

The Lived Experience Council:

**A lasting
strategic influence**

GambleAware

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Message from the Chair

As the Chair of the GambleAware Lived Experience Council from July 2024 up until the council's last meeting in December 2025, I'm proud to introduce this impact report.

This document reflects the collective strength, insight and dedication of a diverse group of individuals who experienced gambling harms firsthand. Their contributions not only shaped the direction of this council, but also influenced the wider gambling harms sector in Great Britain, in meaningful and measurable ways.

The council represented a unified voice, a coalition of lived experience advocates who came together not for personal recognition, but to drive systemic change. We operated with mutual respect, shared purpose and a commitment to collaboration. Our diversity was our strength, offering a kaleidoscope of perspectives which enriched policy development, service design and public health strategy.

Over the past three years, lived experience has been embedded into the commissioning, research, national prevention campaigns and delivery of services across the sector. This has led to more responsive, compassionate and effective approaches to tackling gambling harms. From shaping national campaigns to informing NICE guidelines, contributing to criminal justice reform, working in education and engaging with NHS partners, the impact of lived experience has been both strategic and transformative.

Looking ahead, our focus must remain on planning for sustainable change. We must continue to build frameworks that ensure lived experience is not a token inclusion, but a foundational element in decision-making. This means investing in leadership development, strengthening community networks and fostering environments where lived experience can thrive alongside clinical, academic and senior executive expertise.

This report isn't just a reflection of what's been achieved, it's an ongoing mobilisation and a call to action for what must come next. Together, we'll continue to elevate lived experience as a cornerstone of gambling harm reduction across Great Britain.

Together, we're building a system that listens, learns and acts.

Nicola Jaques MBE

**Chair of the Lived Experience Council
(July 2024 to December 2025)**

The power of lived experience

Lived experience plays an essential role in the prevention, education, treatment and support of gambling harms, particularly when it comes to creating effective strategies.

It represents a unique perspective, whether gained through personal experience of addiction or supporting a loved one.

This perspective offers a depth of understanding that can't be replicated by theory or professional training alone. It's the 'unpolished diamond', an insight shaped by real-world challenges, systemic barriers and the nuanced realities of stigma, shame and recovery.

When integrated meaningfully, lived experience strengthens prevention, informs trauma-aware practice and improves engagement.

It also enhances the relevance and impact of treatment, support and research. Crucially, lived experience must be recognised as a form of expertise on parity with executives, clinicians and other professionals around the table.

Many people with lived experience also bring wider skillsets. From project management and leadership to professional qualifications and sector knowledge, all of these life skills help those people contribute strategically, meaning they produce solution-focused objectives and measurable outcomes.

This combination of insight and capability shows how lived experience is not tokenistic but transformative.

Embedding lived experience within UK gambling-harm systems isn't optional. It's a strategic requirement for building responsive, person-centred and evidence-informed services.

By valuing these perspectives alongside other forms of expertise, organisations can address gaps, challenge assumptions and create interventions. By doing this, they're authentically meeting the needs of individuals, families and communities affected by gambling harms.

Why the Lived Experience Council was so important

People with lived experience of gambling harms were at the centre of GambleAware's work. That's why the Lived Experience Council (LEC) was created as an independent panel. It was established in 2022 and active until the last meeting in December 2025, in advance of the charity's managed closure.

Throughout this time period, members continuously provided strategic challenge, scrutiny and accountability across commissioning and programme delivery.

The council wasn't there as a symbolic group, but as a body informed by governance and motivated by action. It was there to make sure lived experience was embedded meaningfully and measurably in the national response to gambling harms.

As GambleAware's then-CEO Zoë Osmond OBE said at the launch in 2022:

“We are committed to meaningful and inclusive involvement of those with lived experience of gambling harms to ensure their voice is amplified across all areas of our work. The council [members] will bring their unique insight, expertise and knowledge to GambleAware and help us in creating a society free from gambling harms.”

Zoë Osmond OBE

Former GambleAware Chief Executive Officer (2022)

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) NG248 guidelines on gambling-related harms (2025) explicitly recognise how important it is to involve people affected by gambling harms when designing and delivering services.

This not only includes the person directly affected by gambling harms, but their families and carers too.

Research shows that involving people with lived experience in making strategic decisions leads to better tailored services, while improving satisfaction and creating more effective systems.

A pioneering moment for expert voices

The first meeting for GambleAware's Lived Experience Council on 2 December 2022 marked a watershed moment in Great Britain's approach to tackling gambling harms. People with direct experience of gambling harms (both people who'd gambled themselves and those affected by others' gambling), weren't just consulted, but were at the heart of strategic decision-making for the nation's leading commissioner of gambling harm services.

The timing was deliberate and critical, as then-CEO Zoë Osmond OBE pointed out in the press release:

“With the imminent publication of the white paper and subsequent regulatory reform, this is a crucial time for GambleAware's strategic development. It's imperative that the voices of those with experience and expertise in this public health crisis guide our future path.”

Zoë Osmond OBE

Former GambleAware Chief Executive Officer (2022)

Aims and ambitions

The Lived Experience Council was formed to embed lived experience leadership into GambleAware's decisionmaking, to improve the relevance and reach of its public health work, and to make sure those most affected by gambling harms had formal influence over national strategy and service design.

The council's key ambitions were to:

- drive cultural change
- improve treatment pathways
- remove stigma
- make sure lived experience remained a central and permanent part of the gambling harm response in Great Britain.

Plans to create a lived experience group were first announced in October 2020, with a formal call for applicants issued in June 2022. The callout was shared on various social media channels and also widely among organisations within the then National Gambling Treatment Service (later rebranded National Gambling Support Network). Following a rigorous interview process, the council was officially launched in the summer of 2022.

Its establishment was a specific commitment within GambleAware's Organisational Strategy 2021–2026. This identified the need for firsthand experience to guide the development of programmes, inform strategic decisions and shape an evolving public health landscape responding to gambling harms.

In governance terms, the Board of Trustees created the council to provide a structured, formal mechanism for people with lived experience to:

- provide strategic advice and make recommendations to influence the organisation's direction
- make sure there was accountability
- bring authentic insight to prevention, treatment and stigma reduction work.

Its founding members set out with a clear, collective ambition to:

- use personal experience of gambling harms to influence systemic change
- reduce stigma
- make sure services and campaigns met the real-time needs of individuals and families.

Ben Howard was elected as the Lived Experience Council's first Chair. He believed the council offered an opportunity for those who had overcome shame, stigma and guilt to help others, by shaping national responses to gambling harm. His leadership elevated the equity and fairness of lived experience at executive levels, shifting the culture of lived experience from one of 'consultation' to strategic influence. This was critical in promoting more responsive systems within the gambling harms sector.

One of the council's key aims was to communicate gambling harm as a public health issue rooted in inequality, trauma and accessibility, rather than personal failure. Members also sought to strengthen the rebranded National Gambling Support Network as an entity. They wanted to support pathways, while identifying gaps, cultural barriers and community needs, particularly for underserved groups.

Strategy and impact

The Lived Experience Council's strategic role and impact within GambleAware's framework contributed to commissioning, prevention strategy, national campaigns and policy development.

The council played a crucial role in shaping the charity's strategic direction, making sure the voices of those directly affected by gambling harms were present across all levels of decision-making. As a core advisory body, its members contributed meaningfully to commissioning frameworks, prevention strategies, national campaigns and policy development. They offered a unique perspective based on real life experience.

The environment

The Lived Experience Council's work was both important and, at times, challenging. Bringing together people with very different histories, expectations and emotional landscapes required psychological safety, trust and careful facilitation. This was especially true when harms were deeply personal and often traumatic. The council was also operating during a period of national debate, scrutiny of the charity and gambling sector, and shifting regulatory expectations. This created external pressures around representation, legitimacy and influence. The wider strategic environment and climate was and still is challenging, particularly with the impending white paper.

The success of the council depended on holding space for a spectrum of views — including those that were sometimes in tension. The richness of the council's work came not from alignment, but from *authentic representation*.

Taking on crucial roles

The Lived Experience Council's unique selling proposition lay not in consultation, but in genuine co-production and governance integration. Members of the council had three important roles:

Strategic advisors

Council members gave independent, expert advice directly to GambleAware's Board of Trustees on all activities, programmes and strategic development. They held an observatory and advisory seat at Board meetings. Their lived experience perspectives also had an influence on executive-level decisions.

Programme influencers

Council members shaped all of GambleAware's work streams, including national public health campaigns, digital tool development, research commissioning priorities and the design of treatment services. This integration resulted in making sure the estimated £52.2 million+¹ of funding under active management was directed according to the real-world needs and insights of people the services were designed to support.

System leaders

Beyond their work internally, council members played a critical role in advocating for system-wide changes. This included support for the statutory levy implementation and engagement with regulatory reform processes. Former Chair Ben Howard was instrumental in building and developing key working relationships in this area.

¹<https://www.gambleaware.org/media/11ene1ys/gambleaware-annual-report-2024.pdf>

Member profiles

The strength of real life stories

GambleAware believed the most effective strategies for dealing with complex public health challenges were those co-created with the people who understood them best – not from theory or observation, but from lived reality. In this section, you can read about the roles of the Lived Experience Council members. It includes details of how their real life experiences of gambling harms helped shape the charity's work and is still influencing the other related work they're involved in.

Nicola Jaques MBE

Chair of the Lived Experience Council (July 2024 to December 2025)

As Chair of the Lived Experience Council, Nicola led with empathy, integrity and a commitment to embedding lived experience at the heart of public health and legislative reform. She was awarded an MBE, received in recognition of her work to tackle gambling harms through her contribution and role on the Lived Experience Council. She was also recognised for her work in gambling harm reduction with regional treatment provider, Beacon Counselling Trust.

Her work's spanned across strategic collaboration, lived experience development and frontline support. She's also always had a strong focus on making sure diverse voices are heard and seeing that inclusive systems are in place for a whole family approach to gambling harms.

Nicola's advocacy is rooted in personal experience – her husband's gambling disorder profoundly impacted her family financially, emotionally and physically. This experience transformed her into a passionate advocate for affected others. She's played a central role in peer research for the Howard League's study on women, as well as on gambling and crime. She's also carried out safer gambling programmes through Beacon Counselling Trust's education initiatives.

Her leadership was vital in establishing the Lived Experience Council as a credible, strategic voice in national policy development. Nicola's ongoing advocacy helps make sure lived experience is not only heard, but is actively shaping the future of gambling harm prevention, education, treatment, support and recovery across Great Britain.

Sam Starsmore

Education programme lead and youth gambling harm advocate

Sam was Deputy Chair of GambleAware's Lived Experience Council. He also leads education programmes at Ygam. Here, he designs and delivers accredited training which helps professionals across education, youth work, sports organisations and safeguarding roles to protect young people from gaming and gambling-related harms.

His lived experience of gambling disorder when he was aged between 16 to 24 informs his passionate commitment to prevention, early intervention and building recovery capital for young people.

He's been in his role at Ygam since 2021 and since then, he's reached thousands of professionals and hundreds of thousands of young people through their national programmes.

Sam's work also extends to policy consultations, media appearances and academic partnerships, where he makes sure youth voices and developmental perspectives inform regulatory reform, research priorities and prevention strategies.

His leadership has positioned Ygam as a national leader in gambling harm prevention education.

The impact he's made shows how lived experience combined with professional expertise can transform how society protects young people from emerging gambling harms in gaming, sports betting and digital environments.

"My lived experience of gambling harms drives everything I do. By combining evidence-based education with real-world insight, I work to prevent gaming and gambling harms, to support early intervention and to help young people build the knowledge and resilience they need to thrive."

Sam Starsmore

Education programme lead and youth gambling harm advocate

Andy May

Lived experience advocate for gambling harm and criminal justice reform

Andy's recovery journey began in 2020 after gambling addiction led to a prison sentence and the collapse of his professional life. His own gambling started in a very safe and sociable manner, with no foresight of ever being at risk of harm. He's transformed his lived experience into powerful advocacy for systemic change, particularly at the intersection of gambling harm and criminal justice.

His own journey, from fraud conviction to sustained recovery, offers a unique insight into the pathways that lead people experiencing gambling disorder into criminal activity, as well as the urgent need for trauma-informed, compassionate responses within the justice system.

Alongside being a member of our Lived Experience Council when it was operative, he supports multiple organisations including the Gambling Lived Experience Network (GLEN), Betknowmore UK, Reframe Coaching and GamLEARN, where his work focuses on supporting people affected by gambling harm through recovery coaching, together with strategic input at an organisational level. He also contributes to national prevention campaigns.

He's spoken at numerous sector conferences, sharing his story to challenge stigma, while advocating for early intervention, appropriate sentencing considerations and rehabilitation pathways which recognise gambling disorder as a health issue.

His advocacy has been featured on national television, national consultation and policy forums. He continues to push for recognition that people who commit gambling-related crimes, along with their families, need treatment and support, not punishment alone.

"If I'd seen something like the GambleAware stigma campaign twenty years ago, the chances are the gambling harm I experienced could have been caught far earlier and my life may have taken a very different route."

Andy May

Lived experience advocate for gambling harm and criminal justice reform

Sue Acton

Lived experience advocate and consultant in gambling-related financial harm

Sue brings a rare combination of strategic insight, professional expertise and lived experience of vulnerability to her work as a consultant, facilitator and researcher. She partners with a wide range of commercial and third sector organisations on issues including customer vulnerability, financial inclusion and gambling-related harm.

After studying psychology at Oxford, Sue spent a decade at Barclays in senior roles spanning across operations, marketing and communications, as well as diversity and inclusion. More recently, at Monzo, she worked directly with vulnerable customers, giving her hands-on insight into the realities faced by frontline teams and the people they support, including gambling-related financial harm. She's a trustee of the debt advice charity StepChange and a volunteer at Citizens Advice.

Having experienced significant gambling-related harm herself, Sue brings an essential lived experience perspective to policy, research and practice. She served as a member of the GambleAware Lived Experience Council and, prior to joining the LEC, was a lay member of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) gambling harms guideline committee.

Sue has a deep understanding of the complex challenges banks and other organisations face in identifying and supporting people affected by gambling. Her forthcoming MSc (Master of Science) thesis explores how customer-facing teams in banks recognise and respond to gambling harm in practice through bridging research, lived experience and organisational reality.

“I’m really interested in the long-term practical impact of gambling-related harms – things like money and debt, career and education, and physical and mental health. Treatment is just the start of support for gambling-related harm, and it is crucial that policymakers recognise and act on this.”

Sue Acton

Lived experience advocate and consultant in gambling-related financial harm

Bianca Colclough

Lived experience advocate and strategic voice for women affected by gambling harm

With 25 years of experience in global corporate recruitment, Bianca brings professional expertise in talent development and organisational leadership. She has powerful lived experience of land-based casino addiction, spanning across 12 years.

Her gambling disorder, which she's courageously linked to childhood sexual abuse, highlights the complex trauma pathways which can underpin women's gambling. For example, the profound shame and secrecy, which prevents women from seeking help.

Bianca is a passionate champion for underrepresented voices, particularly women affected by gambling harm who remain significantly underserved by treatment systems and public health responses.

As a research assistant on the University of Staffordshire's major study on gambling harms and the criminal justice system, she contributed to groundbreaking work which exposed the unique challenges faced by women affected by gambling-related crime.

Bianca has shared her story with the BBC and national media, waiving her legal right to anonymity in order to break the silence surrounding women's gambling and childhood abuse.

As a mother of two, she's deeply committed to safeguarding future generations from gambling normalisation. She's also committed to advocating for prevention education, which addresses the gendered nature of gambling marketing, product design and harm.

Bianca's advocacy informed GambleAware's campaigns, academic research and policy consultations.

She helps make sure women's experiences are centred in prevention and support strategies, particularly for those affected by land-based gambling environments. Her work challenges the male-centric narrative of gambling harm, while calling for gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches to treatment and recovery.

Niks Kolosnicins

Youth gambling harm advocate

Niks Kolosnicins joined the Lived Experience Council in December 2024. This was motivated by a desire to use his lived experience of gambling harm as a young person to advocate for meaningful changes in policy, which could help protect children and young people. He first encountered gambling at the age of 12 through loot boxes and in-game purchases, and he later developed a gambling disorder in adolescence. His experience highlights how digital product design and poorly regulated online platforms can normalise financial risk-taking, blurring the line between gaming and gambling for children and young people.

Now in recovery, Niks uses his insight to challenge policy and practice. On the Lived Experience Council, he brought a youth perspective to prevention strategy, commissioning and research priorities. He made valuable contributions to GambleAware's national campaign on tackling stigma, 'Let's Open Up About Gambling', which raised awareness of gambling harms experienced by children. Shaping the campaign's messaging and being one of the spokespeople, he engaged in media interviews to raise awareness. Apart from being a member of the Lived Experience Council when it was still operative, Niks volunteers as a peer supporter with GamCare, offering one-to-one support to people experiencing gambling harm. A recent economics graduate, he values evidence-informed, youth-centred safeguards which protect children and young people in digital environments. Niks is also a member of the Student Advisory Committee at Student Minds, advocating for stronger mental health support and clearer pathways for students affected by gambling harms. Additionally, he serves as a trustee at New Citizens' Gateway, a charity supporting refugees and asylum seekers with complex needs.

"I joined the LEC to make sure young people are not an afterthought in decisions that can affect their lives. Gambling harms can start early through game design, in-game spending and marketing. If we listen to youth experience and act sooner, we can prevent harm from escalating and make it easier for people to access the help they need without shame."

Niks Kolosnicins

Youth gambling harm advocate

Rob Parker

Lived experience advocate for gambling harms and criminal justice reform

Rob Parker was the GambleAware Lived Experience Council member for Wales. He's also currently the Community Engagement Manager for Ara Recovery for All, a National Gambling Support Network (NGSN) provider. Since joining Ara in July 2020, Rob's used his lived experience of gambling harms to help others, developing a deep passion for the recovery and wellbeing space – a world only discovered when needed. In his various roles at Ara, Rob's worked across youth education, project management and commissioning bids. He currently leads Ara's prevention work in Wales, focusing on early intervention, education and harm reduction.

While in his role as a Lived Experience Council member, he drew on his own life experiences to support strategic decision-making. This included speaking at a Welsh government-sponsored event at the Senedd. Rob was also a member of the Welsh government's Gambling Levy Strategic Group. In this role, he contributed to early meetings on future support systems.

Before Ara, Rob worked in property management, developing key communication and problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, during this time, Rob struggled with gambling. This ultimately led to a prison sentence for theft from an employer after he battled with gambling issues for over five years. This experience motivated him to advocate for systemic change, using his voice to support others, while making sure effective prevention and treatment strategies are available for those in need.

Former Lived Experience Council member (anonymous)

Lived experience researcher and community builder in gambling harm reduction

This former member of the Lived Experience Council was exposed to gambling during her childhood when various family members used to gamble. Having moved to a children's home at the age of 15, she started gambling as a coping mechanism when feeling lonely.

As an adult, she's dedicated to supporting other women experiencing gambling harms. She's particularly passionate about sharing her story to help raise awareness of the support services available for women.

Steve Ramsey

Criminal justice reform advocate and lived experience leader in gambling harm recovery

Steve's gambling addiction led to a custodial sentence in 2017. This was an experience that resulted in his unwavering commitment to reforming responses to gambling harm within the criminal justice system.

Combining his background in finance and business support with his lived experience of imprisonment, he brings strategic insight and operational expertise to his advocacy work across multiple national organisations and government agencies.

Apart from being a member of the GambleAware Lived Experience Council when it was still active, Steve is central to the development of the EPIC Restart Foundation. This is an organisation dedicated to supporting people in recovery from gambling harm and addressing the legacy impacts of addiction, including criminal records, financial devastation and family breakdown.

He collaborates extensively with statutory bodies, the Gambling Commission, HM Prison and Probation Service and academic researchers to improve identification, support and rehabilitation pathways for people affected by gambling harm in custody and community supervision settings.

Steve's work has played a vital role in the Howard League's Commission on Crime and Gambling Related Harms, GamCare's criminal justice programme development and numerous research projects exploring prevalence, sentencing practices and recovery pathways.

His advocacy has contributed to policy submissions, alongside training programmes for probation officers, police and court personnel.

Through EPIC Restart Foundation's programmes and broader peer support initiatives, Steve makes sure comprehensive, trauma-informed support is available across the full spectrum of gambling harm and criminal justice involvement.

His leadership demonstrates how people with lived experience of gambling disorder and imprisonment can help shape compassionate, evidence-based reform, which reduces reoffending, supports recovery and challenges punitive approaches that fail to address underlying health issues.

Mark Conway

Systems change advocate and lived experience leader in gambling harms and justice reform

Mark joined GambleAware's Lived Experience Council at its inception in 2022, driven by a conviction that lived experience must be central to the development and delivery of gambling harm prevention strategies. His own gambling disorder emerged during a personal crisis and escalated over a decade, culminating in a prison sentence for fraud.

With a background in IT and financial systems, Mark now works as a consultant in the gambling harms sector, advising charities on service design, operational improvement and strategic development. Mark co-founded the Gambling Lived Experience Network (GLEN) – an independent network which amplifies lived experience voices in national policy debates, research projects and service development initiatives. As Operations Lead, his work combines experiential insight with strategic reform, making sure lived experience informs public health approaches and criminal justice responses to gambling harm.

Mark's played a critical role in developing GLEN's communications strategies, as well as in building collaborative relationships with stakeholders across government, academia, industry and the third sector. His contributions to the Scotland Reducing Gambling Harm (ScotRGH) programme and the Scottish Gambling Harm Lived Experience Forum have advanced public health approaches in Scotland. Mark's advocacy has been featured at conferences, in policy consultations and in media coverage. He consistently challenges stakeholder assumptions, calls for evidence-based approaches and makes sure the voices of people most affected by gambling harm are central in all discussions about solutions.

“Having experiential learning and understanding feeding directly into the commissioning, design and delivery of services aimed at preventing and alleviating harms caused from gambling is a critical need. The Lived Experience Council, willingly supported by GambleAware, has significantly improved impact across all these key areas.”

Mark Conway

Systems change advocate and lived experience leader in gambling harms and justice reform

David Quinti

Lived experience advocate and community leader in gambling harm recovery

Having been in recovery for over 10 years, David is a tireless advocate for change and a positive voice in raising awareness of how gambling harms can affect anyone, regardless of background or circumstances. His lived experience has been the driving force behind his confidence and commitment to support others, including tackling the stigma that prevents people from seeking help when they need it most.

David's passion for amplifying voices of people affected by gambling harms has enabled him to take on diverse and influential roles across the sector. He was a member of the GambleAware Lived Experience Council and he currently works as a peer aid coordinator at BetKnowMore UK. Here, he leads a team of volunteers with lived experience who offer structured peer support to people harmed by gambling, while also providing support to their families.

His work includes matching individuals with appropriate peer supporters, carrying out group sessions across the recovery journey and making sure there's robust duty of care for both those seeking support and the peer volunteers themselves. David's a founding member, former Chair and now co-lead at the Gambling Lived Experience Network (GLEN), where he's played a central role in establishing core principles, governance structures and the network's independent voice.

His work with the Gambling Lived Experience Network has challenged government and industry to prioritise wellbeing over profit and tax revenues. He also advocates for effective public health strategies and meaningful inclusion of lived experience in all aspects of gambling harm reduction.

David serves as a recovery coach at Reframe Coaching, helping individuals navigate their recovery journeys with compassion and practical support. He also holds roles as an ambassador for GamCare and an alliance member for Beacon Counselling Trust. Holding such diverse roles has strengthened his understanding of governance, communications strategy and the wider gambling harms ecosystem.

With a decade-long career as an operations manager at Sky prior to his recovery, David brings operational excellence and strategic thinking to his advocacy work. The impact of his work shows how professional skills combined with lived experience can drive meaningful systemic change and offer hope to those still affected by gambling-related harms.

Ben Howard

Former member and Chair of the Lived Experience Council (December 2022 to July 2024)

Ben was a member of the Lived Experience Council between December 2022 and July 2024, during which time he held the position of Chair. He played a pivotal role in embedding lived experience at the heart of national strategy, policy influence and decision-making within the organisation.

He experienced gambling harms himself for 14 years, which ultimately led to bankruptcy, losing his house and experiencing homelessness briefly. This was in addition to the loss of his career and relationship, and going through the criminal justice system, which resulted in a custodial prison sentence.

Drawing on his own personal experiences, he was determined in his role on the council to create a space where all voices were heard, discussions were purposeful and clear, and timely decisions were reached. His approach modelled best practice in lived experience leadership, where he balanced challenge with compassion and strategy with authenticity.

Ben was actively involved in agenda planning and meeting preparation, making sure the Lived Experience Council business aligned with GambleAware's priorities. He contributed directly to white paper consultation submissions on gambling harm reform, as well as Gambling Act legislation. This helped translate lived experience into insights which were relevant to policy and informed national debate.

He was also instrumental in stakeholder meetings to scope, design and carry out a lived experience involvement strategy for the charity. This helped set a benchmark for meaningful, ethical and impactful engagement.

This investment in lived experience not only strengthened GambleAware's work, but also had a profound impact on Ben's own career. The role affirmed lived experience as expertise, showing how community-led insight can result in strategic thinking, while influencing reform and challenging traditional power dynamics.

Ben's now a service manager for gambling harms within the LGBTQ+ sector, where he continues to champion the embedding of lived experience across all services. He also continues to advocate for lived experience not as a contribution, but as a cornerstone of effective, equitable and compassionate systems change.

Strategic impact

Transforming public health campaigns

The most visible evidence of the Lived Experience Council's influence can be seen in GambleAware's groundbreaking stigma reduction campaign, 'Let's Open Up About Gambling'.

This launched in April 2023 and represented a fundamental shift in approach. For the first time, a campaign was co-created from inception to delivery alongside people with lived experience.

Research underpinning the campaign revealed 75% of people experiencing gambling problems felt unable to open up to family and friends, with stigma cited as the primary barrier.

The campaign, developed with the Lived Experience Council's direct input and featuring lived experience voices through animated stories, achieved remarkable results:

High reach and recognition

This was seen particularly among the target behaviour change audience (those aged 18-44 scoring 3+ on the PGSI scale).

43% increase in website users

There were 160,000 website users during the campaign period (an increase of 43%), with 22,000 users of the new self-assessment quiz.

Real-world action

90% of all campaign recognisers reported taking action as a result of the campaign – from calling the helpline to reducing or stopping their gambling.

The campaign's success showed how making lived experience central to design and delivery leads to communications which genuinely resonate.

As highlighted in the evaluation, using empathetic, non-judgemental language and authentic lived experience voices proved essential to reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking.

The campaign also proved to be a positive experience for those involved:

“Being part of the stigma reduction campaign, initially contributing through media interviews in the Autumn of 2023 and then, since joining the LEC, helping to guide the programme along is something I’ve been very grateful for the opportunity to do. Knowing how that stigma felt for me when I was struggling with my own gambling and trying to break down those barriers for other people is a piece of work that I’m proud to have been involved in.”

Andy May

Lived experience advocate for gambling harm and criminal justice reform

“It has been a real privilege to be involved in the stigma reduction campaign in 2025. I felt like I had a genuine voice in shaping the campaign’s messaging and strategy. Being one of the spokespeople for the campaign has been a bit nerve-racking, but the whole team at GambleAware and their external partners did an amazing job at making me comfortable sharing my personal story publicly.”

Niks Kolosnicins

Youth gambling harm advocate

Shaping research and evidence priorities

The Lived Experience Council fundamentally influenced how GambleAware approached research commissioning. It meant funding decisions for research grants began to include assessment panels with people who have lived experience. This involved scoring proposals against published criteria, which resulted in research priorities aligning with the actual experiences and needs of affected communities.

“I played a key role in scoping priorities for the State of the Nation: Children & Young People report, ensuring lived experience shaped what mattered most. Embedding these voices into research commissioning helps align evidence and policy with the real experiences of children and young people affected by gambling harms.”

Sam Starsmore

Education programme lead and youth gambling harm advocate

Some key research programmes influenced by lived experience input included:

Women and gambling

A £250,000 research grant was allocated to understand drivers of gambling participation and harms among women, to make sure services were tailored and accessible for this under-researched group. Former Chair of the Lived Experience Council, Nicola Jaques, along with a former member of the council, had also previously been involved in peer research for a women, gambling and crime study commissioned by the Howard League, bringing direct expertise to this area.

Minority communities

Research was undertaken on minority communities' lived experience of gambling harms across Great Britain, addressing critical evidence gaps.

Stigma programme

A £350,000 grant was allocated to fund comprehensive research into gambling stigmatisation and discrimination, directly informing the development of the stigma reduction campaign and language guidance.

The Lived Experience Council also helped establish GambleAware's guidelines for researchers. This meaningfully involved people with lived experience in research, which raised standards across the sector.

“In a sector where all calls for policy or legislative change are routinely challenged for evidential proof around need for change, it has been particularly pleasing to witness how the involvement of the Lived Experience Council has led to far greater co-production between lived experience and academia. We are witnessing the emergence of a new blended approach to research. One where academic and experiential learning share equal value and come together to create enhanced understanding around gambling impacts, often informing robust and practical applications designed to alleviate harm.”

Mark Conway

Systems change advocate and lived experience leader in gambling harms and justice reform

Influencing treatment and support commissioning

The Lived Experience Council's impact on treatment commissioning is perhaps less visible but equally profound. Council members provided crucial insights into:

- barriers to treatment access
- the importance of peer support
- the need for services that reflect the diversity of people experiencing harms.

“I provided input to a round of funding decisions at GambleAware. The commissioning process was new to me and so the work helped me develop my skills whilst drawing on my financial services background. Being a part of strategic planning was a joy; so often lived experience input is tactical.”

Sue Acton

Lived experience advocate and consultant in gambling-related financial harm

Ben Howard, the council's founding Chair, highlighted the influence of the Lived Experience Council when defending GambleAware's commissioned services. He drew on his own personal experience of the National Gambling Support Network (NGSN) in providing treatment and support when he needed it:

“I struggled with gambling and I found recovery through the GambleAware commissioned National Gambling Support Network (NGSN). From this, I was able to build a strong network of pre-support and treatment in under 48 hours, as well as sustained aftercare which I still use today in my fourth year of recovery. The NGSN not only provided me with life-changing guidance, but saved me from suicide in 2020.”

Ben Howard

former Chair of the Lived Experience Council (December 2022 to July 2024)

Guiding service design and delivery

The Lived Experience Council held scrutiny to commissioning frameworks to make sure lived experience was not only acknowledged, but actively integrated into the further design and delivery of services across Great Britain, both inside and outside of the National Gambling Support Network.

This involvement helped create more responsive, empathetic, effective and inclusive support systems, which reflected the complexities of gambling harm experienced by individuals and communities.

Prevention strategy and co-production

Through the planning and structure of co-production, members of the Lived Experience Council contributed to the development of educational and awareness materials, which formed part of the national prevention strategy.

Input from the wider lived experience community network meant GambleAware could be sure these resources were relatable, accessible and resonated with diverse audiences, particularly those who may be marginalised or underserved by traditional approaches.

The Lived Experience Council worked in parallel with other lived experience structures including ALERTS (Affected Lived Experience Research, Treatment and Support Group) and the Gambling Lived Experience Network (GLEN). This created a multi-layered system for capturing diverse perspectives on treatment needs and effectiveness.

Strategic development and policy influence

The Lived Experience Council played a key role in GambleAware's strategic planning processes. The charity's 2023 strategic framework set out five key outcomes focused on a coordinated whole-system approach. This was developed with the direct involvement of Lived Experience Council members, alongside the Board of Trustees and commissioning teams.

Council members also contributed to broader system development. Several, including Sue Acton, contributed to supporting the Government in reducing gambling harms.

In addition, members of the Lived Experience Council contributed broadly across sectors at a national level, on development relating to gambling harm experiences. This extended their influence beyond our organisation to the wider policy environment.

Building a representative and democratic voice

A critical element of the Lived Experience Council's influence was GambleAware's commitment to building the capacity of lived experience networks, with depth and breadth. The charity invested in making sure these networks were diverse, democratic, sustainable and accountable to their membership, allowing them to speak with a representative voice. GambleAware's support for the Gambling Lived Experience Network (GLEN), which achieved charitable status and established formal governance processes, further showed this commitment. The Gambling Lived Experience Network's development reflected a recognition that individual voices, while important, need organisational infrastructure to bring about system-wide change.

Inclusion and diversity

The Lived Experience Council actively worked to make sure communities who were disproportionately affected by gambling harms were represented. The council also prioritised representation from:

- young people under 25
- women affected both directly and as affected others
- minority communities
- people with professional expertise in education, health services and the third sector
- those who'd been through the criminal justice system.

Further case studies

English Gambling Education Hub²

The Lived Experience Council's input into the development of training materials for this hub made sure resources were culturally sensitive and relevant to young people. Feedback from council members helped tailor content to reflect the lived realities of youth engagement with gambling, which enhanced its educational value and accessibility.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines consultation

Council members contributed to the national consultation on clinical standards for gambling harm, embedding lived experience into the development of NICE guidelines. This involvement helped make sure clinical pathways were informed by the nuanced needs of those affected, which promoted more holistic and inclusive care.

Digital prevention assets

The Lived Experience Council's feedback led to significant improvements in GambleAware's digital prevention tools. Their recommendations enhanced accessibility, usability and engagement, particularly for people with varying levels of digital literacy or those navigating recovery.

²The English Gambling Education Hub was active between April 2022 and September 2024.

Impact on the wider system

Embedding lived experience across the sector

The creation of the Lived Experience Council and its effective functioning had a significant effect across the gambling harm reduction sector. As Tim Miller, Executive Director of Research and Policy at the Gambling Commission, noted at the 2024 GambleAware Annual Conference³:

“It was, for example, during the life of the National Strategy that we really saw the voice of lived experience become much more embedded in many organisations.”

Tim Miller

Executive Director of Research and Policy, the Gambling Commission

This systemic embedding of lived experience represented a fundamental shift from consultation to co-production in gambling harm prevention and treatment.

Contributing to regulatory reform

The creation of the Lived Experience Council coincided with, and directly contributed to, one of the most significant periods of regulatory reform in gambling history for Great Britain. It provided crucial evidence and perspective during:

- the development of the gambling white paper
- consultations on the statutory levy implementation
- continuing discussions on advertising and marketing restrictions.

Members of the council continue to call for wide inclusion of lived experience in the design of the new system for prevention and treatment under the statutory levy.

As the sector transitions from voluntary funding to a statutory levy system, former members of the Lived Experience Council maintain that they'll speak openly for the voices of those with lived experience to remain central to system design and delivery.

³GambleAware Annual Conference - Tim Miller Speech

A model for public health commissioning

Key success factors

The Lived Experience Council's effectiveness as a model came from these key factors:

1. Genuine power and influence

Council members didn't simply advise. They had direct input in board meetings and strategic decisions. This structural integration ensured their voices couldn't be marginalised and that they were a crucial, 'critical friend'.

2. Appropriate remuneration and support

GambleAware's Lived Experience Council established clear remuneration and expenses policies. This recognised how meaningful participation required resources and treating lived experience expertise as a valuable professional contribution, while recognising the wider skillsets and professional capacity of its members.

3. Term limits and renewal

With terms of two to three years renewable once, the council balanced continuity with bringing in fresh perspectives. This avoided both tokenism and burnout.

4. Diversity and representation

Active recruitment took place to make sure there was representation of marginalised and under-represented communities who were affected by gambling harms.

5. Integration with wider networks

GambleAware's Lived Experience Council didn't operate in isolation, but connected with broader lived experience networks (GLEN, ALERTS), as well as members of the wider community who were registered to contribute to specific projects.

Transferable lessons

The Lived Experience Council model offers valuable lessons for other areas of public health commissioning, including that:

- lived experience input is most powerful when embedded in governance structures, not limited to consultation
- co-production requires investment in capacity building for lived experience networks
- diversity of lived experience must be actively sought – no single person or group can represent all perspectives
- remuneration and professional recognition are essential for sustainable, meaningful participation
- combining strategic councils with broader community engagement creates both depth and breadth of input.

Looking forward: The statutory levy era

As the gambling harm reduction system transitions to statutory levy funding, the role of lived experience becomes even more critical.

The new system presents what the former Chair of the Lived Experience Council, Nicola Jaques MBE describes as ‘a once in a generation opportunity’ to prevent gambling harm at scale.

During its years of activity, the Lived Experience Council was well-positioned to make sure that:

- increased funding translated into services which truly met the needs of affected communities
- prevention and early intervention received appropriate priority alongside treatment
- research continued to address critical evidence gaps identified by those with lived experience
- the system remained accountable to its beneficiaries, not just its funders
- stigma reduction remained a central pillar of all prevention work.

An enduring influence

The Lived Experience Council has fundamentally changed how Great Britain approaches gambling harm reduction.

By moving from consultation to co-production, from advisory to strategic, and from representation to genuine shared power, its presence has shown how those with lived experience aren’t just subjects of services, but expert co-designers of systems.

The contributions of the Lived Experience Council provide a blueprint for future planning – showing how lived experience can be strategically used to enhance public health responses to gambling harm.

As the future system is initialised, strategic lived experience involvement remains important in ensuring that services, policies and campaigns are not only informed by data, but deeply rooted in human experience.

The enduring influence of the Lived Experience Council extends beyond any single campaign or research project. It lies in:

- a shift in organisational culture which places lived experience at the centre of all decision-making
- a model of governance that other organisations across the health and social care sector are now emulating
- a generation of lived experience leaders who've developed skills, confidence and networks to continue advocacy work
- a body of evidence and practice guidance which will inform commissioning for years to come
- a fundamental challenge to stigma, which positions people with lived experience as experts, not just beneficiaries.

As the new commissioners continue GambleAware's mission to create a society free from gambling harms, lived experience will still be central to the vision, not as an add-on or consultation mechanism, but as an integral part of the new statutory system DNA.

This represents genuine progress toward a public health system which truly serves the communities it aims to support.

Safeguarding the integrity of lived experience: A strategic imperative

Looking at the future of commissioning and prevention, it's vitally important to have robust mechanisms in place which protect the integrity and influence of lived experience.

It's critical to acknowledge and include all types of lived experience, while recognising there is a broad range of experience and that not everyone's story is the same.

This means:

- **formalising feedback loops** between individuals with lived experience of gambling harms and commissioning teams to ensure experiential knowledge informs every stage of service design and delivery
- **tracking and documenting lived experience involvement** across all strategic programmes to prevent dilution of its impact and to highlight where its voice has shaped outcomes
- **publishing annual impact reviews** that not only celebrate contributions but also critically analyse outcomes, offering transparency and accountability to stakeholders
- **expanding representation** in regional and national policy forums to make sure lived experience is embedded in the wider public health discourse.

It's essential that these measures aren't undermined by bureaucratic inertia or the rigid frameworks of previous statutory commissioning models.

The value of lived experience mustn't be filtered, sanitised or sidelined to fit within outdated systems of governance. Doing so risks erasing the very insights that make public health responses more humane, more relevant and more effective.

Instead, commissioning bodies must embrace a paradigm shift – one that recognises lived experience as a form of leadership and expertise in its own right.

This shift needs courage, collaboration and a commitment to equity. It demands that we move beyond consultation and into co-creation, where lived experience isn't just heard, but actively shapes the future of gambling harm prevention and recovery.

Conclusion: A call to partnership

To NHS England, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

As we conclude this impact report, we extend an invitation to partnership built on the foundation of what's been achieved over the past three years – that lived experience isn't an add-on to effective gambling harm reduction, but is essential.

The evidence we've given shows that when lived experience is genuinely embedded in commissioning, research, service design and prevention strategies, outcomes improve. Services become more accessible, interventions more effective, and public health approaches more nuanced as well as responsive to the communities they serve.

To NHS England:

As gambling harm support transitions into NHS integrated care systems, we urge you to design pathways that place lived experience at the heart of service development and delivery. The insights of those who've navigated these harms can transform clinical effectiveness, reduce barriers to access and make sure care is trauma-informed and recovery-oriented from the start.

To the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities:

Gambling harms disproportionately affect marginalised and vulnerable populations. Lived experience expertise is crucial to understanding and addressing these health inequalities. We ask that you embed lived experience voices in policy development, prevention frameworks and health equity strategies to ensure interventions reach those most at risk.

To UK Research and Innovation:

Evidence without the context of lived reality is incomplete. We call on UK Research and Innovation to champion co-production in research commissioning, fund participatory research models and recognise lived experience researchers as equal partners in knowledge creation. The questions we ask, the methodologies we develop and the solutions we propose are strengthened immeasurably when informed by people who are directly affected.

In the transition to a new system, lived experience must shift from a 'programme feature' to a nonnegotiable structural element of gambling harm governance, strategy, commissioning and evaluation. The function of the Lived Experience Council shows that meaningful involvement isn't simply desirable, but essential to ensuring fairness, effectiveness and public accountability.

Looking forward, this work must now evolve into a clearly defined best practice model. This model can then be used for the enrolment and professional development of lived experience leaders (people with strategic expertise) at levy oversight executive level. Establishing such roles is essential to make sure people directly impacted by gambling harms hold formal, consistent and influential positions within national decisionmaking structures.

The ambitions of the Lived Experience Council must serve as the blueprint for future system leadership. This includes the drive to transform culture, strengthen treatment pathways, remove stigma and guarantee that lived experience remains a permanent and central feature of the gambling harm response across Great Britain.

These principles form the foundation for a collective call to action: one which urges commissioners, policymakers and providers to embed lived experience expertise at every tier of governance.

This isn't a request for consultation after decisions have been made. This is a call for genuine co-design, shared governance and sustained investment in lived experience infrastructure, training, remuneration, career pathways and leadership development.

The members of the Lived Experience Council stand ready to work. We bring not only our experiences but our expertise: strategic thinking, policy insight, community connections and an unwavering commitment to reducing gambling harms across the UK.

The next chapter of gambling harm reduction will be defined by the partnerships we build now. We invite you to join us in creating a system that truly listens, learns and acts – where lived experience is not an afterthought, but a driving force for change.

Together, we can build a future where fewer people experience the devastating impact of gambling harms, and where those who do are met with understanding, dignity and effective support. The time for transformation is now.

On behalf of the GambleAware Lived Experience Council



**GambleAware is the leading independent charity
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and strategic commissioner of gambling harm education,
prevention and treatment across Great Britain to keep people
safe from gambling harms.**

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