

Wayahead®

# Lived & Living Experience Policy & Framework



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# Purpose & scope



**Wayahead values the expertise of individuals with lived experience of mental health challenges. Their insights are integral to shaping our programs, reducing stigma, and ensuring our initiatives are relevant, impactful, and effectively translate knowledge into action.**

## **Valuing lived and living experience**

People with lived and living experience of mental health issues, and their families, kinship and carers hold unique insights into how services can best respond to mental health needs. While acknowledging commonalities, Wayahead respects and values that each individual's lived and living experience of mental health challenges is unique and deeply personal.

## **Commitment to diversity and inclusion**

Wayahead actively seeks to ensure diversity within its lived and living experience engagement, explicitly including the broad spectrum of caregivers, families, and kinship groups, as well as individuals from First Nations, diverse cultural, linguistic, LGBTQ+, disability, and age backgrounds.

## **Working together as equal partners**

Wayahead envisions a mental health system where the voices, expertise, and lived experiences of consumers, carers, families, and kinship groups are central to all aspects of service design, delivery, and governance. We are committed to moving beyond tokenistic involvement to genuine partnership and shared power. This ensures that the voices of those with lived experience are heard and valued, influencing Wayahead culture, policies and practices.

## **Embedding experience in everything we do**

Wayahead aims to embed lived experience into every facet of the organisation, including service design, delivery, monitoring, reporting, research, evaluation, continuous improvement and governance. This includes ensuring lived experience representation at all levels, including leadership.

## **Co-designing programs that make a difference**

Wayahead has integrated lived experience into its core programs (e.g., Mental Health Month, Anxiety Support Groups, the Information Services). This commitment to co-design and co-production, as detailed in Wayahead's strategic plan, ensures that services are relevant, impactful, and truly meet the needs of the community. Wayahead's consistent prioritisation of lived experience expertise sets a high standard for best practice in the mental health sector, demonstrating a commitment to equity and genuine partnership.

## **Guided by human rights and shared responsibility**

The framework is grounded in human rights principles and this is a core principle throughout this document. It is the responsibility of the Board, Leadership Team, staff and volunteers to implement and uphold the framework's principles and practices.

# Purpose & scope *(continued)*

## Definitions

- **Lived experience and living experience** of mental health challenges encompasses direct personal encounters with mental health challenges.
- For the purposes of this framework, “lived and living experience” refers to individuals with direct experience of a mental health issue (consumers), as well as their carer’s, families, and kinship groups.
- We acknowledge that different types of lived and living experience offer unique perspectives. The term may apply to staff and volunteers who bring their own unique lived and living experience to their roles.

### An expansion on the definitions is provided:

- **‘Lived and living experience’ of mental health issues:**

Lived experience typically refers to past experiences with mental health challenges. It encompasses the individual’s journey, including the challenges faced, coping mechanisms used, and lessons learned. It suggests a period of experience that may or may not be ongoing.

- Living experience emphasises the ongoing and present nature of the individual’s experience with mental health challenges. It highlights the continuous process of navigating mental health, including current challenges, ongoing management strategies, and the ongoing impact on daily life.

- **‘Caregiving’ for someone with mental health issues:** Encompasses providing support and care to a family member, friend, or loved one struggling with mental health issues. This involves understanding their needs, advocating for them, and helping to manage the emotional and practical challenges involved.

- **Navigating the mental healthcare system:**

The process of accessing and utilising mental health services, including therapy, medication management, and support services. This can involve finding appropriate service providers and advocating for oneself within the system.

# Recovery orientated language



Wayahead is committed to actively avoiding language that creates an ‘us and them’ dichotomy or categorises individuals as ‘well’ versus ‘unwell.’ Our language will consistently promote a sense of shared humanity and collective responsibility for mental wellbeing.

## Avoiding sensationalised language

The SANE Mindframe guidelines and the Mental Health Coordinating Council’s guide on recovery-oriented language highlight the critical importance of language in mental health. Words carry powerful connotations. Using stigmatising language (“crazy,” “psychotic,” “mentally ill”) activates negative stereotypes and prejudices leading to discrimination and social exclusion. Mindframe’s guidelines directly address this by promoting person-first language and avoiding sensationalised or alarming language.

## Reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking

Stigmatising language creates barriers to help-seeking. Individuals may avoid seeking support due to fear of judgment. Using respectful and empowering language fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment, encouraging help-seeking behaviour. The use of person-first language (“person with lived experience of depression”) emphasises the individual’s identity beyond their mental health condition. This empowers individuals and promotes a sense of agency and self-determination, crucial for recovery.

## Focusing on strengths, resilience and hope

Recovery-oriented language focuses on strengths, resilience and hope, rather than solely on deficits. This fosters a positive outlook and encourages individuals to focus on their goals and aspirations.

Using clear, accurate, and non-judgmental language improves communication between individuals with lived experience, healthcare professionals, and the wider community.

This includes the importance of being aware of non-verbal language as a powerful tool in communication. The guidelines emphasise the importance of cultural safety and adapting language to suit the preferences and needs of the audience. By promoting respectful and accurate language, these guidelines contribute to a more inclusive and supportive society for individuals with lived experience of mental health challenges.

## Staff and volunteer training

Wayahead staff and volunteers will receive training on language to support consistent application of recovery-oriented and person-first language across all communications.

## Embedding lived experience in practice

The policy and framework aim to enhance lived experience inclusion within Wayahead, leading to improved outcomes by supporting initiatives that encourage people with lived and living experience to share their stories, promoting empathy and challenging negative stereotypes.



# The value of lived experience

Wayahead's values are aligned with the *National Lived Experience Workforce Development Guidelines (National Mental Health Commission, 2021)*.



## Wayahead is committed to:

### **1. Lived experience inclusion**

This is a fundamental social justice issue. A fair and accountable mental health system must centre lived experience.

### **2. Valuing the inherent worth and dignity of every individual**

Recognising the unique expertise that comes from lived experience.

### **3. Working in genuine partnership with people with lived experience**

Sharing power and decision-making.

### **4. Embracing a culture of continuous learning and improvement**

Using feedback to refine our practices and achieve better outcomes.

### **5. Open communication and accountability...**

...in all our interactions with people with lived experience.

# Best practice principles for lived experience inclusion

- **Empowerment and self-determination:**

People with lived experience have the right to make decisions about their care and participation in service delivery. Their autonomy and self-determination are paramount.

- **Meaningful participation:**

Inclusion goes beyond tokenism to ensure true participation, partnership, and shared power. Individuals with lived experience should be genuine partners in all aspects of service design, delivery, monitoring, evaluation, and governance. This requires sharing power and decision-making equitably, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.

- **Respect, dignity and cultural safety:**

The inherent worth and dignity of every individual must be respected. This includes creating a culturally safe environment that values the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of all individuals.

- **Trauma informed care:**

Recognising the impact of trauma on individuals' experiences and needs is crucial. Services and interactions should be designed and delivered in a way that avoids re-traumatisation and promotes recovery and healing.

- **Equity and justice:**

Lived experience inclusion is a fundamental social justice issue. The aim is to create a fair and accountable system that addresses historical and ongoing inequities.

- **Transparency and accountability:**

Open communication and accountability are essential in all interactions with people with lived experience. This includes clear communication about roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.

- **Continuous improvement:**

Lived experience inclusion will be integrated into Wayahead's philosophy, practices, and commitment to continuous improvement. This requires ongoing evaluation, feedback mechanisms, and a willingness to adapt based on the input of individuals with lived experience.

Wayahead will develop and communicate practical guidelines and 'rules of engagement' for creating safe, inclusive, and respectful spaces for all interactions, particularly those involving the sharing of lived experience. These guidelines will be co-designed with individuals with lived experience.

Wayahead is committed to identifying and dismantling barriers that lead to 'box-checking' exercises, ensuring that all contributions from individuals with lived and living experience are genuinely safe, purposeful, and impactful, moving beyond mere compliance.

# Recruitment, training and induction



**Wayahead will ensure recruitment processes are inclusive, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive. We will prioritise the physical and emotional safety of all candidates.**

## **Inclusive and culturally responsive recruitment**

The process will be adapted to meet cultural protocols and individual needs. For example, ensuring the application provides reasonable adjustments as needed. We will clearly communicate the challenges and positives of lived experience work, allowing candidates to make informed decisions about their suitability for working and volunteering with Wayahead.

## **Representation and equity in selection**

Wayahead will include people with lived experience on selection panels to ensure diverse perspectives are considered and to model inclusive practices. Wayahead will actively recruit from underrepresented groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and older people.

## **Ongoing training and capacity building**

Wayahead commits to ensuring that all relevant staff and volunteers, particularly those in direct support roles, receive current and up-to-date training in critical areas such as ASSIST and suicide prevention, to enhance their confidence and capability in providing safe and effective support. All volunteers and staff will be offered comprehensive training on bi-annual/or annual basis (depending upon need) that addresses the specific challenges of working in mental health.

### **This includes training on:**

- Trauma-informed care
- Cultural safety (First Nations)
- Inclusive Practice (First Nations, LGBTQ, disabilities, and culturally diverse communities, and older people)
- Ethical considerations and boundaries
- Mental Health First Aid
- Crisis intervention e.g., Suicide ASSIST (as appropriate)

## **Embedding lived experience in induction**

The induction process will explicitly introduce Wayahead's commitment to lived experience from the outset. It will include a facilitated discussion or resource that encourages new staff and volunteers to reflect on their own relationship with mental health and provides a safe space to consider if and how they might wish to share their lived experience, ensuring comfort and choice.

## **Creating a supportive onboarding environment**

The induction process will be tailored to the specific role and will include an opportunity for the staff or volunteer to meet with other lived experience volunteers and staff. Creating a welcoming and supportive environment is essential for successful onboarding. For lived experience individuals, this might involve pairing them with a mentor or buddy for additional support and guidance and providing access to peer support networks.



# Lived experience contributions

## Strategic planning and governance

- Provide input into the strategic plan (co-creation)
- Staff participating in Board sub-committees and attending Board meetings when appropriate
- Lived and Living advisory group where there are numerous voices heard. Establish a dedicated 'Lived Experience Advisory Group' with a clear mandate to provide strategic guidance, oversight, and advocacy for the continuous embedding and evolution of lived experience principles across Wayahead, ensuring a strong structure for contributing to Board decision-making.

## Program development

**People with lived experience contribute to monitoring and evaluating Wayahead's services through:**

- Participation in surveys and feedback sessions
- Contributing to program codesign and development to embed lived experience skills, information, and insights
- Reviewing program materials and resources
- Providing input on service delivery models including community education

## Evaluation and research

**Lived experience is integral to all research and evaluation activities. This includes:**

- Participation in research design and implementation
- Co-creation of research questions and methodologies
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Dissemination of research findings



## Direct peer support

**Wayahead supports peer support initiatives, including:**

- Mentoring and support schemes
- Peer-led support groups
- Direct peer support services

## Advocacy

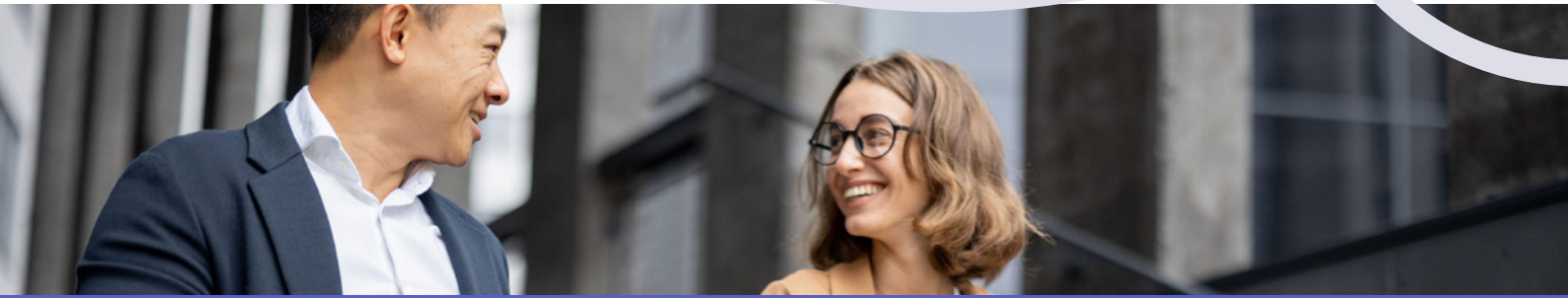
**People with lived experience are actively involved in Wayahead's advocacy efforts, including:**

- Participation in public awareness campaigns
- Lobbying for policy changes (e.g., through membership network)
- Sharing their stories to reduce stigma and discrimination

## Education and training

People with lived experience co-deliver training to staff and other service users, sharing their expertise and promoting recovery-oriented approaches (e.g., stigma reduction training, the development of training curriculum and materials, effective communication skills using culturally sensitive language, and safe story-telling approaches).

# Supporting lived experience volunteers, staff & ambassadors



Wayahead provides ongoing support and resources to lived experience volunteers and staff, including:

- **Peer review and monitoring:**  
Opportunities for peer review and feedback to improve programs.
- **Peer support:**  
Mentoring and support to foster learning and connection.
- **Ambassadors:**  
Incorporating Ambassadors with lived experience of mental health could strengthen peer-to-peer support, increase the diversity of perspectives, and improve the effectiveness of engagement strategies. These ambassadors could act as liaisons between Wayahead and the communities they represent, ensuring that the voices of those with lived experience are heard and acted upon.
- **Participation:**  
Opportunities to share stories in social media/media; and attend meetings and events as speakers or participants.
- **Training and professional development:**  
Access to training and professional development opportunities to enhance skills and knowledge.
- **Supervision:**  
Regular supervision from experienced staff to provide guidance and support.
- **Wellbeing:**  
Beyond formal supervision, Wayahead commits to proactive wellbeing measures, including regular informal check-ins and dedicated support mechanisms, to ensure that individuals with lived and living experience are 'travelling okay' and feel adequately supported in their roles. This includes fostering a culture where open communication about wellbeing is encouraged.
- **Remuneration:**  
Fair and equitable compensation for their time and expertise (where applicable and feasible).
- **Recognition and appreciation:**  
Regular recognition and appreciation for their contributions.

# Governance



Embedding lived experience into governance fundamentally shifts power dynamics and decision-making processes compared to traditional governance models.

People with lived experience can participate in Wayahead's governance structures, including:

Serving on  
the board of  
directors

Participating  
in Board  
sub-committees

Providing input  
on strategic  
planning

# Risk management

Wayahead recognises that the involvement of people with lived experience need to be adequately supported and there are potential risks. We mitigate these risks through:

- **Risk assessment:**

Regular risk assessments are conducted to identify and address potential hazards.

- **Wellbeing measures:**

Appropriate measures are implemented to ensure the safety and well-being of all involved.

- **Confidentiality:**

Staff and volunteers adhere to privacy and confidentiality to protect the privacy of individuals.

- **Boundaries:**

Respectful and professional boundaries are fundamental to our work with lived experience. These boundaries protect both the individuals we serve and our staff/volunteers, fostering a safe and productive environment built on mutual respect and trust.

- **Supervision and support:**

Adequate supervision and support are provided to lived experience volunteers.

- **Incident reporting:**

Clear procedures are in place for reporting and managing incidents.

- **Training:**

Adequate training is provided (e.g., De-escalation, ASSIST, Mental Health First Aid) to increase skills and knowledge.

Risk assessments will also consider the potential risks associated with a narrow vision of lived experience, including the risk of not being diverse enough in representation, which can lead to blind spots and limit the effectiveness and relevance of Wayahead's initiatives.





# Commitment to continuous improvement

This framework will be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure it remains relevant and effective. People with lived and living experience will be actively involved in this review process.



## Ongoing review and accountability

The Lived Experience Framework implementation will be a standing agenda item for bi-monthly staff meetings to ensure ongoing discussion, feedback, and integration into daily operations. This ensures consistent internal dialogue and accountability. This framework, like all Wayahead policies and procedures, will undergo a formal review on an annual basis, with active participation from individuals with lived and living experience, to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness. This aligns it with broader organisational governance.

## Clear and inclusive communication

Wayahead is committed to presenting the framework, in clear, concise, and accessible language to ensure broad understanding and engagement across all stakeholders, including those with diverse literacy levels and backgrounds.

## Using the 'leading the change' toolkit

Wayahead will adopt the Leading the Change toolkit's methodology for evaluating lived experience (Mental Health Commission NSW, 2024). The toolkit's checklist provides a practical tool for Wayahead to evaluate its levels of lived experience inclusion and leadership. This checklist will be used to identify strengths and weaknesses, set targets, and develop an action plan for improvement. The results of this self-assessment will be documented and used to inform ongoing policy development and implementation.



# Commitment to continuous improvement *(continued)*

## Establishing a continuous improvement cycle

Wayahead will use the toolkit as a foundation for establishing a continuous improvement cycle for lived experience inclusion. This involves regularly reviewing its practices, using the checklist to assess progress, and adapting its policies and procedures based on the findings. This includes mechanisms for gathering feedback from staff, volunteers, and service users, with lived experience.

## Gathering and applying feedback

Wayahead will establish clear and accessible mechanisms for gathering ongoing feedback from individuals with lived and living experience, including staff, volunteers, and service users. Mechanisms for gathering feedback will recognise diverse perspectives in embedding lived experience principles. This feedback will be systematically collected and used to inform continuous improvement.

## Measuring inclusion and experience

As part of its continuous improvement cycle, Wayahead will conduct regular anonymous surveys of individuals with lived and living experience

(including volunteers, staff, and Board members) to assess their experiences and perceptions of lived experience inclusion. The results will be cross-referenced against the 'Leading the Change toolkit' checklist to identify areas for growth and inform action plans.

## Public accountability

Wayahead will publicly report on its progress in embedding lived experience through its website, annual reports, and social media channels, using the 'Leading the Change toolkit' framework to demonstrate transparency and accountability to the community and stakeholders. This could involve sharing the results of its self-assessment, outlining its action plan, and reporting on its progress towards achieving its goals.

## Next Steps

To operationalise Wayahead's Lived and Living Experience Framework, the organisation will establish a Lived and Living Experience Advisory Committee. This committee will provide strategic oversight and guide implementation through the development of a detailed action plan that includes measurable key indicators to track progress and impact. A Terms of Reference will be co-designed to define the committee's purpose, scope, and decision-making authority, ensuring transparency and accountability.

The framework will be embedded across Wayahead's governance structures and committees, including the Anxiety Disorders Advisory Committee (ADAC), to promote genuine partnership and shared power. This process will align with best practice principles of co-design, co-production, continuous improvement, and equity, ensuring lived experience is central to organisational culture, policy, and program delivery.

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