

FAIR RECRUITMENT & EMPLOYING PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DISADVANTAGE



Ideas and lessons-learnt from
Inspiring Change Manchester and beyond

back on track >

changing lives through learning

 **COMMUNITY
LED
INITIATIVES**



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HOW WE GOT HERE

Inspiring Change Manchester (ICM) was an eight-year programme which was funded by the National Lottery ‘Fulfilling Lives’ initiative. It was led by Shelter and delivered in partnership with Back on Track Manchester, Big Life Group (formerly Self-Help Services), and Community-Led Initiatives.

ICM existed to explore innovative ways of working that would help people who were experiencing multiple disadvantage and who were excluded from the system to reach their full potential. The services that were offered through ICM were designed and developed with local people who had experience of multiple disadvantages and an understanding of the support needed to overcome barriers. Over the course of ICM, 433 people received support from the programme and 49 people completed GROW Traineeships.

ICM has helped to shape, and has been shaped by, the city since 2014. There may not be a programme of its scale again and it hopes to leave a positive legacy in Greater Manchester.

GROW TRAINEESHIPS

A fundamental part of Inspiring Change Manchester was the creation of GROW Traineeships (Getting Real Opportunities of Work). GROW Traineeships were designed to create paid routes back into work for people who had experienced multiple disadvantage. At the time, the GROW model was seen as a new way of approaching recruitment, and now some of these practices are much more common.

People on the GROW Traineeships undertook placements in different roles at Shelter, within the ICM partner organisations and in some cases externally. The placements had a centrally resourced offer of support which included; training, support, progression guidance, and access to a personal development budget. The GROW programme also challenged barriers within recruitment and management practices and drew on people’s personal expertise to improve the approaches of the organisations involved. 49 people completed GROW Traineeships and 76% had secured paid employment in another role by the end of their time on the scheme.

A mixed group of people met on the 23rd February 2021 with the open task of deciding what the ‘legacy’ of GROW Traineeships could be. This became one of a number of working groups that were set up to capture the learning of important themes of the programme.

The ‘lived-experience employment group’ had representatives from multiple organisations which included people who had brought their own ‘lived-experience’ to their roles in different ways. The membership changed over time, but a core group met nearly every fortnight for a year and wider perspectives from across Greater Manchester were also brought into the discussions.

At the first meeting it was agreed in the minutes that *“so many organisations are doing great work in this area that we need to share wider good practice and not just focus on what ICM has done”*. The group also decided on an ambitious plan to write a best practice guideline, host a training event, and record a podcast series to unpick some of the trickier parts of this topic.

After lots of meetings, co-design workshops, many interesting conversations, and a few changes of direction... this document and the supplementary ‘tips for candidates’ paper is what became of the original ‘Best Practice Guide’ plan. Working in this way (through partnerships and co-design) is not always easy and we hope this document reflects the views of everyone who was involved along the way. All of the quotes are from people who have been employed through the GROW Traineeship or by similar schemes in other organisations.

This document wishes to share ideas and examples from ICM and beyond about fair recruitment and employing people who have experienced multiple disadvantage. It may seem more relevant to VCSE¹ organisations but the methods can be applied to any roles.

We hope that it will encourage more organisations to review and improve their recruitment practices and to create more access to paid employment opportunities.

Our longer-term vision is for **all** recruitment practices to become fair and inclusive so that there does not need to be a separate approach for employing people who have experienced disadvantage.

¹ Voluntary, Charity and Social Enterprise

BENEFITS OF FAIR RECRUITMENT

Everyone brings their lived-experience, life-skills, and personality to a role - this isn't something which only applies to people who have faced disadvantage. Employers often say that colleagues who thrive in new roles are people who were the 'right fit' for the organisation. This usually has little to do with their qualifications or prior professional experience. We need to better recognise the informal or untraditional (but equally as valuable) experience that people bring.

Fair recruitment requires a commitment of resources and flexibility, but it will benefit the employer more than the person being employed. Having a diverse workforce improves organisations (particularly within the VCSE sector). To change the system, we need people 'on the inside' who can bring new insights, skills and ideas. This can advance projects, identify any access barriers, improve engagement, and challenge existing practices.

If a workforce better reflects the community it can break down barriers between agencies and citizens and lead to more open and equal relationships with people who access provisions or use products. It helps organisations to become more knowledgeable about how different communities experience their services and their workplace.

Having an inclusive workplace culture which promotes wellbeing has also been shown to improve staff retention, job satisfaction, productivity, morale, and organisational problem-solving. It increases creativity and innovation whilst giving more opportunities for learning, collaborative working, and access to funding.

We hope that the learning from the GROW Traineeship will be adopted by more charities and be expanded to leadership roles and positions within the statutory and private sectors. Our vision is to build on the progress in Manchester and reach a point where all recruitment practices are fair and inclusive so there does not need to be a separate approach or process for employing people who have experienced disadvantage.

FAIR RECRUITMENT PROCESSES

There are lots of nuances and specific ways of approaching fair recruitment that is difficult to capture in a written document. This guide hopes to open up conversations and ideas by focusing on fairness and accessibility across six main stages of the recruitment journey;

- 1. Planning for a new role
- 2. Applications
- 3. Interviews
- 4. Induction
- 5. In-role support
- 6. Professional development & next steps

It is likely that you will know and do some of this already, but you might pick up some new ideas along the way too. This approach can be applied to all recruitment exercises so that you can attract people who can use their personal experiences to positively shape any roles.

PLANNING FOR A NEW ROLE

Before creating or advertising a new role, there are a few overarching elements that can help to make the recruitment process fairer from the start and more likely to be successful.

Everyone who contributed to this guideline agreed that, on balance, it was better to create more accessible opportunities and focus on the experience that someone will have, rather than waiting until there is a 'perfect' process. The values, support provision, and workplace culture which underpin your recruitment approach are fundamental and should be championed by leadership and felt throughout the whole organisation.

CHECKLIST - DO YOU HAVE...?

PRACTICAL PREPARATIONS

- An understanding of what flexible contract options you could offer ☐
- Sufficient resources for in-role support and development (financial & staffing capacity) ☐
- Workload expectations that allow space for service and systems influence (if desired) ☐
- Suitable and accessible staff training options ☐
- A diverse range of channels and networks to advertise the role to ☐

WORKPLACE CULTURE

- An ethos which fully values the benefit that 'lived-experience' brings to a role & organisation ☐
- An open and inclusive working culture, with progressive EDI and DBS policies² ☐
- A willingness to embrace challenge, flexibility, and change at all levels of the organisation ☐

² Equality Diversity and Inclusion, Disclosure and Barring Service

As an employer, you will want to feel confident that you have an environment where anyone who joins your organisation should thrive in their role. Organisations need to truly value lived experience and have an appreciation that employing someone who has been through disadvantage could have a lasting negative impact on them if done badly. Asking someone to bring their lived experience as a prominent part of their role can be professionally and emotionally demanding and sufficient support should be allocated.

"An important thing for me was already knowing that ICM was going to be a good place to work. Everyone gets things wrong or might say the wrong thing. As long as we can all talk about it and they're properly up for making it better, it'll be fine."

"If I wasn't encouraged to share my experiences, I would have left a few times, I had imposter syndrome. The honesty and the belief I knew they had in me meant I could express how I was feeling and get the right support"

WIDENING YOUR NETWORKS

Build two-way relationships with different charities, neighbourhood centres, and organisations that work with diverse communities and ask if they would help to promote your upcoming role.

BAN THE BOX

Ban the Box is a campaign to increase job opportunities for people by only asking about criminal records if and when necessary.

recruit.unlock.org.uk/knowledgebase/when-to-ask

ICM GROW TRAINEESHIP

When recruitment for the GROW Traineeships began, colleagues from ICM made links with prospective candidates by visiting other services and making themselves known. This encouraged and reassured people that they would be suitable for those types of roles and that their service could support them to apply.

VOLUNTEERING

If you are a VCSE organisation who is looking to start the process of creating more opportunities for people who have faced disadvantage, it may help to start with volunteering roles. The recruitment process for volunteers can also be made more accessible and you might want to consider reviewing whether or not any voluntary positions you have could (or should) become paid roles with a developmental focus built in.

"Without volunteering, I literally wouldn't be where I am now - all my jobs came from it, somehow."

Person who has faced multiple disadvantage in Manchester

Departing from more traditional processes can help your organisation attract people with diverse skills and experiences to the role. Here are some things to think about when it comes to the application process:

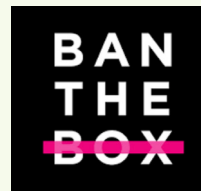
Role profile

- Use plain English and avoid jargon or acronyms
- If you are directly referring to someone's 'lived experience' make sure it is talked about in a positive and strengths-based way which highlights it as a skill and asset which will enhance someone's ability to do the role
- Only list essential and desirable criteria which reflect the reality of the role (e.g. don't include University degrees, or a specific number of years for experience, or 'excellent/advanced' IT skills if they are not needed for the position)
- Highlight the value of less traditional qualifications and experience which are relevant to the position, including volunteering roles and personal experiences
- Explicitly state your organisations values and your commitment to equality, diversity, and fair recruitment

DBS example text

This is a client-facing Engagement Worker role and we cannot employ someone to this position who is barred from working with vulnerable adults. This role is exempt from the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 and is subject to an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check.

We operate Fair Chance Recruitment practices and will not ask for any information about convictions during the application process. Following the interview stage, we will ask our preferred applicant to disclose any past convictions (including spent convictions, cautions, reprimands and warnings). The information disclosed will be considered by a panel and a decision will be taken about making an offer.



Application pack

- Clearly outline each step of the application process, including any DBS requirements
- State that flexibility and support can be offered throughout the recruitment process and include information about organisations that can help people with completing the application
- Have different options for how people can get in contact to ask questions (not just via email)
- Have a sufficient (or longer than usual) timeline for the responses
- Consider sharing our candidate guideline

Promotion

- Promote the role to diverse networks, including charities and community groups
- Make sure that it can be seen & applied to offline; avoid digital forms or portals if possible
- Consider offering a drop-in session for the role (an example from Back on Track is given below)

Shortlisting

- Have all applications sent to someone who can anonymise them to avoid bias (remove personal identifiers such as name, gender, address)



BACK ON TRACK INFORMATION DROP-IN SESSIONS

When hiring a new project worker, Back on Track held optional 'drop-in' sessions as part of the recruitment process. This gave people who were interested in the role an opportunity to chat through any questions they had about the role and about the application process in an informal setting before the application deadline. It also meant they could visit the centre and meet with colleagues/volunteers/peers.

The role was promoted through engaging posters and social media and it was explicitly stated that applications from people who had experienced disadvantage were encouraged. The job description was clear and the application form asked only for evidence about the skills, qualities, knowledge and experience needed for the role.

Unconscious bias was reduced by excluding information about age, non-relevant education and work history from the application process. In line with fair recruitment processes only the preferred candidate (following the interview process) was asked to disclose convictions.

This process led to an increase in both the number and the diversity of applicants. It enabled people to focus on communicating their strengths and abilities and gave applicants hope that their suitability for the role would be assessed fairly.

Interviews are not the only way to make an appointment and if someone hasn't been interviewed for a while (or ever) it can be a very daunting experience. Here are some ideas for how to make people feel more at ease so that they can demonstrate their full potential;

Planning (internal)

- Write and agree the interview questions with a diverse group of people and focus on drawing out the skills and characteristics that will be needed for the role
- Use open questions which speak to a range of experience, for example use 'how would you approach...' rather than 'give an example of when you have...'
- Have a diverse range of people on the panel who are relevant to the position being hired
- Offer support to people who are joining the panel if they need it (both before and after)
- Standardise the process for all candidates to increase fairness and reduce bias

Preparation (candidate)

- If the interview is in person, give detailed directions with public transport options and photos e.g. "Check in at reception and I'll come and meet you there. The 293 bus stop is nearby."
- If the interview is online, offer a place where you can set someone up for the video call who might not have a stable internet connection. Give clear instructions on how to access the virtual meeting and offer to do a trial run
- Give the names of who they will meet and how long the whole process will take
- Share advice on how to prepare (what to wear and what types of questions will be asked)
- Ask if they have any learning needs or accessibility needs and state that adjustments will be made which will have no impact on the recruitment decisions
- Make it explicit that travel can be reimbursed and share information on schemes that can offer support with this

INTERVIEW PANELS - WHAT NOT TO DO...

"Don't invite me to be on an interview panel if you're not going to listen to what I have to say or if I don't have an equal say in who gets hired. This happened to me and it felt tokenistic. It felt like I was just there so that they could say it was inclusive. I do it voluntarily, it's disrespectful of my time."

During the interview

- Have someone who isn't on the panel to meet the candidate first and have a chat with them before they go into the interview to help put them at ease
- Have the panel introduce themselves fully and explain how the interview will go, start with some opening questions that are unscored
- Consider giving the candidate the interview questions to look at before the interview so that they can make notes and prepare their best examples and answers
- Check that people fully understand the questions and offer to reword them if it isn't clear
- Give people time to think about and/or change their answers throughout the interview
- Be warm and friendly; use positive non-verbal feedback (e.g. body language, eye contact)
- Consider using interactive workplace-based activities or group interviews (see below example)

Appointment

- When deciding who to appoint, think about what people bring (e.g. values) and what can be taught (e.g. IT skills)
- Tell people when and how they will hear back, and stick to this or let them know if there will be any changes
- Give detailed and constructive feedback to any unsuccessful candidates, and offer for this to be given in writing or in person
- Consider if your organisation could offer unsuccessful candidates any other opportunities

“The first time I went for a GROW Traineeship I didn’t get it, the feedback I got made me feel motivated to re-apply and I was successful the second time round!”

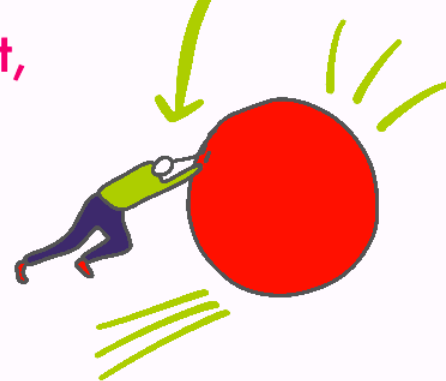
CLI GROUP INTERVIEWS

At CLI, they have designed an interview process to reduce anxiety and assess how well people can interact with others (which is an essential part of the role). They put candidates in an informal environment with other people and give them interactive tasks to complete. These ‘interviews’ last for four hours and people are scored on how well they interact with others and whether they demonstrate desired behaviours (rather than how well they answered an interview question). Candidates have fed back that it reduced their anxiety and gave them enough time to settle in and show their true colours. www.communityled.org.uk/blog/recruiting-people-differently/

Someone who’s experienced multiple disadvantage and is trying to get into employment, training or education.



Someone who hasn’t.



As with any new colleague, you will want to make sure someone is positively inducted into the team so that they can contribute to the organisation and develop as an employee. There are some additional considerations to have in mind that can be beneficial for people who have experienced disadvantage. (Some of these suggestions may be more relevant to VCSE organisations or for new employees whose experience of disadvantage is more severe or more recent.)

- Allocate more time for people to get to know their new colleagues and (with consent from the person) speak to the team who the new employee will be joining about the type of support they would like to be provided
- Give more attention to familiarising people with IT systems and workplace processes
- Offer specific support and advice about moving from benefits into paid employment or make a referral to another organisation that can provide this (e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau)
- Include an offer of core skills training (e.g. document preparation, video calls, Outlook, Microsoft office, CRM systems) as well as any trainings that are specific to the role (e.g. safeguarding)
- Identify skill gaps and develop a professional development plan
- Use clear step by step guidance and accessible terminology for any trainings
- Have regular space and time set aside to talk about their development and support needs

“It was IT that was my biggest struggle, I was getting loads of support with other things but people sort of assumed I’d know how to do things like send emails and set up meetings on calendars.”

“I wish people told me what I wasn’t doing well enough too, it’s important and it helps me to know what skills to try and develop. Just being encouraging all the time doesn’t give me a chance to do my job properly.”

“I’ve noticed that in co-design groups it’s often men who speak up more about their lived-experience and who give their ideas. I guess it doesn’t have to be a gender thing, but you’ve got to look out for different people’s different needs and make sure everyone is getting heard. Some people will wait to be asked.”



Opening up conversations

Take responsibility for trying to understand people’s anxieties and bring up topics that they may be worried about but not want to ask. Offer detail and reassurances where possible and consider having a dedicated colleague that they can speak to which isn’t their line manager. Conversations to think about having as part of someone’s induction are;

- Any flexibility of working hours and contracted hours (appreciation of any childcare or carer commitment and recovery groups)
- Processes for requesting leave which isn’t for holidays, such as time off for mental health
- When and how wages are paid, and how this can impact someone’s benefits or housing
- The challenges of bringing ‘lived experience’ to a role and organisation, and how this may feel for them

SUPPORT IN THE ROLE

Any support and advice should be ongoing and not just offered at the start of a role. It can be beneficial to establish in a structured way so it is not something that will only be there if it is asked for or seen as needed. There are additional support offers that can be more relevant for people who have experienced disadvantage, but these would also benefit all employees. They include;

- Flexible working arrangements
- Creating manageable but sufficient workloads
- Regular 'check-in' meetings that aren't related to tasks or performance
- Access or signposting to external specialist support (e.g. mental health)
- You may consider building in a 'wellness plan' or 'reflective practice' sessions
- Have a separation of pastoral support and line management
- Encourage people to access peer mentoring programmes (or develop your own)
- Opportunities for reflection, e.g. reflection journals
- Encourage empowerment within the role (offer coaching skills to people's managers)

'Lived experience' and professional boundaries

Expecting someone to bring their 'lived experience' to a role is a huge ask and the difficulties this can cause should be acknowledged. For some people, there might be parts of their new job that open up personal challenges, or there might be issues in someone's personal life that affect their ability to work.

Remind people that they have been hired for their values and skill sets (not their 'lived experience') and it is their choice if and how they want to share any personal experiences. Cultivate a culture where all colleagues feel able to open up about personal life and feel confident that non-judgemental support will be available. The principles of professional boundaries and working within your competence are very important in any VCSE person-facing roles because of the complex nature of this work.

ICM REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND WELLNESS PLANS

Reflective Practice is a monthly session where ICM staff (including GROW Trainees) meet with a trained counsellor to discuss any issues and concerns they may have in relation to their work. There is also an option to arrange one-to-one meetings with the counsellor for more private issues. Sessions were held face to face in a neutral venue and were moved online during Covid-19. They normally last for up to two hours and are informal sessions which are led by the attendees with input from the counsellor.

The sessions were extremely valuable as they provided a safe space for staff to receive help to overcome any challenges they may be facing with the people they support. They also allow staff to share their experiences and best practice with specialist IAG³ input from the counsellor. This is especially helpful for staff with less experience of working within this sector, as peer support is often more effective in managing challenging situations.

"I was getting support for my mental health but I wasn't expecting that using my 'lived experience' and being asked to talk about this a lot would bring up past trauma.

That was difficult."

"It would be my personal recommendation that Reflective Practice should form part of any staff wellbeing policies in organisations that work with people facing multiple disadvantage. The work is by nature often emotionally charged and providing space for staff to reflect and support each other, will have huge benefits for the organisation as a whole."

Peer mentors

The peer mentoring model promotes mutual support and brings people with lived experience to the heart of delivery. Peer mentors are able to use work experience gained via mentoring to move into employment. This 'motivational ladder of engagement' has allowed peer mentors to build confidence, new skills and networks as well as supporting people who have re-entered the workforce.



³ Information Advice and Guidance

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND NEXT STEPS

The employer should take a proactive responsibility for skill development and should build this in as a structured part of any role. It is important to work together with the employee to help people prepare for their next steps too, particularly for fixed-term roles. The conversations about an individual's future goals and areas for growth should be started early on in their role and reviewed throughout their contract. Some ideas and examples from ICM include;

- Have regular structured one-to-one development sessions
- Develop personalised training plans
- Formalise time within the role to complete agreed personal development tasks
- Consider having 'study days' with allocated budgets
- Give people control for decisions relating to their development (e.g. choice of courses)
- Arrange shadowing and placement opportunities for people to discover other avenues of work
- Encourage the exploration of individual passions and interests and roles in other sectors
- Support people with searches and applications for onward roles
- Develop longer term training and support plans for after the traineeship or role will end
- Provide opportunities and job variety within the team outside of ordinary scope of job description

ICM PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BUDGET

As part of the GROW Traineeships, each trainee is allocated a personal budget of £1,500 which can be used in a flexible way to support their development based on what they feel may be most beneficial to them. In the past trainees have spent this on training courses, IT equipment, counselling and clothing for interviews. This gives each individual control over their own development and recognises that each trainee will have unique needs, interests and gaps in their development.

Influence and systems change

If part of the role is related to systems change, or if part of the reason why you undertook a fair recruitment exercise was to bring new perspectives into your organisation, it is important to provide support and development in this area too.

There is often a focus on professional developmental opportunities that are for more traditional skillsets relating to the workplace. It is important that people also feel supported to share their views and develop, so they have a greater influence too. People should feel encouraged to speak out and campaign on the barriers they are facing within the workplace as well as in the sector. Looking at influence from a professional development point of view, you should involve both pastoral support and practical upskilling.

"A GROW Trainee can often feel a bit lost and overwhelmed by the new obligations and culture of the workplace.

There can be a conflict between wanting to show you can 'do the job' and wanting to pursue systems change.

There should be support to help people voice their frustrations of these discrepancies."

GROW TRAINEESHIPS - LEARNINGS FROM ONE PERSON'S EXPERIENCES

My motivation for applying to the GROW Traineeship was around social justice; improving services, expanding engagement, using my understanding of needs, and getting involved partnership work.

I started my placement as a GROW Engagement Worker in 2018. I was on the waiting list for housing after my detox and it felt like one of my only opportunities to get an income. I was saying yes to any volunteering roles at the time and I was having to re-contextualise where I now fitted in 'the system'. I was surprised at how much I had to stretch the minimum wage.

There was lots around the traineeship that I found challenging, and I was continually questioning the worth I brought to the work environment. There were different management styles and structures and not everyone shared my broader more open understanding of what the role could be and what influence I could have within it. The GROW Traineeship can create a weird status for you that isn't always met with the same level of opportunities. There were some clashes between the potential that ICM and the GROW Traineeships could have, and the more traditional case work requirements of the role. I remember some interesting early conversations about the hub space, labels, and making cups of tea. I asked 'who's hub is it..?'

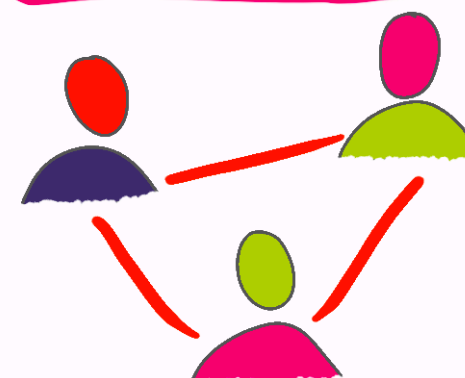
I think lots of people, whatever their backgrounds, are drawn to the VCSE sector because of a lack of connection.

There are complexities around boundaries with these types of roles. They value close relationships and 'lived experience', and promote certain behaviours by putting this out there, but the professional and personal lines can be blurred and it's the person's wellbeing that will take the hit. There is a careful balance to be had between giving people flexibility and preparing people for the realities of other workplaces too.

The GROW Traineeship gave me immediate access to people and networks that would have took me years to establish. I knew that I wanted to pursue work in systems change and I was careful not to fall victim to 'process conformity' - I wanted to succeed in the sector without losing my perspective and ability to pose challenges. I enjoyed how ICM supported curiosity and how willing they would be to explore new ideas (most of the time).

I spent my personal development time on Manchester Street Poem and on work with the Elephants Trail. My GROW Traineeship was extended and after that I worked on a project around health inequalities. I'm building my influence in local, regional and national arena and I'm working to have relevance in multiple spaces which isn't defined by my personal experiences. I can still feel a pressure to mould and I always think that it shouldn't have to be as hard - we all know what needs to change. After ICM, I'd love to see the GROW Traineeship model develop into a leadership programme, there might be a bit of risk, but the reward would be huge.

WHAT NEXT?



- Push on different sectors' doors
- More risk taking and experimentation
- Use spare corporate training capacity
- Prepare employers, not just those job hunting!

There is a separate guideline which focuses on tips for people who are looking to re-enter the workplace based on the advice from people who completed GROW Traineeships. The working group also developed a podcast series on fair recruitment which forms part of a suite of materials that mark the end of ICM. If you are interested in this area of work, you might also like to look at:

1. GROW Traineeship presentation, booklet, and framework documents ---> [LINK](#)
2. Video about GROW Traineeships ---> [LINK](#)
3. Peer mentoring outcomes report ---> [LINK](#)
4. CFE 2021 research on workforce development and multiple disadvantage ---> [LINK](#)
5. CFE briefing - Involving people with lived experience in the workforce ---> [LINK](#)
6. Elephants Trail ---> [LINK](#)
7. Good Employment Charter ---> [LINK](#)
8. Unlock ---> [LINK](#)
9. Involving People with Lived Experience in the Workforce Webinar ---> [LINK](#)
10. ICM podcast series on lived experience employment. ---> [LINK](#)

THANK YOU

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