A Good Life

Exploring what matters to people facing multiple and complex needs

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Summary

This report presents findings from our research with a group of individuals who have faced multiple and complex needs, asking them about their hopes and aspirations and what their good life would look like. It forms part of our SPARK programme of research, with related briefings focusing on: the evidence base on selected service models for people facing multiple and complex needs; the application of payment by results for this group; and engaging partners to develop a 'whole-system' response to these issues locally.[1]

The findings seek to challenge more creative and ambitious thinking about what people with multiple and complex needs can be supported to achieve. With public services increasingly moving towards outcome-based commissioning, this paper will be of interest to commissioners and policymakers seeking to develop more effective services for this group.

Whilst participants' conceptions of a good life were multifaceted and varied, key themes emerged:

- Stability. This was a common aspiration among participants: the importance of a 'normal' life with realistic goals, underpinned by a sense of being internally content
- Relationships matter. Positive relationships can be motivational and supportive and might come via services, children, or people with similar experiences
- Quality matters. The good life included a good job that was fulfilling; a safe, clean home; respect and courtesy from services
- The good life in its fullest sense goes beyond traditional 'needs-led' service provision, for example including informal support networks or outdoor activities and sports
- The good life is a journey, not a single vision. Participants highlighted the setbacks and difficulties which are part of this journey.

Participants' goals and aspirations would likely be shared by many people. While overcoming difficulties was a part of their journey towards the good life, goals such as a home and healthy relationships are understandable and relatable, and showed the importance of 'normality' to our participants.

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[1] Download other resources at http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/partnerships--development/spark/resources/

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1. Introduction

People facing multiple problems, caught in a cycle of crisis and crime, often come into contact with a wide range of services. These include health and social care services, criminal justice agencies, benefits and employments agencies and supported housing and homelessness services. Unfortunately many of these interactions can be fruitless; or worse, they can exacerbate an already negative situation. Previous research has suggested that one contributory factor in this poor response from services is a mismatch in expectations between both the type of help that the client wants and what is available, and between what constitutes a successful outcome to services and what constitutes a successful outcome to the client (Anderson, 2011).

Increasingly, public services have moved towards outcome-based commissioning. The Department of Health now produces national outcomes frameworks for public health, the NHS and adult social care, and in a number of areas services are also increasingly paid by their 'results', in full or in part. While it is anticipated that such 'outcomes-based' approaches offer potential for a more responsive and flexible service delivery environment, the implementation of outcomes-based commissioning raises the important question: who decides what outcomes matter? Similarly, when evaluating whether or not a service is a 'success' to inform funding or commissioning decisions, we need to think about who decides what 'success' looks like.

This research was conducted to ensure that the voice of people facing multiple and complex needs was not lost in answering these critical questions. We wanted to find out what outcomes are important for people facing multiple and complex needs, in particular those who have experienced repeat contact with the criminal justice system. We worked with our national service user forum, all of whom have experiences of multiple and complex needs such as homelessness, substance misuse, poor mental health and offending. We aimed to find out about their hopes and aspirations - what a good life would look like to them, drawing deliberately on the language of Tony Ward and colleagues' 'Good Lives Model of Offender Rehabilitation' (http://www.goodlivesmodel.com/) which emphasises building on strengths to support desistance from crime.

We chose to explore these ideas through the use of 'collage as inquiry' (Butler-Kisber, 2008) whereby the participants were asked to create magazine collages depicting what a good life would look like to them which would support the elicitation of ideas and form the basis for discussion. This approach was adopted to encourage free-thinking among participants about possibilities, moving away from familiar but limited concerns linked to service provision.

While this was a small scale exploratory research study with a specific group of participants, and what constitutes a good life will vary between individuals, our findings present a powerful picture of the wider types of outcomes that should be considered, and provides 'food for thought' for commissioners and local leaders. We hope that it helps encourage the commissioning of public services to be more focused on what matters to some of the most marginalised and excluded members of our society, and to be aspirational about what – with support – they can achieve.

2. Methodology

2.1. Recruitment, research, and analysis process

Participants for the research were recruited through Revolving Doors' national service user forum. In total, 16 people attended one of three full day workshops, of whom six were female and 10 male.

In the workshops, participants were asked to each make a collage that would represent their own good life. To do this, they were provided with various materials, such as paper, pens and a wide selection of magazines. This process was followed by a discussion about the collage with the research team.

Creative methods such as collage-making can be a rewarding way of conducting research with excluded groups, and in general it has been argued that imagery can be used to express our emotions where words cannot – particularly where people may have low levels of literacy and lack confidence in using language to express complex emotions. (Diem-Wille, 2001, in Prosser and Loxley, 2007).

"Collage, created from a synthesis of shattered fragments, realized in an emergent, often randomized composition, arrives at meaning in a very different way - accidentally, capriciously, provocatively, tangentially." (Davis, 2008, p.250)

Use of creative methods was also intended to encourage a free thinking approach to the possibilities of a good life, moving away from traditional service-led concerns. In this way, the research process attempted to move the balance of power back towards a group which is generally disempowered and excluded from discussions of 'what matters'. Although this creative approach formed the basis for discussion, most of the analysis was still based on linguistic expression, drawing largely on transcriptions of discussions with a member of the research team about the collages, with the collages used for context.

During the workshops, all the researchers made notes of their observations. The recorded discussions were transcribed and two researchers independently sorted the transcripts into common themes. The initial themes were continuously refined through discussions with the wider research team and again following a feedback session with our national service user forum.

2.2. Limitations and how we addressed them

A pilot workshop was conducted, following which we made some changes to the methodology. Firstly, in the pilot workshop, participants were also offered the chance to write a poem if they would like to and at least two participants opted to do this, adding it to the collage. Secondly, participants went on to explain their collage and how it represents their good life in a group with the other participants and researchers, with opportunities for follow-up questions and discussion from the group. In workshops two and three, poetry was not suggested as a mode of expression as this presented additional challenges to analysis. In addition, since much of the subject matter had been of a highly personal nature, participants were asked to talk through their collage privately with a researcher, and then asked five pre-prepared questions (listed in the appendix). Data from all three workshops (including the pilot) was included in the analysis.

Our decision to recruit all participants from our national service user forum for the discussion introduces a degree of 'sample bias' in the research, and we acknowledge that the specific make-up of the group and the small sample size means that readers should be cautious in generalising from the findings. The average age of the group was 46, with only one participant under the age of 30, and some have made considerable progress in their recovery journeys.

The selection of magazines available could have influenced the design of collages, which was mitigated through a wide spread of magazines. Participants may have also been influenced by each other (although staff observed that during the collage-making participants were very quiet and focused on their own collages.) Researchers may also have analysed the transcriptions with their preconceptions of what

constitutes a good life. To guard against this the draft themes were revised and refined based on participants' feedback, transcripts were anonymised and analysed by two people independently, and researchers wrote down their bias so they were aware of the possibility of this influencing them.

2.3. Steps taken to ensure the research was ethical

Although the research was designed to be future-focused and aspirational, the research question inevitably prompted reflection from participants on the distance of their current life from what they aspired for, and the subject matter brought up some distressing personal themes such as loss of children, imprisonment, abuse and addiction.

In all three workshops, informed consent was sought from all participants through an information sheet, preparatory discussions, and a consent form explaining the purpose of research and seeking permission to record discussion and photograph collages (see appendices). Regular breaks were scheduled, and participants were informed they could leave the workshop at any time and ask for their collage to be destroyed (although in fact all participants stayed to the end and actively encouraged use of their collages within the final research). Transcripts of discussion were anonymised.

In the pilot workshop, participants presented their collages to the full group, which included the research team (Revolving Doors staff members) and other forum members. This format was adopted as the forum members knew each other and had an existing peer support relationship. However, feedback from the participants suggested that, while they wished to make the collages in a group environment, they would prefer discussions to be held on a one-to-one basis with a researcher so this was implemented in workshops two and three. In all three workshops, a debrief session was held and a member of the research team phoned the participants on the following day to 'check in' on their wellbeing.

3. Analysis: Themes of the good life

The themes identified in this analysis were refined and agreed with participants in a final feedback session. While acknowledging that many are interlinked and overlapping, we have arranged them into three broad categories: things that represent progress in achieving the good life; the role of other people in the good life; and a series of cross cutting themes that included elements from the other two categories.

Table A: Themes identified by participants

Category	Specific themes
What represents progress in a good life?	Housing and the home Making a positive contribution Fulfilling employment Enjoyment and fun Life skills and financial security Being healthy Desistance and recovery journeys
What is the role of other people in a good life?	Children Other interpersonal relationships Being trusted Being respected Challenging prejudice and stigma
The interior and exterior life: cross-cutting themes	Stability New experiences and positive challenges Freedom Independence

Before moving on to discuss these themes, it is important to raise some general reflections that shape the findings:

- Many participants contrasted a fantasy 'dream life' with a more realistic goal of contentment and stability. While there is a significant focus throughout on fairly modest goals of stability and feeling safe, some included some more ambitious 'in a perfect world' concepts – as one participant said, "*for when I win the lottery*". Some acknowledged that priorities can change with age: perhaps when they were younger they may have focused more on "youth fun" rather than "midlife worries".
- Participants often spoke of their collages (and even designed them) in terms of a journey towards the good life, as opposed to creating a single vision. The emphasis on recovery from their problems as a process and a journey that may have many setbacks is an important one throughout.
- Some participants were not yet sure what their good life looked like – and this perhaps related to uncertainties and mixed feelings about families and relationships. One participant chose to visually represent this uncertainty: "*The nice big hole in the middle of this…I'd like to talk more about it but I haven't even sorted it out in my own head"* (see Collage 6).

- While many participants wanted to see change from services, they also recognised their own role in creating a good life: "*there's only so much you can change [about services] cos I think a lot of it has to come from within*".

3.1 What represents progress in a good life?

Often, progress was represented by tangible, clear symbols such as housing or a job. Nevertheless, the quality of these things was important – for most, a home was more than mere shelter, and people wanted a job that rewarded their skills and made a difference. In many cases, making progress was a current, ongoing journey for participants. Underlying and supporting this progress were the distinct journeys of desistance from crime and recovery from substance misuse.

3.1a Housing and the home

Ten participants mentioned this theme, and for many it was particularly important: "*that's what I really, really want.*" However, as a theme it could represent many different things.

Stability

For many participants who had experienced the struggle of homelessness, a stable home was an ideal. Permanent or longer-term housing reinforced this sense of stability: *"rented's fine but I'd rather buy my own place cos then it's mine and I could call it mine."* It also meant people had the confidence to make it their own: "*[if I had a] one year or two year tenancy, that would make me feel so insecure…I could never fix it up."*

Some participants stayed completely focused on what they could currently achieve: *"I had this fantasy world where I was gonna have different houses…but now the realism of it all is I just want a place I can afford to live in and that's it."*

Supported housing and shared housing were conceived of in different ways. In the follow-up meeting, most participants agreed that hostels could be beneficial as a 'stepping stone' to something else, and offered practical support. For one participant, hostels and the professionals working in them had been helpful: "*I did get a lot of encouragement from my time in the hostel.*" Others had less positive memories of their time in hostels, associating them with instability.

'My own space': Safety and tranquillity

Basic shelter or a "roof over my head" was crucial, but most wanted more than that from their home. For some, including one participant who was currently in a difficult and insecure housing situation, a stable home represented safety, and a clearly defined space that was theirs alone. Participants used words such as "sanctuary" and "tranquillity" to describe their ideal home – it was a peaceful place where you could "*lock your door and just leave it all behind you*". This was important for those with experience of unstable living situations, such as squats.

However, while independent housing represented peace and respite for some, others feared the responsibility. Some weren't sure how to reconcile their desire for sanctuary and peace with their need for companionship:

"*I like the idea of this nice big house out in the open but even then, still on my own, so is it really sanctuary?"*

Good quality: clean and attractive

A tranquil, beautiful space could go hand in hand with a peaceful house for participants. Although most did not want something extravagant, some mentioned wanting a pleasant, attractive home, and this was reflected in some collage pictures:

Collage 1

"If you look at the picture [pictures of kitchen and windows, bottom right] *that is a beautiful setting, that's a good life to me. The tranquillity of it. The cleanliness of it, the airs, it seems fresh."*

This participant also highlighted the "cleanliness" of the house displayed on his collage. Two other participants also spoke of a clean environment – and this was in some cases contrasted to places people associated with times of heavy drug use, such as squats.

3.1b Making a positive contribution[2]

For several participants, the difficulties they had experienced made them want to give back to society, and work to effect change. Four mentioned their work with Revolving Doors, as well as service user panels and activism elsewhere which made them feel proud of their achievements. This work also engendered feelings of respect and confidence, identified as an important component of the good life: *"it was my second meeting with police officers yesterday…and it's the first time from the police I've actually felt listened to."*

Some wanted to use their experiences to help others directly, through things like mentoring:

"So you know, that makes me even more determined to go out there and help other people and show other people … I've had parts of a crap life for a good few years and I know how down and in the gutter you can get. And I've been there and I wouldn't like to be there again because it's a dark, horrible, dirty place and if I can help people and mentor people to not go [there]…"

[2] All participants are members of Revolving Doors' national service user forum, and in many cases active in other local service user groups as well. As noted above, this sample bias may have impacted on the relative weight placed on this aspect when describing their view of a 'good life'.

One participant felt that this responsibility to help others and be a kind of role model motivated him to stay on the right track: "*helping others out is a big incentive*". Others felt that their direct experience gave their support and advice more weight and credibility.

3.1c Fulfilling employment

For the six participants who mentioned work as a part of their good life, most wanted a job that recognised their skills, that they enjoyed and that they could "stick with". In other words, the quality of the employment mattered. One participant emphasised this need for fulfilling employment: "*Maybe I'll get a job stacking a shelf or something…but I know I'm better than that. I was only with* [company name] *two months when I was promoted to supervisor."* This linked with the need for people's strengths to be acknowledged and recognised: "*I've done so many things and can do so many things."*

For some employment seemed to be tied to a sense of self-worth, and also the ideal of stability and normality. One participant who gets sporadic jobs explained that when he has work, *"I respect myself, I feel good cos I'm one of the workers coming home from work and life's normal."* Another linked it to keeping on the *"straight and narrow… you haven't got to commit offences once you've got money in your pocket".* However, one participant associated low-paid work with insecurity:

"There isn't a job out there where I would be able to afford anywhere and I'd end up back on the streets again, that's another fear I've got going on. So I mean in one way it would be a damn good job for me to step into employment so I could afford a facility and all that"

Four participants linked making a positive contribution (see above) to their career goals. One participant noted that the bulk of the work he currently did in supporting others was voluntary, but he would like to build on that through "*qualifications in teaching adults…I think I'm good at teaching cos I'm quite colourful in the ways I explain things sometimes*." Another participant envisioned having a profitable business that would enable him to do community work:

"If I own my own business doing me landscape gardening and stuff, when I go bigger on that and I do well on that and I start making a profit - I can get people working for me… It might take a couple of years but if I have enough money to have other people working for me, basically be my own boss, I can go out then and I can do mentoring as well as have my own business. So I can help people plus help myself - so it's like hitting two birds with one stone."

However, for some participants, work was not mentioned or represented on their collage, possibly because of the age of some of the participants (some were approaching their sixties) or because it felt like too distant a goal.

3.1d Enjoyment and fun

The importance of having fun and finding new ways to enjoy life was raised by many as part of a healthier, better life. New experiences such as travel symbolised progress: one participant explained that he was aiming to go abroad and this was something he could only plan for now because he was financially stable. One participant said she would love to travel so she could just "*unwind and relax…just chill out.",* with another suggesting that holidays were valuable as a way of "*learning to relax and enjoy the day*."

For another participant, outdoor activities and sports were a part of the good life, and doing them seemed to symbolise a full, active life: *"you're doing things, you're motivating yourself, you're going places".*

Another participant raised the need to find different types of enjoyment and fun to the "high life" of their past:

"[Gesturing at picture of diamonds] *Yeah I've lived the high life and it didn't work out, so I wanna try and accept what I've got now. I always like look at two things, I look at drugs in this hand and my mates in this hand and what do I wanna lose. Is it worth losing my mates? It's not."*

While this ties into the common desire for stability, a few participants stressed that they still wanted to pursue challenging, exciting pursuits:

"I do go bmxing and we go in fast cars and stuff like that … basically that's why [the collage is] all glittery cos the show's still going and rocking"

Collage 2

This participant's collage contained several themes symbolising progress. The healthy life was contrasted to the picture of a couple symbolising offending (top right).

3.1e Life skills and financial security

For several participants, this was a pragmatic part of their vision of the good life. Rather than a rich, pampered life, financial security often meant being able to budget and live within your means. This theme also relates to some participants' mixed feelings around romantic relationships (see below): at the follow-up feedback meeting, people expanded on the need to be self-reliant.

One participant used the metaphor of 'learning to swim" to illustrate how budgeting was important:

"Cos if I didn't learn how to swim and budget, I wouldn't be able to pay my gas with £120 every two weeks, pay gas, electric, credit, cigarettes….a pair of panties and soap, go to Iceland…"

This could also be linked to a sense of being clean and well-organised: one participant included cleaning products on her collage and another said she would like to always "*have your keys and your phone- just being able to find things and have everything sorted out.*"

People also felt they needed to develop coping skills and self-sufficiency, in particular preparing for problems "*cos you never know what's gonna happen*". One participant discussed "learn[ing] how to struggle" – where 'struggle' meant battling through a difficult situation rather than denying its existence. This was represented by an image in their collage:

Collage 3

Researcher [referring to section of collage indicated]: *So what's that one, with the head buried?*
Participant: *Oh that's, you have problems, you have to learn how to struggle and deal with them.*

3.1f Being healthy

Being healthy was a significant theme for some participants, and was sometimes linked to life skills in that it often meant taking care of yourself. Becoming healthy was a challenging journey for much of this group, and some comments suggested that participants almost had to 'fight' to achieve good health: "*the health part…I'm winning that battle".*

Participants wanted to be physically "fit", to have "wellbeing", to fix their teeth, or to recover fully from eating disorders. Health issues brought up feelings of regret, and one woman regretted the damage done to her long term health:

"..And this, health [gestures at 'healthy' text on Collage 2] *not realising what you've done, well- realising what you've done to yourself and what a waste of time it's been."*

A healthy life remained a positive goal for some participants, where they enjoyed "healthy food", going to the park, and enjoying nature. Like many other themes, becoming healthy was a journey - ongoing and challenging but ultimately worthwhile.

Collage 4

Like several others, this collage portrayed a 'journey' towards the good life. Many images chosen at the bottom represented self-care, hygiene and health; and were contrasted by the participant to some of the images representing the 'bad stuff' at the top.

3.1g. Desistance and recovery journeys

Participants often spoke of the good life, and even designed the collages, as a journey towards the good life (as opposed to creating a single vision). This could be why participants chose to depict negative experiences on their collages. One participant recognised that previous bad experiences had shaped her character today: "*I had to go to prison to get to where I am today, that's how I look at life".*

Journeys of desistance from crime and recovery from substance misuse were part of progress toward the good life. However, it is important to note that this journey was about much more than simply becoming drug-free or crime-free, but that this status could help achieve a broader 'good life'. Progress on this journey was characterised by a stable, healthy life which included good friends, internal calm, and making a positive contribution. Whereas the beginning of this journey – before positive progress was made – was often associated with drugs, crime, or destructive relationships.

These journeys were often challenging and non-linear, with setbacks to be expected. Two participants used a metaphor of a mountain to illustrate their 'uphill climb' towards a good life (see Collage 5). This progress was recognised by one participant to have its drawbacks: "*it's good to get to the mountain top…but it's also lonely on the mountain top, so it's good to come down to the valley for fun, nuttiness and people."*

Drug and alcohol recovery

Drug dependency could impede progress. One participant explained that she would like to go away but could not until she had stopped taking methadone, and that currently she had to visit a pharmacist for this every day. However, she also noted that the progress she had already made meant she had earned back the trust of her friends and family. Another participant wanted to be more active, but noted that drugs got in the way of that.

Recovery was an individualised process and pressure to reduce dependency on substitute prescriptions caused anxiety for one participant:

"I feel a bit pressurised to come down too quickly- [they're] trying to cut me off… after years and years suddenly it's like they wanna cut you down every two weeks… and they want me to do a detox and things ….so I feel a bit pressured. I would hope they would respect what I think, but ….You've probably heard they're getting paid for how many people they can get off, so they're kind of pressured"

For some participants, there was no magic bullet or 'wake-up call' making them drug free, but rather a slow reduction in their levels of consumption:

"*I don't take heroin off the street anymore so I've dealt with that…I stopped smoking hash, I stopped taking pills…but erm the only thing that makes me weak is crack and that I've got down to once a day."*

Desistance from crime

While some participants were more positive about their progress, they still represented desistance as a journey or process that for them was ongoing: *"I'm on the right track as far as I'm concerned, and I've been engaging with services well for seven years now and I haven't been in prison.*" One participant highlighted the role of others as an ongoing reminder to stay out of crime; she actively chose not to return to offending because *"it's not worth losing my mates".*

Participants were at different points in their lives, and some were further on this journey than others. However there was a common theme of a journey towards a stable, crime-free, drug-free life being complex and involving setbacks, but also progress that should be seen as a positive in itself.

Collage 5

One participant's visual representation of his journey towards the good life

3.2 What is the role of other people in a good life?

Often, other people were a catalyst in the journey towards the good life; they inspired and motivated people to change. Yet also, other people could be barriers – in the form of a destructive relationship, distressing memories, or more broadly in the form of prejudice and lack of respect. Participants talked of a good life where people with multiple needs didn't face discrimination and stigma.

3.2a. Children

For those who had them, children and grandchildren were the most important part of their life. Children motivated people to make positive change and gave them a goal:

"*I think the most important thing is how my children will view me."*

"I did have a focus in life and that was where I wanted my grandchildren back in my life".

One female participant emphasised the unique strength of the mother-child relationship and its consequent potential to imbue meaning to the good life, "*because a mother gave birth to that child*". Some wanted to give their children what they had never had: "*I wanted the kisses you know but I never got those so I give them to my children*". Other participants wanted to rebuild relationships with children where they were distant: *"I do spend time with [my kids] but not as much as I would like to you know so I'm gonna work on that this year, that's my big goal"*. In other cases, people had lost custody of their children, and discussing them was a source of pain and sadness; and two female participants suggested at fertility issues meaning they were unlikely to have children of their own. Insurmountable issues like these could be barriers to achieving the good life.

3.2b Other interpersonal relationships

Family & relationships

Some combination of family, romantic partners and/or friends was an important part of the good life for almost all participants, particularly where such relationships had been absent or problematic in the past. One participant discussed how he wanted to "create my own family" perhaps in response to difficult past experiences:

"F*or me, family has always been a big thing for me and this has affected like where I am at the minute. You may not be able to make that out* [participant gestured at a picture of scrambled letters making up the word 'family', seen in Collage 6 below] *but that is broken family effectively […] I snipped up all the letters cos I couldn't find a whole family and I was like that's actually metaphorical, I'm gonna leave it as it is […] I haven't even sorted it out in my own head so that's kind of personal at the moment. Basically the only way I can fix this for myself is to create my own family"*

Collage 6

In some cases, memories of family of origin were more positive, but were linked to loss and distance:

"Right a good life to me is (pause) when my mum and dad, before I lost my mum and dad we used to live together like, my sisters and brothers and my mum and dad. And we used to always watch Only Fools and Horses [participant gestures at relevant image on collage] *and* Birds of a Feather [participant gestures at relevant image on collage]. *Erm so basically they're the best things on this [the collage], what I've made today, because of how deep it goes for me, because my mum and dad and me sisters and brothers erm so they were the good life, they were the really good memories so that was a good life to me."*

Feelings about romantic relationships were mixed. For some participants, relationships were associated with past experiences of domestic violence, or were linked with offending histories; and two female participants identified being single and self-reliant as the right choice for them. One participant said *"obviously the marriage didn't work…. I'm not looking for that again, if it comes it comes but it's not something I'm thinking about at all."* For these women, a romantic relationship could be a future possibility, but only if it was the right, healthy relationship.

Friendship and support networks

The discussions highlighted that relationships could take many forms, with friends being particularly important for some: "*it's really nice to have female friends"*. These friends often had similar backgrounds and experiences, offering a form of peer support. However, one participant felt so-called 'friends' could be insincere or fake and she wished she could tell the difference (see Collage 7).

Structured networks and service user involvement organisations could be a bulwark against loneliness and a source of support and solidarity. Some were linked in to local clubs, such as a regular cooking club, which offered a chance to socialise as well as mutual support. Support networks were often inherently local and therefore were tied into their ideas about the home and where they would like to live: *"they're talking [about] moving me as far out as [place] which I think would be a bad thing for me 'cause I need to be close to friends"*.

Supportive relationships were vitally important in difficult times: one participant discussed how the letters people sent her in prison "kept me alive". Positive relationships could also be a motivating force: through showing belief in people's potential and character. In some cases this motivator role came from professionals, which one participant said "*gives you a chance to see the better side of yourself*". In one case, family was a positive motivation to stay drug free: *"[my partner] said to me if I ever went back on the drugs again it would be the end of the relationship...[also] I don't wanna let down my family, I've got them back in my life and I'm all the better for it."*

For three participants, pets were important and offered a source of comfort and connection.

3.2c Being trusted

Two participants highlighted this theme: one discussed how important it was to her that she is trusted to look after her nieces and nephews, and she suggested that this had not always been the case. It was noted that this is different from respect and 'common courtesy', discussed below. This difference was discussed further in the follow-up feedback session: trust was something you needed to earn (back), in some cases from your loved ones, whereas everyone should be afforded basic respect.

3.2d Being respected

The importance of respect was highlighted by five participants, and its importance was reiterated at the follow-up meeting with the national service user forum. This was particularly relevant to the services and agencies that this group may come into contact with: "*I would like, when I go get my methadone, to have respect from the services*". Common courtesy was seen as important, yet some participants felt that services forgot this, and rather used damaging stereotypes and associations to treat them badly.

One participant recalled one experience with the police who had observed her being victim of an attack but who had failed to act on this. The participant attributed this to the fact that she was associated with a group of street drinkers and therefore not seen by the police as warranting their protection: *"the first thing they look, I'm sitting with a bunch of guys that drink alcohol and cos they're known as drunks, they let somebody spit at me".*

3.2e Challenging prejudice and stigma

Seven participants highlighted this theme, with one highlighting the demoralising and counter-productive effects of defining people by particular issues or problems:

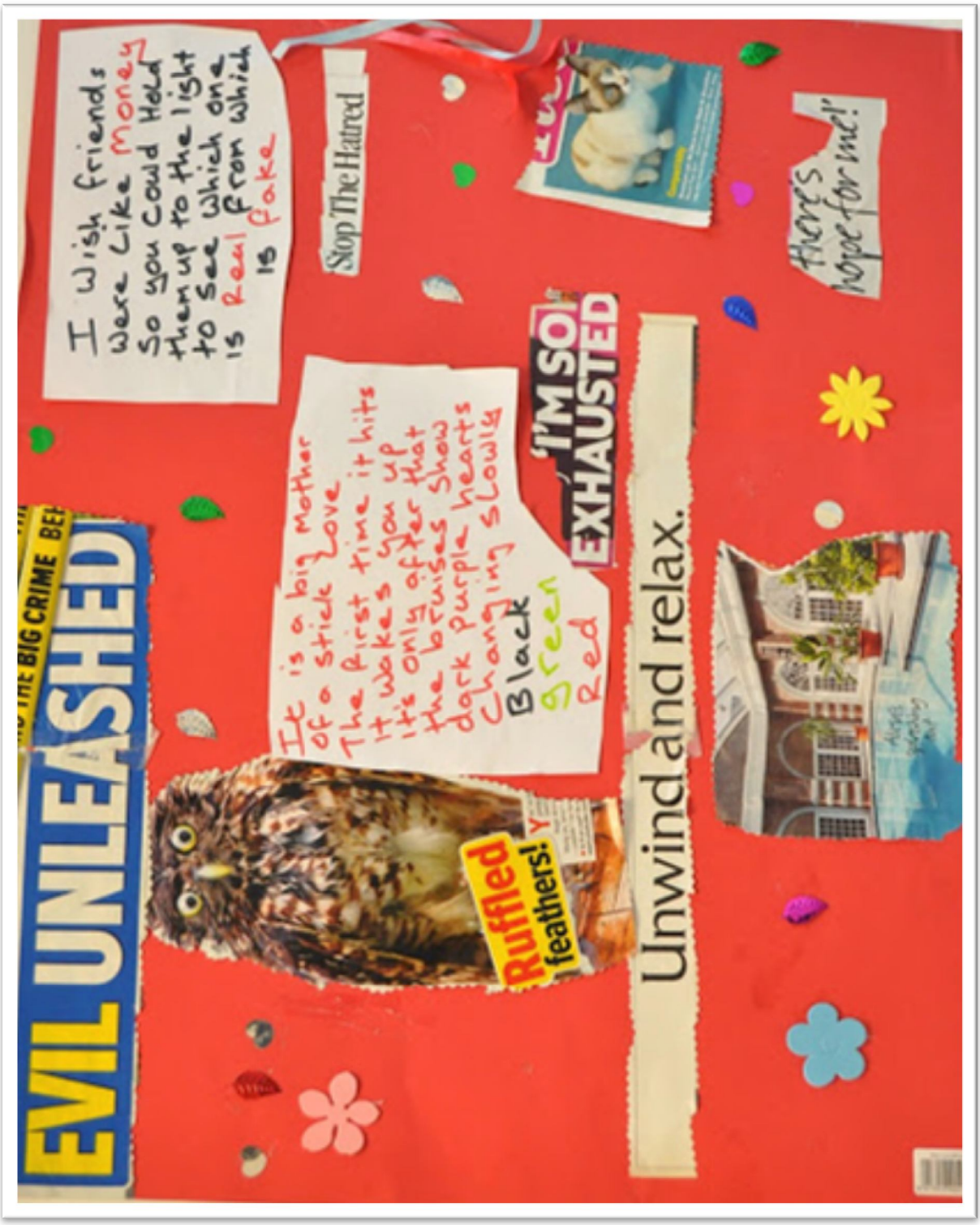
"I love [service name] *to death, but my keyworker... this is what she put on my referral: "she has a long history of drugs, street working". And I said who did you get this from? Who told you this? Is this what you put? Never mind I'm doing college, never mind I did my driving theory, never mind I did this, I just took it and ripped it up and threw it on the floor, cos how dare you? Know what I mean? Who's gonna want to put me in their house if that's all they think of me?"*

Some wished for a society without simplistic perceptions and prejudice, where the general public looked "*deeper than what you can actually see on the surface*", and where difficulties such as alcoholism were treated with compassion. One participant felt that there was widespread prejudice against people who self-harm, found among "alcoholics and drug users" and also doctors and nurses working in A&E. One participant felt that currently, services for drug users such as rehab did not accept people's differences, rather requiring service users to conform to the standards of those in charge. Another highlighted the importance of compassion for people facing difficulties:

"*I feel there is an underclass of people that really do need to be taught a few things but also nurtured as well…rather than just being told this is how it is."*

Being part of actively fighting discrimination was important for some participants, and was a way in which they could give back and make a positive contribution (discussed more above in section 3.1b).

Collage 7



This participant's collage suggested at distressing experiences of romantic relationships, and also expressed a desire for sincere friends who she could trust.

3.3 The interior and the exterior life: cross-cutting themes

The themes in this final category were cross-cutting and related to many of the more tangible themes discussed in other categories. However, they were also discussed as distinct themes in themselves. They were often focused on internal wellbeing, yet this also related to and was influenced by external factors. Many of the things discussed in the above two categories could help achieve things like stability and freedom - but did not guarantee it. When discussing the theme of stability in the follow-up forum meeting, participants noted how this is ironically a "fluid and insecure" concept, and this also seemed to apply to the other themes discussed below.

3.3a Stability: a life "without struggle, without strife"

Stability was a major theme for almost all participants. For many, a good life wouldn't necessarily be exciting or glamorous, but would be a comfortable and consistent life *"without struggle, without strife"*. Stability was symbolised through the tangible aspects of the good life discussed above, such as stable housing and greater financial security. A job could also help achieve stability, but participants emphasised the need for stable and well-paid work as opposed to sporadic jobs: one participant, while discussing his career goals, noted pragmatically that "*if this is gonna be a vocation for me then it's gonna have to pay bills*."

For many participants, 'normality' was the ideal that they were striving for:

"There's no fast cars…I wouldn't mind one, but it's just the important things [depicted here in the collage]."

"All I wanted was to be normal again … I never had a normal life where on Friday or Saturday you go out with your friends into the town and you have a good party or you know, you go out with your family"

Collage 8

For one participant an armchair represented his desire for a comfortable life

Stability also implied an internal wellbeing and peace, without constant worrying and disruption. External factors (e.g. stable housing) did not always guarantee this internal sense of peace, though they could influence this. Participants discussed how they would like to be calm and no longer anxious:

"Not so many high highs and low lows, if I could just achieve that bit in the middle I'd be really happy"

"That's just … what I would like, to be able to, sleeping easy at night, not worrying, security, not worrying, just to be able to feel safe in my own house, not having the door banging in or, yeah bailiffs, no police, no dealers, no owing money, just … happy place."

To achieve internal peace and stability, some participants mentioned the importance of hope and trying to stay positive. The ability to give oneself respite from struggle was also important: one participant mentioned going to her 'happy place' as a way to cope with "headaches", which in her case involved reading fiction. For three participants, spirituality was also a source of help in difficult times. This could take the form of organised religion, although did not have to. Although most participants did not mention this, those who did found it particularly important – and unlike some other notions of the good life they felt that this was something they already had and they did not need help in getting there:

"I don't need help on that...when you need [god] you ask for him and he's there".

In some cases, the fragility of this stability was highlighted. In the feedback session on initial themes held with the wider national service user forum, one participant gave an example of how someone could, on the surface, appear to be doing well and be 'in recovery' from drug problems. However, if they came across an area in which they knew drugs were sold they could feel suddenly vulnerable, as if they were always going to be on the brink of slipping into old ways. It was noted in the same session that to really 'move on' it's necessary to reconcile your past, with all its difficulties, with your newer, better life. Accepting and acknowledging that the bad times happened was seen as important to achieving this sense of internal stability.

3.3b New experiences and positive challenges

In some cases, participants wanted to be able to simultaneously embrace new, challenging experiences as well as staying stable: *"I wanna be able to take risks but with a cushion to full back on"*. Risk in this sense is a positive thing: pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. One participant used a picture of a camper van with wings attached to illustrate this dual need for stability and new experiences; he explained that he wanted somewhere to rest his head at the end of the day but also wanted to "*spread my wings*".

This could involve new ways of perusing enjoyment and fun, necessary in adjusting to a new, more stable lifestyle (see 3.1d above). It could involve experiences that were not extreme or dangerous, but would be perhaps an alternative to the apathy of drug use:

"Yeah you sort of do have to force yourself, but then when you do go out you really enjoy yourself… [*with*] *the whole drugs thing you just get caught up in that and your whole life is around drugs and you never go out anywhere or do anything. It could be supported, like if someone's organising sort of like day trips, if we're doing it ourselves or if an organisation's organising it I think that's great, just get people to get up....we did one in Brighton and I was organising it and in charge like ringing them all up- I was calling them, they was not getting away with not coming, like it was pouring with rain, and we was going to Brighton and phoning them all up 7 o' clock in the morning, come on, get up like. But we had a really good day, sometimes you need someone to kind of like nag you on the phone to do it and then you really enjoy it. But it's really easy to put things off and not do them isn't it."*

3.3c Freedom

Freedom was also identified as an important aspect of the good life for some participants. Freedom was contrasted to the "horror" of prison by one participant. There are degrees of freedom, as participants acknowledged in the follow-up meeting. For example, being out of prison but on parole is a limited degree of physical freedom. Many participants linked a lack of freedom to a sense of control and surveillance. Four

participants independently stuck eyes on their collages (see for example Collage 9) and explained this represented 'being watched' by the State, by police, by Social Services: *"when you're in prison you're always being watched…when you come out of jail you're being watched"*. At the same time, people acknowledged the eyes could in some cases represent their own paranoia: "it's real plus it's internal".

Freedom also comes in many forms: being physically free and out of prison; psychological freedom; being drug-free; being debt free. One participant sketched barbed wire on his collage: this appeared to represent not just literal imprisonment, but being trapped in a bad situation. Although things like being free from drugs was an ideal, it was hard to imagine for some: "*What I hope is that I'd be content without the drugs, but really…they're too deep in me.*" Being free from their own anxieties was as important as freedom from external authority figures such as social services, prison or the police. One participant discussed trying to get rid of her "paranoia": *"I'd like to have a more balanced life.... half the time it's all up here, it's all in my head. People aren't watching you, they're far too busy doing what they're doing."*

Collage 9

Eyes on one participant's collage represented 'being watched' by different agencies, hinting at her distrust of authority

3.3d Independence

Three people explicitly associated the good life with being independent, but it was an underlying theme of many other points. This had a number of distinct components including self-reliance, independence from services, and – linked to issues of stigma – self-assurance, so that they were not so affected by what other people thought of them. One participant discussed how she had learnt not to worry about other people's judgements: "*They can think what they want to think, before I used to make it bother me you know, but now it doesn't bother me*".

Participants varied as to how much they valued and wanted each component of independence**.** For some, being independent from services was not necessarily a requirement for a good life – rather, being linked in with services represented the good life because they were engaging in positive ways, and the people they came into contact with at these services were some of the "good people" in their lives. Others wanted a space where they were not dependent on staff, and this was often tied to feelings around housing and the home:

"I mean some people don't wanna move out of hostels, some people don't feel safe to move on, some people don't feel like they can live unsupported- some people I've spoken to. But with me, I couldn't wait to have my own little thing [place] and my own little front door and not having staff living in. I really wanted to… to me that was important. But I know there are other people that are really scared to move on from places, you know? [That are] not at that stage yet, they feel like they need staff and that…to help them with bills and things. But I really wanted to have my own- that was important to me you know to have my own front door, to have a key and not have to buzz the office for staff to let you in. That was something important to me, but it's not the same for everyone."

Collage 9

While this participant was aware not everyone felt the same way, she clearly wanted her own place, where she was not dependent on staff and had her "own front door" (represented her collage above, as indicated). Another participant was, conversely, scared of moving away from that staff support and of the considerable responsibility attached to independent living:

"Well with the housing I'm in a bit of a limbo at the moment because I've been in supported housing and now they're looking at moving [me] into independent living and that scares the hell out of me right now, you know? Cos they said there's gonna be training and the next thing they're talking about is the heating bills here and I'm like, oh my. [They said] 'did you find the training helpful?' and I went 'no, it scared the life out of me you know?' So they're talking about me going into flats and…there's all these hidden things… you know you've gotta check which water company you're with and think this, and I'm like oh god I just wanna place I can afford, you know?"

The difference was highlighted and discussed in the follow-up meeting. The idea of 'interdependence' was raised. This meant recognising that as humans we all have something to give each other and we all benefit from the support of others. While dependency is often feared by services, most of us will never be truly 'independent' and most people rely on some kind of service throughout their lives: a GP for example. That said, some in the meeting recognised the danger of becoming too dependent on services or particular people in professional roles.

4. Discussion: Implications for services, commissioners, and policymakers

This research was conducted with a small sample of participants, and as discussed above the specific findings are not necessarily generalisable to the wider population of adults with multiple and complex needs. The particular elements of the good life considered most important also naturally varied between individuals, while many themes that were identified almost universally, such as independence, stability, or relationships, were multi-layered and contested in terms of what they meant for different people.

Nevertheless, a number of issues and themes came through strongly from this research which are likely to be relevant more widely. The process provides several considerations and reflections that may be of use to services, commissioners and policymakers when setting outcomes and aiming to improve the lives of people in this group.

Some key considerations and reflections include:

4.1 The importance of stability and meeting basic needs

Participants' hopes and ambitions were often modest, reflecting a desire for a 'normal' life. Indeed, this group who are often described by policymakers as 'cut off from society' and who have faced severe disadvantage and entrenched exclusion largely identified common and basic human needs as the key features of a good life – focusing on their desire for a safe and stable home; financial security; basic good health; and good relationships with friends and family. These were reasonable and relatable aims, which some participants contrasted with signifiers of wealth and luxury seen as 'not important' or an unrealistic 'fantasy'.

These basic, often practical needs contributed to a key cross-cutting theme discussed by all participants: the desire for stability. Those facing multiple and complex needs often live chaotic lives, and stability and a sense of control over their lives came through strongly as something prized by participants in their vision of the 'good life'. Of course, as noted above, this is a complex issue in itself. Participants in the feedback session discussed at length the difference between external, practical features of stability (e.g. regular income and a home), which were identified as important but not always sufficient to achieving a sense of *internal* stability and mental wellbeing. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on this theme throughout shows the importance of achieving stability as an outcome for this client group.

4.2 Understanding the journey

Participants described the process of recovery and achieving these aspects of a 'good life' as a journey, which was likely to include a number of setbacks. Small steps towards progress were highlighted as important – for example, reducing levels of substance misuse, rather than necessarily being able to move away from drugs altogether at once. Echoing 4.5 below on individualised outcomes, participants highlighted the need to work with people at their own pace. Many participants identified the difficult and 'uphill' nature of a typical journey towards stability, desistance and recovery.

That the journey can be challenging, lonely and involve relapses and setbacks highlights the importance of flexible support. In an environment where service providers are increasingly rewarded on 'results', the importance of small steps towards change may be underestimated. Broad targets to move people away from services or 'dependency' may make people feel pressured, and consequently backfire. Rewarding success only by ultimate outcomes, for example complete abstinence from drugs or complete desistance from crime, may fail to acknowledge the complex nature of the journey. Commissioners and policymakers should understand the nature of the recovery journey for this group when setting outcomes and designing

payment structures for services (see also Revolving Doors Agency, 2015), while services working with this group should not be deterred by setbacks and relapses which are a natural part of people's journeys.

4.3. Looking beyond traditional service provision

Some conceptions of the good life, including aspects that were identified as important to the recovery journey, were outside the remit of traditional 'needs-led' service provision. Supportive, healthy relationships that were often tied in to local networks or clubs show the importance of community infrastructure and opportunities to develop long-lasting, peer relationships. Fun and enjoyment was identified as an important part of a fulfilling healthy life, and features such as relaxing holidays, local cooking clubs, sport and physical activity and friends that lived nearby both represented the good life and could also contribute to a greater level of stability and could support the recovery journey.

This may encourage discussion of which outcomes commissioners focus on and whether there is potential to think more creatively about how to support people. Commissioners could play a role in developing and funding peer-led support groups, groups around clubs and hobbies, volunteer-run community centres, social spaces which facilitate access to support, etc. Personalised budgets could help to fund local sports or other physical activities, or day trips, enabling people greater freedom to choose the kind of activities that they feel would help them to move toward their recovery goals.

4.4 Quality matters

Running through the discussion of different aspects of the good life was a sense of the importance of achieving *quality* outcomes. Participants identified the difference between harmful and helpful relationships; discussed the need for a clean and safe home; and those who mentioned work hoped for a job that would reward their skills and that they could 'stick with'. People also wanted good quality responses from services: underpinned by respect and a positive approach. Being respected was agreed as highly important and should be taken into account when evaluating services. Services themselves can also use service user involvement forums to understand and try and reverse experiences of stigma and bigotry. Poor responses from services were felt to be stigmatising and demoralising, whereas professionals who had seen the "real me" had encouraged participants to make positive change.

4.5. Outcomes and what defines success are individualised

While several themes were commonly identified, the way these were conceived often differed between individuals. People varied in what kind of relationships they wanted and whether they wanted a partner. In some cases, living alone represented much-needed independence and peace; for others, it could bring loneliness or insecurity. As participants themselves noted in the follow-up feedback meeting, what makes a good life will also change over the life-course.

The fact that each of these common themes were often complex and contested in what they meant to different individuals highlights the importance of listening to what individuals consider important, respecting their priorities and preferences and then really supporting them to achieve their goals. For some of the participants in this research, this could look like: help finding work they enjoy; support in maintaining relationships that are helpful or healthy to them; or moving someone into independent living at a pace they find comfortable. Support should take into account and be responsive to particular experiences and identifiers such as age, gender, experience of trauma and parental status. This research reinforces the importance of taking an individualised approach, with the service user actively involved in shaping their journey.

4.6. Involving service users in defining success

The importance of quality, of unique definitions of success and the good life, and the role of community and peer support, highlights the importance of involving and consulting service users at key stages: when (re)commissioning services, in designing outcome frameworks and payment mechanisms, and in evaluation. In this study, listening to the views of those facing entrenched exclusion, who are sometimes considered 'cut off from society' (and often failed by systems and services), focused attention on some important themes and messages that differed in important respects from the organisational agendas of the services that often respond to them. Their vision of a good life represents a positive challenge to services and commissioners to do better for this group, and a compelling case for ensuring that service users are involved in setting the outcomes that affect them.

Using the collage method could prove an effective way to understand people's priorities: here, it was extremely fruitful and seemed to bring out themes that may not have been easily expressed through focus groups, interviews or questionnaires. Evaluators, researchers and those designing services may wish to use a similarly creative approach.

4.7 The personal benefits of service user involvement

Involving service users can have wider benefits than improved services and commissioning processes. In this research, participants highlighted the benefits of service user involvement for them personally, including in some cases in supporting their recovery journeys. Participants who wanted to find alternatives to the "high life" of offending, or to the stagnation of drug use, found positive roles as members of local service user forums or through volunteering to help their peers. Long-lasting friendships were also found through service user support networks. It could also help people discover and refine their own skills, potentially supporting future employment opportunities. Services may consider that people with multiple and complex needs could benefit personally from getting involved in local forums and groups led by service users. For this group of participants, it had clear benefits for them personally in supporting their progress towards the good life.

5. Conclusion

Often we perceive people with multiple and complex needs to be excluded from society, to be on the margins. Undoubtedly they do go through experiences and challenges that many people never will. However, despite their marginalised status, many of our research participants wanted what most people want – a stable home, healthy relationships, good health, and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, participants' conceptions of a good life were neither simple nor straightforward – which is itself quite normal. Everyone's good life had unique elements. There were intangible and complex themes, such as stability and freedom: these seemed to rely on resolving issues within oneself as well as achieving symbolic 'normality' in the form of a house, partner or job. Relationships were conceived in similarly complex ways, and while many participants told us this was one of the most important themes, some also discussed their need to be self-reliant and develop their own 'coping' or 'life' skills.

In addition to some relatively modest ambitions, some also craved new experiences – such as travel and fulfilling work – as well as positive challenges, such as working for a fairer society through service user involvement, developing their own skills and being 'pushed out of my comfort zone'. Participants were focused on their own role in achieving the good life, although support from services often played a key role in motivating and encouraging people to make positive change. Their good life was more wide-ranging than just getting help from services, and involved supportive communities, nurturing relationships, their own strengths, and more broadly making the world a better place.

Our findings should challenge commissioners to think creatively and ambitiously about what people with multiple and complex needs can be supported to achieve. Listening to this group's thoughts on 'what matters' highlights the multifaceted nature of the good life. It may also be one way to work towards the fairer society which many participants considered a key part of their good life.

Appendices

1. Questions asked to participants in workshops two and three

1. Thinking about your collage, what does a good life mean to you?
2. Which of these aspects of a good life do you feel are most important to you?
3. Which of these aspects of the good life do you feel closest to having?
4. Are there parts of this life that you feel further away from?
5. How do you think that your idea of a good life has changed over time?

2. Consent form

Name of Researcher(s): Sarah Anderson, Esther Dickie, Turshia Park

Title of study: **Creativity Methods Workshop- What does a good life look like.**

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you give your consent please sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.

I am able to read

(please circle) YES / NO

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and / or written form by the researcher.
- I understand that the research will involve: completing a collage and then discussing this individually.
- I understand the research will include the discussion of sensitive topics.
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation. If this happens:
    - I know that I will still receive the same money to thank me for my time
    - I will not be treated any differently
    - I know that I can request for my work to be destroyed.
- I understand that data gathered in this project may be used in a report and made publically available. This includes quotes from the discussion and examples of my collage.
- I understand that the researchers may breach confidentiality if they are concerned for my safety or the safety of others.
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study. I understand my data will be stored securely.
- I understand that the recording will be deleted after 6 months and will only be heard by revolving doors staff.
- I understand that I will receive a cash payment as a thank you for my time

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study.

Name: ……..…….

Signature: ……..…….

Date: ……

Do you give your permission for us to record today's discussion? (please circle)

YES / NO

We may want to use your collage for other purposes e.g. display on the wall or in other reports, are you happy with this?

(please circle) YES NO Only after I have been contacted

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A Good Life: Exploring what matters to people facing multiple and complex needs

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