



# Trans Pathway Peer Research Report



# Introduction

In July 2024, akt contracted two trans adults with personal experience of homelessness as peer researchers. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the delivery of akt's Trans Pathway project during its initial three-year period of funding. Over a period of six months, the peer researchers received training on conducting participant-led research, conducted interviews with current and former young people supported by the Trans Pathway, and facilitated an insight-gathering workshop at the Trans Pathway youth group.

The Trans Pathway is a Greater Manchester-based project which supports trans and non-binary 18-25 year olds who are facing homelessness or living in a hostile environment. It is hosted by akt, a national LGBTQ+ youth homelessness charity. The Trans Pathway project offers floating support including housing advice, advocacy and wrap-around support addressing additional barriers that trans+ young people face to access safe housing. Wrap-around support is flexible to the young person's needs and planned together with the young person; some non-exhaustive examples are budgeting and maximising income, setting up utilities, registering with a trans-friendly GP, completing a deed poll and updating identity documents such as a passport, and signposting/referral to access other specialist support (e.g. counselling, GIC, ISVA services, immigration advice). The Trans Pathway also offers Youth Engagement activities for the young people on the project, including a youth group and attendance at events such as Trans Pride.

This report contains the core findings, identifying the Trans Pathway project's strengths and weaknesses, as well as recommendations to improve the offer for trans young people. This learning also identifies the best practices for organisations to adopt when considering how to develop initiatives for trans people experiencing homelessness. The Trans Pathway sets a well-needed example of a holistic project delivered by trans staff that has created a radically impactful service. One that goes beyond meeting just housing needs, but rather cultivates a safe and inclusive community where trans young people flourish, receiving support in many aspects of their lives.

# Methodology

## Background

Peer and Participant Research are methodologies that value lived experience and the co-creation of knowledge by those affected by the issues and experiences that are being researched. Peer Research is conducted by people who have lived experience in common with the affected group (in this case, trans identity and experience of homelessness). Participant Research is research in which the participants are an active part of analysis, evaluation and sense-making, based on the belief that the affected group already has valuable knowledge which can be consolidated through a participative process.

This project represents a significant shift in akt's approach to evaluation. In contrast with traditional External Evaluation where an evaluator's distance from the affected community is assumed to provide objectivity, the Peer Researchers' lived experience can provide greater insight, relatability and trust for the interviewees. They are likely to have more personal experience as well as in-depth knowledge about key issues, and interviewees may feel less onus to explain and justify their experiences, reducing barriers to participation. This shift in approach reflects that trans-specific services which are not designed and evaluated with the involvement of trans people at every level are more likely to replicate transphobia and barriers to access.

## Process

akt engaged Peer Researchers who were not already part of the Trans Pathway project, but had relevant lived experience, to lead this research. The intentions were to reduce the burden of labour and time commitment for current service users making it easier for more young people to participate; ensure confidentiality; and minimise the likelihood that young people's relationships within the group would affect or be affected by the research. Participant research methods were included by inviting Trans Pathway young people to assess the pilot, and specifically during the World Café group activity where young people were able to explore and shape themes emerging from the interviews.

The Peer Researchers and Trans Pathway staff team received support and training from Groundswell at the outset of the project. Groundswell specialises in research carried out and informed by people who have experienced homelessness.

The two-day training covered:

- An introduction to Peer and Participant research methodologies.
- Skills for a successful interview and participant-observation.
- Research ethics and safety.
- Use of research tools such as the participant information sheet and interview questions.
- An opportunity to apply the skills in a practice interview.

Peer Researchers wrote short biographies in which they introduced themselves, shared a little about how their lived experience relates to the Trans Pathway and why they got involved with the research.

Prior to starting interviews with the young people, the Peer Researchers attended a session of the Trans Pathway youth group. This provided the young people with the opportunity to meet the peer researchers and find out more about their project. It was hoped that this would enable young people to build rapport with the peer researchers so that they could feel more confident about being interviewed and able to open up about their experiences. The peer researchers continued to attend a number of sessions over the course of the research project, culminating in the group insight-gathering session discussed below.

## Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured using an interview guide agreed upon by the peer researchers and Trans Pathway project frontline staff (appendix A).

The interviews were offered to both current and former service users who had consented to be contacted by akt. An information sheet, consent form and the interview questions were circulated in advance. There were three options that service users could choose from: an individual in-person interview, an individual Zoom interview, or group (in person) interviews. There was no take-up for the group interview option, so all interviews were completed individually, with six in-person, and one interview over Zoom.

Interviewees could take breaks, skip questions, and finish the interview at any point during proceedings.



# Group Session

Following the completion of individual interviews, the peer researchers designed an insight-gathering workshop which they delivered at the Trans Pathway youth group on November 7th. This workshop used a modified version of the World Café methodology to facilitate participant-led discussions exploring specific topics.



Image 1: Scan of an A3 sheet of paper titled *Community* with several prompt questions. Young people's insights are recorded on post-it notes.

After initial analysis of the data gathered through the interviews, three topics were identified as needing further exploration:

- How trans young people were impacted by their relationships with Trans Pathway staff;
- Why the community cultivated by the Trans Pathway project was important to trans young people;
- What success would look like for trans young people at the end of their time with the Trans Pathway project.

The findings from this session were then collated into the overall thematic analysis. This provided greater detail into issues that had arisen during interviews, but where the data was less rich. It also gave the young people the chance to have greater input into the research project through participant-led discussion. Thirdly, it offered another avenue for participation to those who did not wish to be interviewed.



## Findings

Four themes have been identified from the seven interviews with young people and the World Café group session: the strengths of the Trans Pathway project; the weaknesses of the Trans Pathway project; best practices when supporting trans young people experiencing homelessness; and the additional barriers faced by trans young people when accessing support.

# Strengths

## Housing Support

A key strength of the project, mentioned by the majority of participants, is that it supports young trans people in accessing safer housing and social welfare, as well as day-to-day necessities such as food, clothing, and personal hygiene products. Trans Pathway staff also advocate for young people, liaising and booking appointments with other public and third sector services, which was noted as being particularly useful for neurodiverse participants. The Trans Pathway also provides a space for young people to learn vital skills, such as cooking for themselves, and to express their creativity through art and poetry.

**“He helps me with my adult life because I’m neurodivergent; I don’t understand much, so he explains it all for me... A big one is that he helps me with my appointments. He helps me by coming to them with me, and also books them for me.”**

## Trans-Led Service

In addition to providing general housing support, over half of participants highlighted the importance of the Trans Pathway being a holistic project that meets the specific needs of trans young people. While many charities might provide support packets to homeless young people, the Trans Pathway also provides essential items and services for trans people, such as binders and deed polls. It also can assist young people in accessing gender-affirming treatment by helping them with their referrals to NHS-funded gender identity services, such as Indigo. Participants noted the impact of Trans Pathway staff being trans to this aspect of the project, highlighting that they did not need to

educate their caseworker on these additional needs. This led to increased trust and safety for participants, especially those who previously had negative experiences with other organisations.

**“In a lot of other situations, I won’t really talk about being trans... When you talk about your housing problems and stuff, I think it’s not considered. A cis person wouldn’t know that a trans person is thinking about these things safety wise... But the staff here know that young people are thinking, ‘Am I safe in this place?’”**

## **Building Community**

Further to this essential support, almost all participants noted how the Trans Pathway project has helped them become proud of their trans identity. Through the community that has been built, and trips such as Trans Pride, participants have grown in confidence and have experienced significant improvement to their mental health. They have been able to translate this beyond the project, feeling more assertive and setting boundaries that assist them in comfortably navigating non-Queer spaces. They have also developed valuable psychological literacy that enables them to relate to their own and others’ trauma in healthier ways.

**“Now I can approach Queer people and Queer spaces a lot more comfortably... I’m a lot more assertive of what discussions make me feel uncomfortable, or make me feel objectified or devalued as a Queer person or a Person of Colour.”**



# Weaknesses

## Internal

A notable problem for almost all participants has been the lack of continuity in service provision as a result of high staff turnover and the loss of relationships with former employees. The primary issue appears to have been the temporary cessation of the Trans Pathway youth group, with participants losing touch with friends they had made through this space when it was paused. The youth group sessions were also criticised for lacking in structure, making it more intimidating for new or more socially anxious attendees. At times, this led to interpersonal conflict that was not sufficiently resolved by staff, resulting in a breakdown of relationships between some of the young people.

**“We all agree on this thing: we need consistency, continuity... We kept having people come and go. Like workers, you know I forget the names of some of them because they didn’t stick around that long... We need something stable. We need our little thing, and Trans Pathways is our little thing.”**

## Big Picture

Participants referred to challenges accessing timely trans-specialist support both at akt and broadly. A third of participants felt that they had been negatively affected by long waiting times, either for the Trans Pathway itself or signposting to other services, such as for gender-affirming healthcare. Several participants noted that they had not known about akt or the Trans Pathway prior to their referral, and wished that they had been aware of the organisation’s services beforehand. Participants felt regret about not receiving trans-specific support sooner, with the delay in accessing NHS services leading

some to pursue unsupervised medical treatment. Two participants noted that due to structural constraints, the Trans Pathway was not able to meet all the needs of young people with complex cases.

**“All homeless charities can’t help me, so I’m just here for support.”**

## **Supporting Service-Leavers**

A final weakness of the Trans Pathway noted by participants was the lack of a clear exit strategy and definition of success for the project. Compounded with the insecurity generated by high staff turnover, this resulted in a minority of participants feeling significant fear at the thought of aging out of the Trans Pathway. Participants also highlighted that no pathway, such as volunteering, exists for continued engagement with the community at akt.

**“I don’t want to leave akt: not when my time’s up, not ever. I’m hoping that I can stay forever. Even if I end up in a better position myself and I can help other young people, like in a couple years’ time, new people who come to us.”**

# Best Practices

All the young people interviewed discussed how staff being trans/non-binary improved their ability to ask for help. Interviewees highlighted:

## Intersectionality within Trans & Non-Binary Identities

Consideration of how intersectionality impacts housing and broader support needs, including: gender, ethnicity, disability and neurodiversity, race, care-experience, sexuality.

**“[I]t was really nice to be in a space where it felt like I didn’t have to mask... what makes me an individual was actually appreciated rather than something to gawk at or something that was the elephant in the room.”**

Respect for complexities of gender identity and expression, including clothes, hairstyle, pronouns (including neopronouns, multiple pronouns, and changing pronouns), different gender identities, names and name-changes.

**“They don’t care about what you wear, or what name you want to change to, or what pronouns you want to use, or what hairstyle you want to have, it’s kind of just a place of acceptance. They know the journey.”**

## Healthcare Advocacy

Healthcare advocacy goes hand-in-hand with accessing safe housing for trans and non-binary people. Without access to healthcare, trans and non-binary people may directly struggle to access housing, as well as indirectly

through not being able to go to work, education, or social spaces, and by experiencing abuse.

**“And even to people like me, I’m an autistic, I have physical disabilities, I’m a queer trans person, I’ve struggled a lot with money, I’ve struggled a lot with getting jobs, I’ve struggled a lot socially, and it is a really difficult to transition into adulthood and trying to find my place in the world and trying to find a place to live... and akt and Trans Pathway really helped smooth that transition and that is incredibly important.”**

## **Making the Space Accessible**

- Interviewees discussed the importance of reimbursing travel, offering food, drink, toiletries, and warm spaces as core to their ability to access support.
- Co-production offers service users the chance to develop skills and take responsibility for their space by making decisions about what they need.
- A broad remit means that trans/non-binary people who are struggling to transition into adulthood can get support that pre-empt the risk of housing precarity, for example by offering a supportive place when suffering abuse at home or from neighbours (especially due to transphobia), and by combatting isolation and fear of the future through meeting/connecting/learning from other trans/non-binary people.

**“When I joined Trans Pathway I had never met another Desi, South Asian trans person before. I joined Trans Pathway, I met two... and it was like looking into a hopeful mirror. Because I was looking at these people and they were at a completely different stage of life to where I am and I aspire to be them.”**

# Barriers to Access

## Fear of Support Services Being Transphobic

Past bad experiences with mental health services, social services, housing support services, the NHS, and GIC services made young people too exhausted to keep looking for help. This included pathologisation of transness impacting mental health and being unable to set healthy boundaries about what information people are entitled to. Young people were forced to advocate for themselves and educate services that they were accessing for support, whilst fearing that opening up would be “used against” them.

**“The Trans Pathway group did help me understand that other people are not entitled to my trans identity... before then I pathologised my transness, because that’s how it is in the mental health system... mental health services are not equipped at all to support trans people and it put me back in the closet for two years.”**

## Inadequate/Unhelpful Support

Housing and support offered by non-LGBT explicit services is often unsafe/inadequate for people with protected characteristics. Young people with intersectional needs may not receive adequate support from social and medical services. They may be unable to leave unsafe housing situations or unable to access transition care while in their systems. Some young people



found that their trans specific experiences of homelessness were not recognised by mainstream services.

**“I just wasn’t meeting the criteria, because I had somewhere to go back to. Except the place I had to go back to was just a living hell...”**

## **Not Knowing About/Being Able to Safely Access Trans-Supportive Spaces**

The participants stated that young people don’t know about trans/non-binary specific services like the Trans Pathway project and that generally there aren’t enough spaces that explicitly support trans people. Young people still living with/relying on their parents are unable to access services for fear of being outed/reprisals at home. Additionally they may be unwilling to leave an abusive home for fear of homelessness without savings/work. Many trans/non-binary people don’t know any other trans/non-binary people and are too socially isolated to be signposted by friends.

**“For lots of young trans people there aren’t a lot of places that do support trans people. And it seems that the whole LGBT community, but primarily trans right now, are kind of forgotten about.”**

# Recommendations

## Staff Stability

Interviewees generally discussed how more funding and resources would be needed to better assist service users, especially by retaining more staff. All the young people asked for more stability and consistency around frontline staff, so that there wouldn't be high turnover.

**"It's always a shame for everyone involved when youth workers move on. And the Trans Pathway project was pretty much on hold while we were finding different workers to take up the mantel. So it would have been nicer if there was guaranteed a stable kind of staff that were going to be there until the foreseeable future."**

## Increasing akt's Profile

Several interviewees spoke about increasing the profile of akt and the Trans Pathway project for potential service users. A more prominent profile could also make it more possible for akt to liaise with social services to provide LGBT+ friendly housing.

**"If akt and social services could work together they could do a much better job... because with a lot of trans young people they will come out as being trans or come out as being gay and their parents will just kick them out. And social services won't really be involved, but they won't be pointed to a place like akt so they're stuck."**

## Developing Skills & Resilience

There was a desire to support young people in developing volunteering opportunities, both within and beyond akt. This could for example be achieved through doing more activities outside of akt and its youth space. Additionally, akt and the Trans Pathway project could support young people to achieve qualifications and explore skills to enhance employment prospects. Generally, the Trans Pathway project and akt could build a clear exit strategy for young people and create an awareness of what success looks like on the Trans Pathway.

**“[T]he young people who access akt, they go on and they want to be social workers and they want to work for akt. They want to volunteer for akt, they want to be people who help their wider community.”**

## Exploring History, Culture & Activism

Providing education on queer history, exploring non-Western ideas of gender, and allowing young people to explore activism in order to better give young trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people context for their experiences, avoid infighting and transmedicalism, and to make the young people feel connected to their community.

**“Sometimes you want to learn about the fine print, the history, and the struggles ... because I feel like one big reason why this big kerfuffle happened in the group was there were some members of the group who did not really honour the intersectionality of peoples identity, and that is very history based and very culture based”**

# Conclusion

This research demonstrates the importance of providing a specific pathway of support for trans young people who are experiencing homelessness. As the above findings show, the fact that the Trans Pathway project is delivered by trans staff has made young people feel safe and understood. This has enabled them to access better housing where they can live authentically, or other vital services such as gender-affirming healthcare.

However, because of this increased sense of safety, a project like the Trans Pathway project needs to be delivered with the impact of staffing changes carefully considered. Lack of continuity in this area can negatively affect young people's experiences and ongoing engagement with the service. More thought also needs to be given to the exit pathway, and how to support young people when they age out of the Trans Pathway.

Finally, another key success of the Trans Pathway project has been its bringing young trans people together in community. The project has helped young people to feel more confident in their identity through the provision of trans-specific support, such as binders and deed polls, and spaces that centre trans youth. This is vital for young people to live richer lives. It not only enhances their mental health and wellbeing, but also helps them to develop a sense of stability and belonging, even in spite of the difficult challenges that they face.

# Appendix A – Peer Research

## Interview Questions

### Section 1: Icebreakers

- How long have you been involved with the Trans Pathway Project?
- Have you been involved in any other of akt's projects besides the Trans Pathway Project?
- How would you describe the Trans Pathway Project to someone who didn't know what it was?

### Section 2: Questions

- In as much detail as you'd like to share, could you please tell me why you got involved with the Trans Pathway Project?
- What sorts of things has the Trans Pathway Project helped you with?
  - Has working with the Trans Pathway Project improved your housing situation?
- What housing support services have you worked with besides akt and the Trans Pathway Project, if any?
  - If yes: what were your experiences and how did they compare with the Trans Pathway Project?
  - If no: what has prevented you from seeking support from other services?
- How do you feel you have been treated as a trans / non-binary person by the Trans Pathway Project staff?
  - If other support: does this differ to other services you've accessed?
- How did you think getting involved with the Trans Pathway Project would help you?
  - Has it helped you in ways that you weren't expecting?
  - Is there anything that you were hoping for that you've not had helped with?
  - Apart from the practical support you mentioned earlier, how has working with the Trans Pathway Project benefitted you?
- If you could go back in time and start again, what would you change about your experience with the Trans Pathway Project?

### Section 3: Cooldown

- We're almost at the end of our chat, so is there anything that I've not asked you about that you wanted to discuss, or anything else that you'd like to bring up?
- Do you have a story or memory of your time with the Trans Pathway Project that you'd like to share with me to be remembered in our research?
- How would you describe your experience with the Trans Pathway Project in three words?



This report was written by our Peer Researchers and published by akt in 2025.

We are grateful to St Martin-in-the-Fields for supporting the Peer Research Project and the Trans Pathway.

We are grateful to Groundswell for offering training and support for the Peer Research Project.

