

# RISE WALK TOGETHER EXTENDING OUR REACH: THE JUSTLIFE PEER RESEARCH MANUAL

BY  
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## WHAT IS THE RISE WALK TOGETHER PROJECT?

RISE is a charity in Brighton and Hove that helps survivors of domestic abuse. The Walk Together Project was funded through the Big Lottery's Community Engagement and Building Project (2016-21), part of the Women and Girls Initiative. The main goal was to make sure the voices of women who have experienced domestic abuse were heard, so we could understand what really works in terms of support—not just for safety but for true freedom from abuse. The Walk Together project was ground-breaking because it gave RISE a new way to work with women who have experienced domestic abuse. It allowed them to share their stories on their own terms and helped expand their sense of freedom from abuse in different parts of their lives.

RISE secured more research funding from the Community Fund as part of the Communities Rising project (2021-24). Five new Community Researchers joined the team to build on the lessons from Walk Together, using tools like visual storytelling and incorporating the perspectives of community workers and partners in the community into the RISE community evaluation and research. This report is written by researchers from both stages of the project.

## WHAT IS THE JUSTLIFE MANUAL?

Justlife are a charity that runs services in both Manchester and Brighton and has become a leading organisation for researching, advocating for and working with vulnerable people living in temporary accommodation.

At the beginning of 2023, Justlife convened a group of five peer researchers in Brighton, funded by the Young Foundation, to establish a team capable of conducting peer research. Their aim was to explore how peer research could be used to access first-hand community knowledge on intersectionality in Temporary Accommodation. The outcomes of this pilot were compiled into the first draft of a co-created manual by the peer researchers, designed to guide future peer research projects. It highlights both the successes and challenges they encountered throughout the process.

Following this pilot, Justlife invited peer groups from partner organizations to test the manual and provide feedback, enriching the learning for future use. In the summer of 2024, RISE was invited to contribute to this process. A team of four community researchers and two facilitators met weekly to review the manual and share their feedback with Justlife. This collaboration culminated in a Knowledge Exchange Event, where the RISE researchers presented their insights and experiences.

## HOW WE HAVE WRITTEN THIS REPORT

This report is an extended version of the RISE peer research section from the JustLife manual titled Our Stories. Our contribution originated from a PowerPoint presentation we delivered at the JustLife Knowledge Exchange Event in September 2024. This presentation was a collaborative effort, reflecting our experiences working through the manual and exploring the diverse perspectives we, as women from different backgrounds who have experienced domestic abuse, could offer.



## WHO WE ARE

Our group was established in July 2024 to test the manual created by the pilot JustLife peer research group. We are made up of four members each of us women with lived experience of domestic abuse. The experience of homeless and temporary accommodation is common for many women who experience domestic abuse. Even when women do not 'leave' (to take up emergency accommodation) it can be argued that the experience of abuse and isolation can make them feel homeless in their own homes and communities.

All four members had engaged with RISE as either Community Researcher volunteers or paid Change Makers linked to the Communities Rising project, funded by the Community Fund. The RISE Walk Together community researcher programme, established in 2017 is based on a research approach that was created with and for women with lived experience of domestic abuse.

## OUR EXPERIENCE AT RISE

Over the period July –September 2024 we met weekly and worked through the core sections of the manual, discussed the training slides, took part in the linked activities and created feedback notes to share with the JustLife team.

We were supported by two facilitators, one of whom manages the Walk Together research programme at RISE (from 2016–24) and a RISE Community Worker (specialising in Black and Minoritised communities), who had herself previously trained as a RISE Community Researcher for the Communities

The intention behind the Walk Together programme was to embed lived experience of domestic abuse as expertise, into RISE models of research and evaluation. Specifically, RISE wanted to understand how best to build in expertise by experience in the way we understand the impact of community support on women's sense of safety and freedom from domestic abuse. As a result, RISE have developed a legacy of rich community research training that has drawn together the voices and experiences of survivors of domestic abuse from different, diverse backgrounds and situations to create a 'Walk Together' research approach to research and evaluation. Thanks to the work of our current team (2022–4) this approach is now embedded in community evaluation at RISE which helps the service better understand the diverse needs of the women they support, to enable them to better design and build support in the community, tailored to their lived experiences.

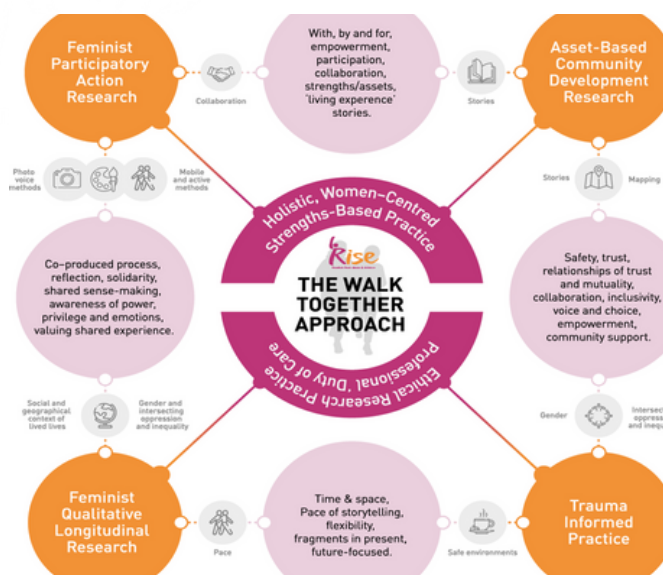
***We are a Woman Only Team!***

***We take a non- hierarchical, collaborative approach***

***We have shared values & motivation  
We come from diverse situations: age, disability, background, sexuality, gender (also non- binary) , ethnicity, class and education.***

***We have shared lived experience – we are 'survivors' or 'person who has experienced domestic abuse'.  
We are at different stages of the journey.***

***We pay attention to language and feelings – even within our team we have different feelings about defining experiences as -victim, survivor, thriver.***



## A FRESH OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT

That doesn't mean that we had all the answers before we started this project with JustLife! The JustLife manual gave us a fresh opportunity to reflect on who we were as a group of peer researchers and what felt important to us. It provided us with an opportunity to reflect on what may have been missed by the JustLife team without the Walk Together framework, but also what we may have missed, by adopting a tried and tested approach from the previous generation of RISE community researchers. We have included here the voices of the Walk Together facilitators who reflect on what they also learnt from the project.

In September 2024 we were invited to the JustLife Knowledge Exchange Event. We presented a PowerPoint with the key themes that we felt emerged from our engagement with the manual and shared our experiences

## THEME 1: COMMUNITY AND SHARED EXPERIENCE

As we progressed through the manual we realised that 'community researcher' felt a better fit for us than the title 'peer researcher' as our work is as much about creating strength, compassion and solidarity within our team as it is modelling this approach to the community conversations and activities in the name of research –out there –with our 'participants' (or community storytellers).

In the section of the manual about research methods we were struck by the advice to walk alongside participants and 'dig deep' to encourage people to tell their story. This theme stuck with us as one that jarred with our Walk Together approach, we realised that we had a lot to share with the JustLife project about the importance of relationships of care and empathy and putting individual wellbeing before the need to extract good data.

### WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO US?

**Feminism and intersectionality.  
Having a trauma informed  
approach.**

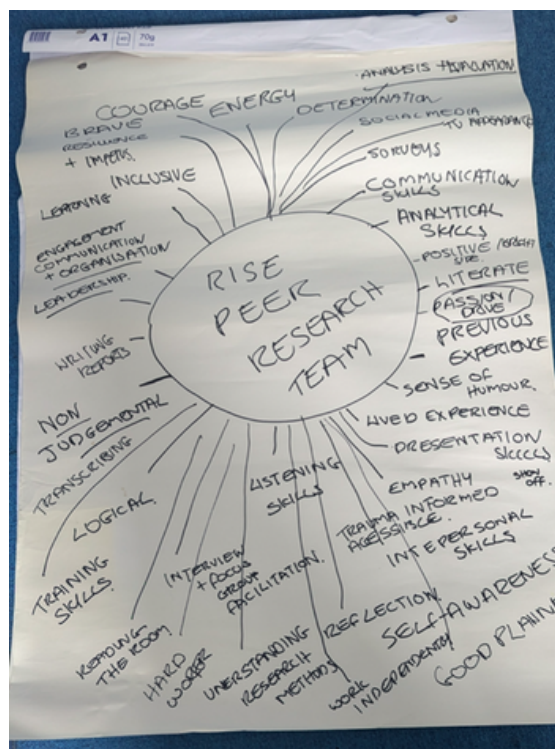
**People feeling safe, held and  
valued.**

**Building relationships of care &  
empathy.**

**Conversations and research  
relationships – where there is a  
bit of give and take – not  
authoritative or extractive –  
Storytelling and Creativity.**

**It's a community approach!!**

***"As survivors, Peer Research has been  
essential to finding a community as  
domestic abuse isolates you. No  
perpetrator wants you to have a  
community of survivors around you."  
(RISE Community Researcher)***



## HOW DO WE DO THIS?

**We think about how we can give back to participants."**

**"We Don't dig deep! – Participants are more important than data."**

**"We care about intersectionality and domestic abuse."**

**"Ample time and space for people to talk through their trauma."**

**"Consent in research being an ongoing conversation. Established relationship to say that you are not okay with something."**

**(RISE Community Research Team)**

One of the aspects of the JustLife manual and slides that we really enjoyed was the section on Intersectionality. Supported by the RISE facilitator it inspired us in the group to explore other examples on YouTube and through poetry. We decided that this part of the manual could benefit from a lot more detail.

## SHARED EXPERIENCE AND FEELING SAFE

Because, as a group, we joined the JustLife project fairly late in the day the other members of the collaboration were a bit of an unknown. We didn't know how much they knew about domestic abuse and whether they would have the same understanding as us or subscribe to common myths or stereotypes. We appreciated the support from the JustLife facilitators who were happy for us to contribute in whatever way felt comfortable to us and appreciated the particular need for women who have experienced domestic abuse for confidentiality and anonymity when working collaboratively.

***"We had an interesting discussion about women's-only spaces. We agreed that it is not simply about being a group of women, because women only groups are not always supportive. Rather it is about shared values and experiences and the importance of having an organisation that reflects the values back to them." (RISE Community Research Team).***

***'I felt nervous presenting at the Knowledge Exchange Event. But I felt really positive about the inclusive environment that was created by the JustLife team. It felt like you could really just be yourself and everyone accepted different needs and experiences' (RISE Community Researcher).***

***One of the conversations that we as facilitators had behind the scenes was how to prepare and support the team to share their experiences of community or peer research in the context of the lived experience domestic abuse outside of the trauma informed and women only space we had created, and that the team were used to. We wondered about the mixed and somewhat unknown audience for the Knowledge Exchange Event. This led to an interesting conversation with the team about women only spaces and what felt important. It reminds us that when considering collaboration across lines of difference we need to clearly communicate and negotiate consent, group agreements and values and think about the supportive relationships and environments that need to be in place. (Facilitator, RISE)***



## THEME 2: CREATING RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS

We realised that one of the things we wanted to share with the JustLife team for the development of their manual was how we created a comfortable and trauma informed environment for research team work and how in turn this could be modelled for research activities and community conversations.

### *Physical Space (Accessible and Safe)*

*Sensory toys.*

*Windows opens or closed.*

*A freeing space & physical safety.*

*Privacy/ door closed.*

*A big enough table/comfy chairs.*

*Sound, lights and colours sensitive.*

*Freedom to take break (but cues or physical prompts).*

*Hybrid/Screen but aware of energy/fatigue.*

*Paper versions/ audible versions of notes.*

*Snacks/ drinks.*

### *Emotional Space – Building ‘Bridges of Understanding’*

*Creating ‘Group Agreement’ for working together.*

*Care, empathy & compassion.*

*Check ins and outs ( all create and hold space)*

*Ongoing process of consent/care for each other.*

*Openness*

*‘Voice’*

*RISE – an organisation that deeply understands and reflects those morals/values and considerations back/caters to group.*

As we discussed what we felt was needed in our research practice we reflected on how important this felt in relation to the experience of domestic abuse and specifically coercive control.

*“Domestic abuse, especially coercive control can take away your sense of freedom, it means you are ‘isolated and trapped’. (RISE Community Researcher)*

*‘It can ‘shrink your world’ – you have no space. This can feel ‘unexplainable to people who don’t know’. ” (RISE Community Researcher).*

When presenting these ideas to JustLife we wanted to explain the key idea of ‘space for action’ (Kelly 2014) that RISE use in their work. Or more simply put, the sense of freedom from abuse that women experience in the onward journey from domestic abuse, and specifically coercive control in different areas of their lives. We explained how community researchers as part of the Walk Together research programme has developed different research tools for exploring the impact of community support on these different areas of women’s lives.

In short, we wanted to make it clear how important peer research is for women who have experienced domestic abuse, both for those who take on the role of researcher and those who participate in research activities and projects. It can reduce isolation, amplify your voice and make you feel heard and understood by others with a similar shared experience

*We define freedom from abuse in relation to the following: our sense of home, feeling comfortable in public places, connected to community, voice, choice and support, knowing strengths, confidence in own thinking, keeping on going, looking after myself, understanding domestic abuse, understanding inequality, caring for others, parenting, relationships and finances.*

### THEME 3: CREATING RESEARCH APPROACHES

Throughout our testing of the JustLife manual one thing that we really enjoyed was the research activities and examples given for discussion. Unlike the examples in the RISE Walk Together research training programme these were not specific to core groups, individuals or experiences. We were able to adapt these stories to domestic abuse but in a way that felt comfortable and exploratory, we didn't have to have all the answers.

The Walk Together research training programme at RISE builds in examples of research situations based on things that have happened in our past work. For example, to encourage community researchers to think about how they would assess the support needs of a group or individual or how much of their personal experience they wish to share. By working with more neutral examples as part of the JustLife project however, we were able to have a discussion about the pressure to 'get it right' when examples are more specific. We were able to talk about the power imbalance between facilitators and participants in training courses and how this could be addressed.

In contrast when we came to an activity about identifying our research skills in pairs we found that we were a bit more subdued and disengaged. We reflected on what was going on for the group. We talked about how hard it is for women to talk about their skills and how this can feel doubly hard for women who have experienced domestic abuse and their confidence has felt eroded.

We wondered whether women may feel able to list their skills in this way and whether it might mean that people just highlight what they can already do (comfort zone) rather than think about what they would like to gain skills in. This made us question whose needs were being served – the organisation who want quick results and a functioning team or the peer researchers who could learn from the experience and build confidence in new areas.

The RISE facilitator suggested we try a storytelling activity that was developed by RISE from Asset Based Community Development, who recognise individual assets not just as skills but also as personal gifts or passions. This is often short-handed to think about strengths of you your head, heart and hands. Rather than list our skills, in pairs we told each other a story about a project or activity that we felt proud of whilst the listener helped record and feedback the key strengths to the group.

***'Its important to have assets not just skills. Sills feels instrumental – its like that phrase 'digging deep' –needs a more strengths based/community method'***

***'Its really lovely to have someone reflect back your story. It makes you feel proud of yourself and feel part of the group. I thought I wasn't a team player before but it is better than I thought it would be'.***

***'Stories are personal and help you express yourself' 'It feels like you are being listened to and heard. 'Its also like a mini exercise on how to be a researcher' '***

What these two examples show us is the different power of stories – either as hypothetical examples for exploration and learning or as real examples for reflection and lifting up the strengths and confidence of individuals. When facilitating and sharing these stories we can think about who is benefiting from this story and how do we negotiate any power dynamics that might be emerging within the research space.

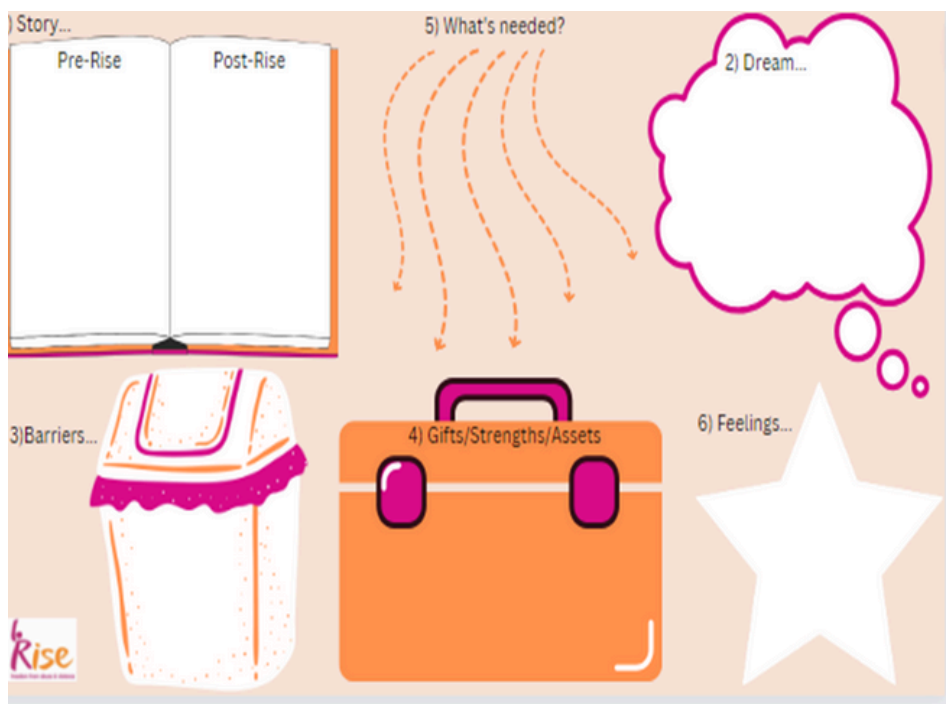
***Peer Researchers often won't have research experience. The manual has lots of assumptions. A glossary of terms can bridge that gap!"***

***"Images and videos can be used to cater for different learning styles."***

***"We want more than just quotes from marginalised communities. Centre their voices!"***

*I think one of the things that felt surprising for our group was the very subtle legacy of traditional research which can feel extractive and done to. We felt this was woven through some of the advice and language in the manual –the phrase ‘dig deep’ stuck with us throughout the project. This reminded me of the challenge we face in peer research, where peers want to provide strong evidence about something they are passionate about. Organisations also want evaluation for funders that evidence progress or growth through scaling or measurement tools. This can sometimes jar with the experience of our community members, whose journey may feel like more of a back and forth and may not have a clearly worked out story or opinion or be in a safe place to tell it. Everyone needs to be aware of different agendas and the power imbalance that we are negotiating sometimes without realising it (RISE Facilitator).*

Our Community Research team have developed different creative ways for frontline workers at RISE to build reflections about freedom from abuse and the journey through RISE support so they can tell their story at their own pace. This kind of evaluation is co-produced.



*One of the evaluations tools created by our Community Researchers for the Communities Rising Project .*

***Its about doing research together – not extracting data.***

***Walking Together = walking at right pace/ our own pace and not rushing.***

***Ongoing process of consent.***

***Mitigating risk of harm/trauma informed***

***Trauma: read verbal cues/body language and expression.***

***Story telling – that doesn't expect you to tell a traditional linear story (past-present).***

***Storytelling – to identify strengths – individual and community***

***Feminist Participatory Research is about the person being researched should be involved in the whole process from the start. Ask them what they need from this process, how does this benefit you so that everybody owns the project.” (RISE Community Researcher).***

***Telling our stories isn't always linear, and so timelines can be triggering (RISE Community Researcher)."***

***"Research is done with the participant, and not to the participant. Walk alongside the participant. (RISE Community Researcher)"***

## THEME 4: MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

As the JustLife project progressed at RISE we discussed our feelings about the JustLife peer research team who had developed the manual. We felt wary of being overly critical of something that felt so important and groundbreaking. In our presentation at the JustLife Knowledge Exchange Event we highlighted key areas where we felt we could work together in the future to further enrich and compliment the manual. Our team agreed that ethics and safety had to be the most important aspect of any peer research project design.

***‘When doing my research at the university it was really important to get ethics approval. Having an ethics application process is vital for peer research as it gives you a framework for ethical practice.’  
(Community Researcher) .***

***‘We were really fortunate at RISE to have the initial support and advice from the University of Sussex Research Ethics Committee. But so much of our learning has been from being embedded within the RISE service and community – learning from professionals and community members on the ground. Its about valuing the knowledge we have from the ground up and sharing this with universities who have a wider reach and audience’ (RISE Facilitator).***

### PEER RESEARCH ETHICS

***Its more than just a manual  
To address – personal & institutional ethics  
What about a peer community ethics committee?  
All bring different strengths and expertise – to create safe trauma  
informed, inclusive research practice.  
Lets work together.***

Another area that we felt would be helpful and compliment the manual would be a glossary of terms. Even better, we felt that having terms framed in the language of peer researchers, as opposed to academic text, would make the terms feel more accessible and reduce the possibility of things being framed in a way that felt authoritative, intimidating or confusing.

### A GLOSSARY OF TERMS

***Words matter  
Language matters  
Understanding matters  
Explain jargon, concepts, ‘theories’, identity positions, approaches,  
methods – in our own words!***

Summing up our critique of the different sections of the manual we reflected that we had come to the JustLife project with previous experience of research training, both as part of the Walk Together Programme and in some cases through university degree training. We also came to the project having already built working relationships with each other at RISE through our volunteer and paid roles. We felt that it was really important that to be truly inclusive and accessible that the manual paid attention to a wider audience who did not have previous research experience. We also felt that it was important to provide more examples from marginalised community groups and experiences such as our own, so that facilitators and group members had a strong understanding of difference in the research process.



## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

***Being a Peer-Researcher makes us feel proud of ourselves and feel proud of the group.”  
“It offers reintegration into society and the opportunity to use lived experience and turn it from  
something really negative to something valuable.” (RISE Community Researcher)***

Taking part in the JustLife project has been an enjoyable way of bringing our team together at a time when we are closing the Communities Rising Project at RISE and with it the Walk Together Research Programme. It has provided us with an opportunity to reflect on the learning we have generated at RISE and our own individual journeys as community or peer researchers. Some of us have been engaged in the Walk Together research programme since it first began in 2017 whereas others have joined later in 2022-4. This project has provided the first opportunity for a past community researcher, now a paid member of the RISE staff team to build her confidence in co-facilitating research activities. We have seen three other community researchers move into paid employment at RISE and two community researchers are about to start PhD degrees this Autumn.

Ultimately what we have learnt however is the solidarity and strength within our team and the sense of connection with a wider network of peer researchers. It shows the power of coming together as a community to build new bridges of understanding.

To help us articulate what community research means to us, one of our community researchers led a poetry workshop, we shared these poems with the other researchers at the Knowledge Exchange Event and would like to share them with you.

### ***When Someone Deeply Listens to Me***

#### ***When someone deeply listens to me***

***I am seen  
I am whole  
I am valued  
Not silenced  
Not gagged  
Not bound  
I am free  
To be.***

### *When Someone Deeply Listens to You*

*When someone deeply listens to you*

*It's like the curtains in a dark room are gently peeled open, and  
beams of sunlight and warmth fill the once-buried and cold space  
When the sun's rays bounce off each wall, you are heard and held  
When the window opens and a fresh breeze breathes life into the  
room, you are healing.*

*When someone deeply listens to you*

*You are swimming freely in an ocean*

*In a depth of breath taking beauty*

*That nurtures and soothes you*

*Untangling your pain and rippling out*

*Connecting you on a boundless journey of peace that becomes you,  
a force of nature you were always destined to be.*

### *Reference*

*Kelly, L, Sharp-Jeffs, N & Klein, R. (2014) Finding the Costs of Freedom, Solace  
Women's Aid.*

## **FIND OUT MORE**

*For Further Information on the Walk Together Research  
please contact: [information@riseuk.org.uk](mailto:information@riseuk.org.uk)*

*Or check out our RISE website: <https://www.riseuk.org.uk>*

*To find out more about the JustLife manual check out their  
website: <https://www.justlife.org.uk>*