and honesty and sharing your experiences. Your voices will shape how we move forward.”
- Takeaway: We will send them a photo of the wish board as well as any report that we write up. We will keep Gifted Women in the loop regarding any recommendations or conversations we may have, following this workshop.



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