

2024

Mental Health and Prison Release Report

in partnership with our Experts by Experience Board



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Adam's Foreword



My mental health when I left prison was poor. It's difficult because you come out of jail and society has completely changed. For me that was the height of the pandemic with everyone wearing face masks and hesitant to touch other people. It's very hard to adapt and you're full of doubt and anxiety. I remember going to a shopping centre to buy a phone and my brother noticed I was shaking. I didn't know how to deal with the influx of people after being around so few in prison. You're more prone to panic attacks when you leave prison and you need time and support to make the transition. It's like arriving in a new country and not knowing how anything works. For the first six months of my life after being released I felt like an immigrant. I had to re-learn how people talk, how people conduct themselves, and what it's like not being in a negative environment all the time.

There's no mental health support. I was released from prison in September 2022 and presented my letter to probation saying I need to do therapy that my psychologist recommended. They told me I had to go to a GP and get added to a waiting list. At the time of writing I have not had any correspondence from the people that are supposed to help.

Struggles with mental health is a subject lots of people don't want to disclose because it's taboo. In prison, that can be even more extreme because you want to look strong and macho to survive. EBE stands for Experts by Experience, and coming together to talk about mental health leaving prison for this research project really felt like that. It gave such an interesting perspective to see people from similar backgrounds to myself talk about our experiences of how mental health has affected us and what needs to change.

People matter. People's mindsets matter. People's experiences matter. No matter what background you come from, you're still human at the end of the day. I think that's what people miss when it comes to people who have been in prison. I hope this research can create awareness on the things people coming out of prison feel on a day-to-day basis. I hope people resonate with it. Someone has to be uncomfortable for these conversations to happen. And when it came to our EBE discussions, it was understanding that it's okay to be uncomfortable and share. Share what you can and then go home with a smile on your face and feel positive rather than negative for it.

Adam Chaab,
Experts by Experience member

Introduction

At Switchback we are proud to work closely with our Experts by Experience (EBE) board in our efforts to create change in the justice system. We meet monthly with current and past Switchback Trainees to understand the issues that impact them. Our goal is to elevate their voice and insight into the heart of the conversation about prison and probation policy. EBE Members have consistently raised the issue of mental health for people leaving prison, so we held two in-depth workshops to discuss this.

In these workshops, EBE members really opened up about the depth of the mental and emotional challenges that they had to navigate after prison. They spoke a lot about trauma. Board members spoke about experiencing trauma throughout their lives and everyone identified their experiences in prison as traumatic. The group discussed the impact that had on them as people and the way that this anxiety and stress followed them into their lives in the community. One way this manifested was a feeling of constant vigilance and threat, even when going about their normal day to day lives. Some EBE members spoke about the fear of being sent back to prison to relive these experiences. They felt that this was especially hard to cope with, when they saw people being recalled in to prison for reasons that felt arbitrary or that weren't explained.

Sadly, EBE members described feeling like they had to carry these burdens alone, as they found it hard to trust people enough to share what they were going through. They painted a picture of having a huge mental and emotional burden that they had to carry. We can't underestimate the impact all of this has when

people are trying to change their lives for the better. They have to cope with this on top of all the practical struggles of life after release. Sadly, the systems which should be supporting them often heightened their stress and anxiety. EBE members describe interactions with services as dehumanising, with little warmth or support involved. Mental health services that process people as 'numbers', and carelessly open up traumatic issues without the appropriate support to address them.

The views of people with lived experience should be essential reading for anyone who wants to reduce crime and reoffending. If we want to support people to change their lives, we must understand the journey people undertake to change. We hope that publishing this report can start a different type of conversation around prison release. We must work to improve access to quality mental health support for prison leavers, but this isn't just about mental health services. This is about the whole prison release system. We need a system that responds to the emotional challenges that people are experiencing. A system that creates a meaningful bridge of support which enables people to live life differently.

2024 is going to be a big year for Switchback and EBE. We are going to be working more 'out loud' and publishing more person-centred reports on the issues that impact people leaving prison. We are excited to work with anyone who shares our goals for a prison release system that is built around human beings, a system which can support people away from a life of crime. If you want to get involved, please get in touch!

Daniel Rajan Mills,
Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Switchback



“

The voices and insights of those leaving prison are often overlooked. Switchback have aimed to correct this, centring the lived experience of prison-leavers.

It was my privilege to spend time with these young men. The group who collaborated on this project showed a tremendous amount of candour. Without this we would not have gained such rich insight, and this project is a testament to them.

This report is a compelling call to action. It shows us the challenges prison-leavers have in navigating their new lives, and the emotional burdens that can bring. It implores us to listen to these young men, and to understand their needs. Most importantly it asks us to work towards fostering a society that nurtures and supports their wellbeing.

We at Toynbee Hall are honoured to part of this project, and look forward to all that comes out of it.

Rushaa Hamid,
Research Manager at
Toynbee Hall

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Key Themes

High Levels of Anxiety

In Prison

Our sessions focused on the experience of leaving prison and returning to the community, but the topic of life in prison was raised throughout our conversations. The group highlighted the way that being in prison affected their thinking and their mental health. When we discussed a statistic from the Centre for Mental Health which highlighted that 90% of people in prison had suffered from mental ill-health, the group pushed back to say that 100% of people in prison experience mental ill-health, especially anxiety.

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Anxiety might not be deemed a normal feeling outside, it's a normal feeling in Jail. Everyone's anxious.

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You're conditioned with that – you're anxious – it doesn't go away in a day as soon as you walk out the gate.

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“

We've been to Jail we know what it's like. It's sh*t. There's no rehabilitation. No one cares. People, especially people with mental health issues in jail, look how they just leave them. They just bang them up and just laugh. The Govs don't care. Officers think it's funny. They don't let them shower. Just let them stress – it's crazy.

”

Prison Release

The group reflected on the way that the run up to prison-release heightens those feelings of anxiety. People are often dealing with a lot of uncertainty, not knowing where they will live, how friends and family will receive them, or what they are going to do to provide for themselves. The experience of being in prison can change someone's outlook and make them feel more worried about interacting with other people.

Some members of the group shared that they felt overwhelmed by coming back into the community. People spoke about the way that people they knew had changed and moved on with their lives, and the way that the city they had lived in before prison had changed. These experiences could make people feel unsettled and anxious.



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At Liverpool St, you know you see it in the movies, so many people moving and lights everywhere. I felt lost in my own city. I didn't know what to do, I felt stuck. I was lucky I had great support.

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“

People that have done long sentences, it's a very different world. You go in at a young age and everything's changed. Everyone your age is doing big things – that's a shame that you feel.

”

“

It's like waking up in a different time zone.

”

Key Themes



“

If you know your surroundings, you can judge whether it will be a bad situation, you can go to a dangerous place, but you are going to be vigilant. It's about knowing whether you are in danger.

”



Feeling Vigilant and Under Threat

Living in the community, people spoke about a number of fears and anxieties that they had to manage on a daily basis. For some members this meant feeling vigilant of their surroundings on a day-to-day basis, especially when seeing figures of authority who represent part of the system. One member of the group described feeling highly anxious and vigilant when seeing a police officer walk into their workplace (a café) because they worried that they might be there to arrest them and take them back to jail.

“

For some of us that was already instilled in us before we went to jail. You are already on alert anyway. You go to jail, crammed in a building, and it's even worse. You come out and it's even worse.

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It can keep you safe, but it can also send you a bit tapped.

”

“

It's just conditioning, you have to be sceptical of other people. You grow up with it and it sticks with you.

”

The whole group discussed that this feeling of vigilance was a survival skill that they had learned in their life. If you weren't vigilant, you were at risk. Members described growing up in dangerous areas, where the risk of harm was constant. One member of the group spoke about seeing English Defence League members coming and attacking women in their community at a young age. The group agreed that the experience of prison deepened their belief that they needed to be vigilant to protect themselves.

The group discussed whether this was a feeling that was still with them and still served them. The discussion was complicated as members felt that ultimately a level of vigilance might still be needed and difficult to let go of, but also that this level of vigilance can be bad for their mental health.

Key Themes

Fear of Recall

The fear of recall and the prospect of being sent back to prison was another source of anxiety. The whole group agreed that the threat of being recalled was a worry that followed them every day. People spoke about constantly worrying that they would slip up and make a mistake that would lead to them being recalled to prison.

This fear was closely related to technology like GPS tags, specifically the fear that any mistake with a tag could lead to being instantly recalled to prison. Members did not feel the process or rationale for why people were recalled was clear. They also observed that the process seemed to be to arrest someone first and then review and investigate later, which added to the fear that no matter what you did, someone could knock on your door any day and take you back to prison. This fear was compounded for some of the members by probation officers regularly telling them, "Do you want to be here or do you want to be back inside?"

“

It causes anxiety. Every time an appointment comes up I think, if I accidentally miss this I could potentially go back to jail. I could have police at my door, they could do anything without even telling you.

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“

With my GPS Tag I have to charge it up every day, I think about the tag charger over my keys, it comes before food and drink. I have to make sure it's charged, otherwise you get recalled. Every day, it's exhausting, whatever you're doing, no matter what happens. Imagine if it dies. I was just always thinking that.

”

“

At the end of the day these people can just take my freedom away. So even when you haven't done anything it worries you. They could just put you in jail today. They can frame you. That's why I just feel paranoid all the time.

”



“

The first thing they do is put you back in jail – they don't investigate why. It's put him away and remand him. Even when you haven't done anything wrong.

”

Key Themes

Trust

The issue of trust was a major theme throughout both workshops. The group discussed that their experiences in life made it hard for them to open up and trust other people. This feeling, that it was better not to trust, was something learned throughout life because of bad experiences with other people. The experience of going to prison and being treated badly in prison had deepened this feeling that it was wise to not trust other people.

The group discussed a general lack of trust, but particularly a lack of trust in institutions and people in authority. Repeated bad experiences made members have very little trust or belief that institutions would help them, or that it was worth opening up to institutions. When we spoke about places of trust, no member of the group identified services either in the justice or healthcare system as trustworthy.

This feeling that it was better not to trust, to avoid being hurt, could make it difficult to share difficult emotions. Members spoke about not sharing difficult problems unless they were really serious or even life-changing. This was due to feeling like they couldn't trust but also because they were concerned about over-burdening other people in their lives who might have their own issues or dilemmas that they were dealing with.

“

Every person I have been emotionally vulnerable with has betrayed me. I felt that way before prison. Prison just made me realise that not trusting people was good for me. If I had trusted people and thought that I could rely on them then that would be dumb cause I was in prison and no one was really there for me. Me and my mum. That's it. Because I expected that to happen it proved to me that I shouldn't trust people. I've spent enough time by myself knowing that no one else has really got you except for yourself.

”



“

I don't trust anything or anyone and institutions are at the bottom of that list. I have no reason to trust them. They've never done anything which has benefitted me. I just can't trust them, too many experiences. It's like going to court – every experience is just evidence as to why you can't trust them.

”

“

Do they have the time for you? Because they are going to have to let something else in their life slip – they've got their own problems as well – you don't want to add your problem to their problems ... it has to be life-changing for me to share this with someone.

”

Key Themes

Mental Health is Not First Priority

Members also cited the number of difficult problems and challenges that they faced as contributing to their feeling that it was better to put their feelings away to try and deal with pressing issues in their life. The group discussed that for most people leaving prison, the focus is practical; finding a way to make money, making sure you have somewhere to live and sorting out issues and reconnecting with friends and family. Given the number of things that people have to deal with, most people don't see mental health as a priority, even if they are having to navigate a lot of mental challenges.

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I've never met someone who's said, 'You know the first thing I'm going to do when I get out? I'm going to address my mental health'. It's not really the first priority.

”

“

The amount of time you spend thinking about that, by the time you've thought about it there's another life-changing problem to deal with. It's one after another so it's just moving on cause that's life. You just have to take it.

”

“

You have to remember what's on the person's mind, at the end of the day their mental health isn't their priority, it's about sustaining yourself to survive. The first thing when you come out? You need to make money.

”



... for most people leaving prison

the focus is practical; finding a way to make money, making sure you have somewhere to live and sorting out issues ...

Key Themes

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At the end of the day you just have to bottle it up – and think about something else.

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“

Sometimes something should be said but obviously we just don't say it ... and it impacts us.

”

“

Men, we have this pride thing, where we don't tell no one.

”



Masculinity and Culture

The group reflected on the way that their upbringing, and the expectations on them as men, made them more likely to bottle up emotions and try to move on. We discussed that people didn't always know how others might react if they shared their emotions, or how it might be viewed to say that you were experiencing any problems with your mental health. Members shared that their experience that people often expect you to just move on and try stay positive in your life, rather than being dragged down by the hard emotions that you may be feeling.

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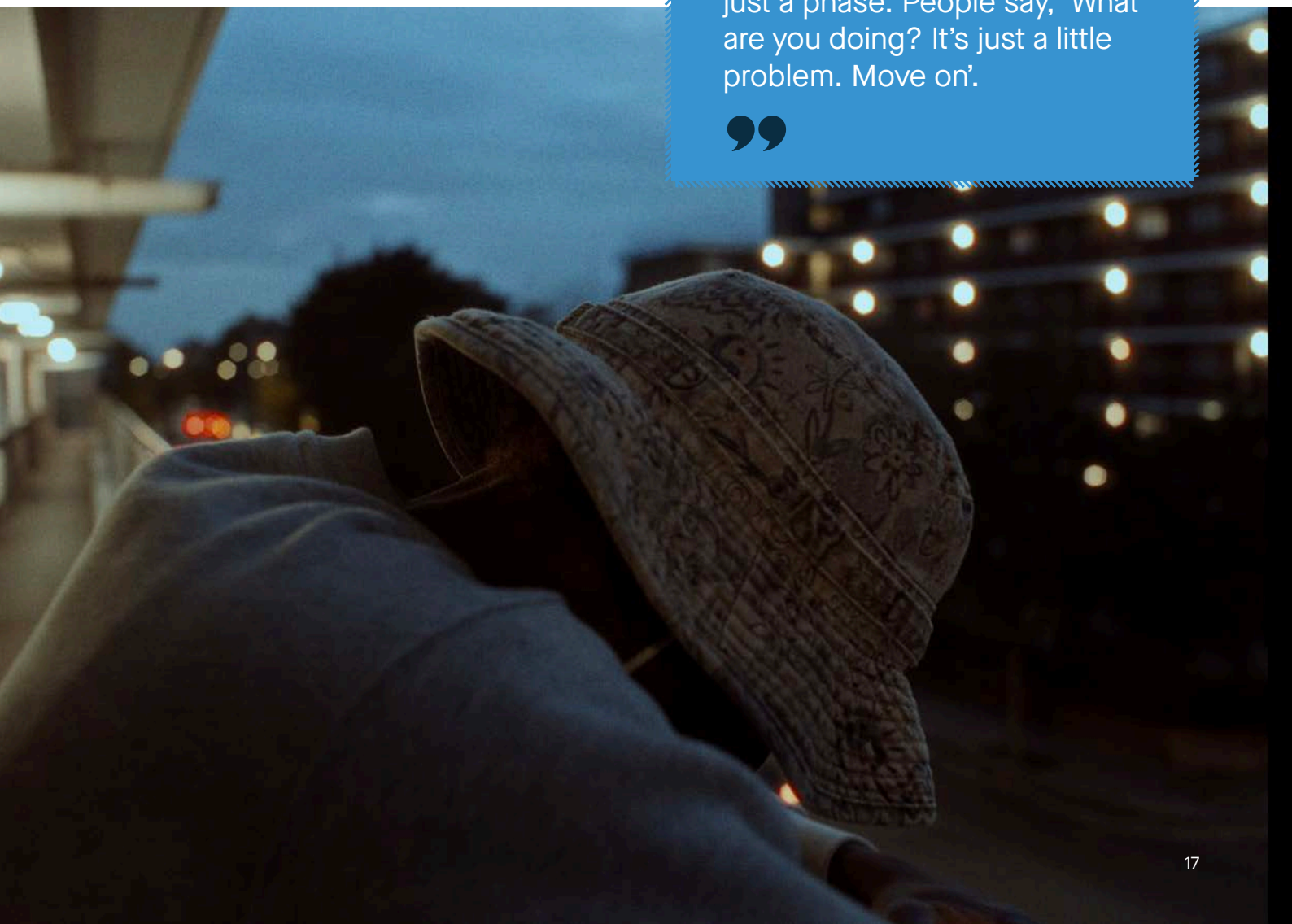
That's how we're kind of brought up. You hit a certain age where you think it's best to just keep things to yourself.

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“

That's culture. They think it's just a phase. People say, 'What are you doing? It's just a little problem. Move on'.

”



Key Themes

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When I spoke to probation – they just deal with numbers and it’s the same with the mental health services. As long as they get their KPIs they will be alright, but are they actually helping the person?

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“

Right now the foundations are outdated – we need fresh perspective and new eyes on it to change the foundation and update and revitalise it. Like changing the soil for gardening. Right now they just do this paper and that paper, but you’re not really sorting the person, you’re sorting the way it looks.

”

“

I don’t think there should be a target or a number that you should try to help because then ... where’s that person’s brain power going? Towards the target or the people you are trying to help?

”



Services Don't Treat You Like a Human Being

A key theme that emerged from the conversations at both workshops was repeated poor experiences with services in both the health and justice system. The group reflected on the way that this put them off engaging with mental health services and contributed to poorer mental health. One of the main issues was people feeling as though services treated them like a number or a box to tick, rather than like a human being.

Members also repeatedly raised a concern that staff from any public service would treat them differently because they had been to jail. They felt that they were subject to a lot of prejudice in society and expected that this would likely be the same if they were trying to access services.

“

Treat us as humans not caseloads. Build a relationship with people you're gonna see better results.

”

“

I go there with a script ... just to get through it.

”

“

They ask you in such a robotic manner. Humanise that conversation a little bit more. It's the energy that they give off.

”

Probation

The group particularly spoke about feeling that probation appointments are too often about going through a scripted set of questions, rather than building a genuine human relationship that can lead to trust and support through the process of re-establishing yourself in society. Some members of the group did speak about having positive relationships with individual probation officers. These relationships were based on the way that the probation officer interacted and created a relationship that felt real and genuine.

Some members of the group also raised that they were concerned about disclosing mental health challenges to probation staff. They raised a concern that if they shared something like that it would make probation officers more alert to them and cause them to scrutinise what they were doing more.

Key Themes

Health Services

The group also discussed some difficult experiences accessing mental health services, ranging from; waiting for months after being referred to be able to access services, starting therapy and opening up about traumatic experiences only to have their support stop abruptly and being told to leave group therapy for raising concerns about the way the group was being run. The group discussed that these experiences had made them less likely to wish to access support in future. The harm of opening up the wounds of trauma and then having to restart with a new professional over and over again was raised as an issue with the way services are currently delivered.

“

How are you gonna fix 20 years of lack of trust with a therapist? That's gonna take years and years.

”

“

Its' the fear of restarting from the beginning. You don't want to relive the trauma.

”

Ideas for Change

At the end of each session, as a group we discussed ideas for change, these are ideas that could be developed over the course of a longer research project. These ideas were suggested in the context of not limiting ourselves by thinking about what might be realistic at this stage.

- Abolish probation and replace it with something meaningful that can provide real support to people leaving prison.
- Swap probation officers for life coaches.
- Offer free therapy for everyone leaving prison.
- Introduce mandatory therapy (the idea behind this was to provide a “mask”. A reason to go to therapy that would mean that people didn't have to open up to others about what they were doing straight away).
- Train probation officers in mental health and how to support someone who is struggling.
- Provide a mandatory mental health check-in when you leave prison that is a real human conversation with someone – not a form or questionnaire.
- Hire people with lived experience in probation.
- Reimagine services to focus on human relationships instead of targets.



“

To tell a therapist something you have to have a lot of trust in someone. I'm not willing to do it again. You don't want to open up to someone, build trust and work out a problem and then it just stops. You're reliving trauma, it's traumatic, it can mess you up even more.

”

Next Steps

Reflections from EBE Members

At the end of the process, EBE members reflected on the importance of research being carried out by people who have experience of living through these issues. They also discussed their motivation for being involved in this project.

Info About This Report

- This report is based on a collaborative scoping project on the subject of mental health and prison release, undertaken in partnership with Toynbee Hall and funded by Clinks. It was an opportunity for Switchback and EBE to develop our approach to research working with an organisation with research expertise.
- We held two in-depth workshops with six participants. We believe there is a foundation for a longer term research project to further explore these themes. We have taken the decision to publish the report now, because we believe these are important insights for the justice system.

“

It's relatability – I'd rather talk to someone who has been through what I've been through than someone who is just trying to get data out of you.

”

“

You fight a cause not because you want satisfaction, but because if you find something wrong – you want to put that extra effort in. We've been to jail, we know what it's like.

”

- As part of our work on this project we carried out a short literature review on this subject. We found that the relationship between prison release and mental health appears to be relatively under-explored. The issues of both mental health in prison, and prison release more generally have been addressed by academics, charities, parliamentary bodies, inspectorates and others. We found there to be relatively limited work exploring mental health and prison release specifically. We believe there is a need for further research in this important area.



Thank You's

- A special thank you to EBE member Adam Chaab who wrote the amazing foreword to this report, and to all the other EBE members who took part but have chosen to remain anonymous. We appreciate you all for the openness and humour with which you have shared about such sensitive issues. A massive thank you to Rushaa Hamid, from Toynbee Hall, for facilitating such an open, trusting space for us to hold these conversations. Thank you to our brilliant delivery team, particularly Raschell Ince, for the support they provided to EBE members in these workshops.
- Thank you to Rachel Tynan and Olivia Dehnavi and Clinks for their support in bringing this report together. And thank you to the Esmee Fairburn Trust and Barrow Cadbury Trust for their ongoing and invaluable support of EBE.

“

It didn't happen for us, so I just feel like anyone who wants to take part, they must have a proper passion for it. Because you could be selfish and think, I'm out now, but you still want to try and make something happen.

”



From charitable trusts to employers providing work experience for Trainees, we are very grateful to the fantastic partners and supporters who make Switchback's work possible. **Thank you** to all those who made this report possible.

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