

Reclaiming my voice

contributing lived experience of strangulation to IFAS

March 2025



Institute For
Addressing
Strangulation

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Acknowledgements

With thanks to the incredible women who took part in the reclaiming my voice project and all those who have contributed their lived experience of strangulation to IFAS over the past two and a half years.

This report is dedicated to those who have been killed by strangulation. May their lives not be lost in vain.

Report by Marianne McGowan
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Introduction & methods

From its inception, the Institute for Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) has made understanding the lived experience of survivors of strangulation a central part of its approach to tackling strangulation in the UK. Survivor involvement at IFAS has taken many different forms and for the most part has been led by survivors themselves. The Survivor Liaison Worker communicates directly with survivors to explore how they would like to contribute to the work of IFAS, exploring any personal skills they would like to develop and build upon in the process. Examples have included developing and consulting on materials aimed at raising awareness of strangulation, creating resources for training, sitting on a recruitment panel and participating in survivor group meetings.

Through discussions with the survivor group, we developed a project that aimed specifically to demonstrate and 'celebrate' their contribution and collaborations with IFAS, including what that involvement has meant to them on a personal level and collective level. Initial themes for the project were discussed and the title of '*Reclaiming My Voice*' was decided upon as a group, as both a physical and metaphorical representation of sharing their lived experience of strangulation. The project was designed to exhibit the value of lived experience at IFAS and the need for continued research and development to support victim/survivors and contribute to awareness and prevention strategies on strangulation in the UK.

To do this we recruited five survivors from our lived experience group to participate in a focus group exploring their involvement with IFAS. Those who expressed interest were provided with an information sheet detailing the aims of the project and were offered the chance to discuss the project with the Survivor Liaison Worker before confirming their participation.

Due to scheduling, we conducted one individual interview and one focus group with three participants, one individual originally expressed an interest but then decided not to participate.

We therefore had four participants, who for the purposes of the report will be referred to as Aicha, Julie, Sam and Saige. These are all chosen pseudonyms.

A semi-structured approach was taken in both the individual interview and the focus group. A series of open-ended questions (see appendix 1) were developed and asked in both sessions. The interview and focus group were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams and participants were anonymised using their chosen pseudonyms.

Analysis & findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews involved listening back to the recordings, reading and re-reading the transcripts before developing emergent themes with relevant quotes. The emergent themes were then discussed and agreed upon by the research team.

The key themes and subthemes were written up and the findings were presented back to the survivor group for their thoughts and feedback. Through this process the next steps for the outputs from this project were agreed upon.

A summary of the themes are as follows:

Using the past to inform the present and future

Using the past to inform the present and the future was the overarching theme that survivors expressed when contributing their lived experience of strangulation to IFAS. Whilst exploring the key themes and subthemes from this project, how the past informs the present and future should be kept in mind. One of the findings from this project, and indeed already a core part of IFAS's approach to lived experience, was getting the balance right in respecting individual past experiences whilst utilising them for change. How this can be done sensitively is captured in the subthemes of this section and the outputs of the project. The sense that IFAS can use the past experiences of survivors to inform present and future policies and practices came through as a priority for the group and is a shared priority for IFAS. The influence that their experiences can have on social change for future generations was also articulated as a motivating factor for the group.

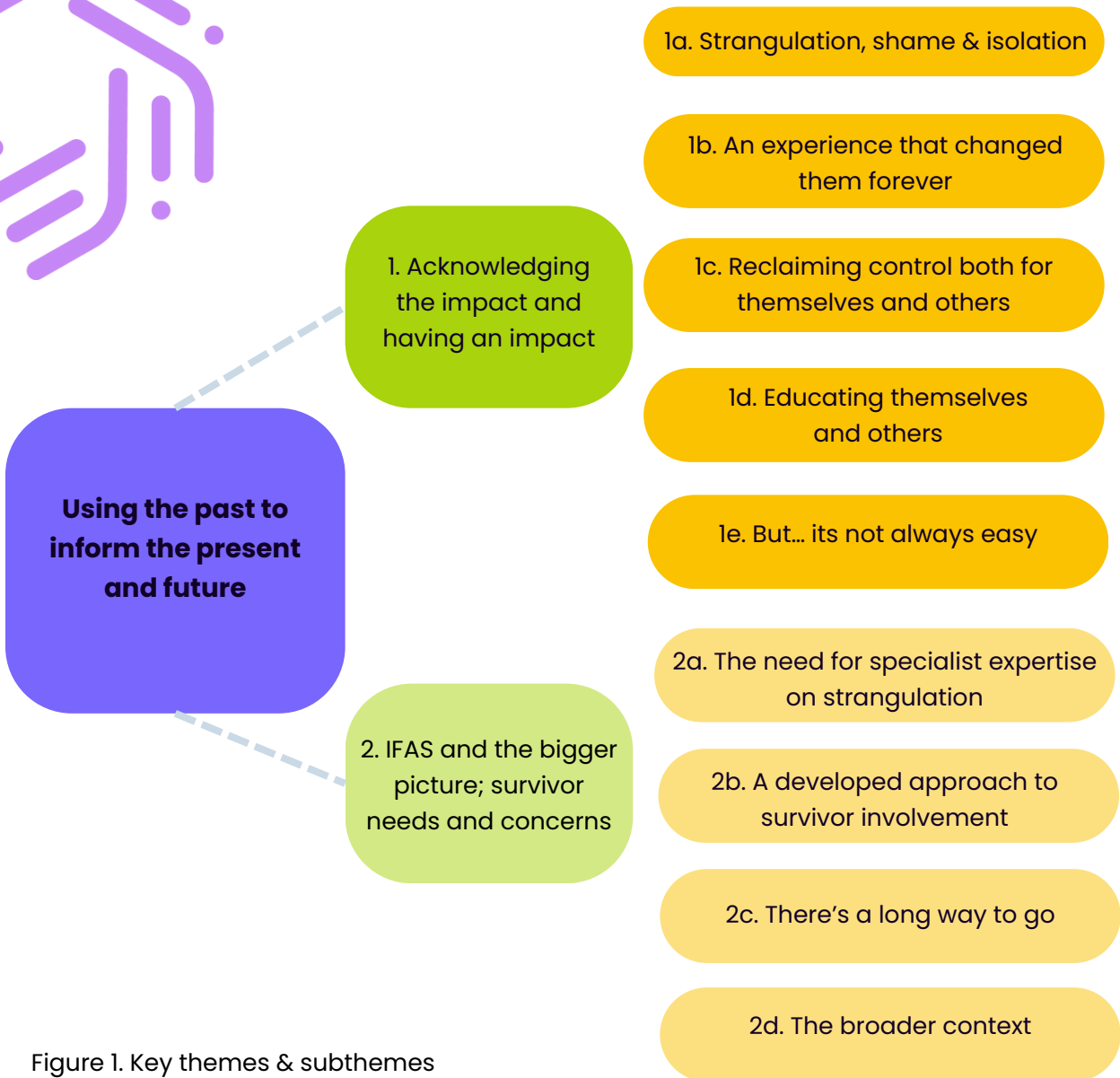
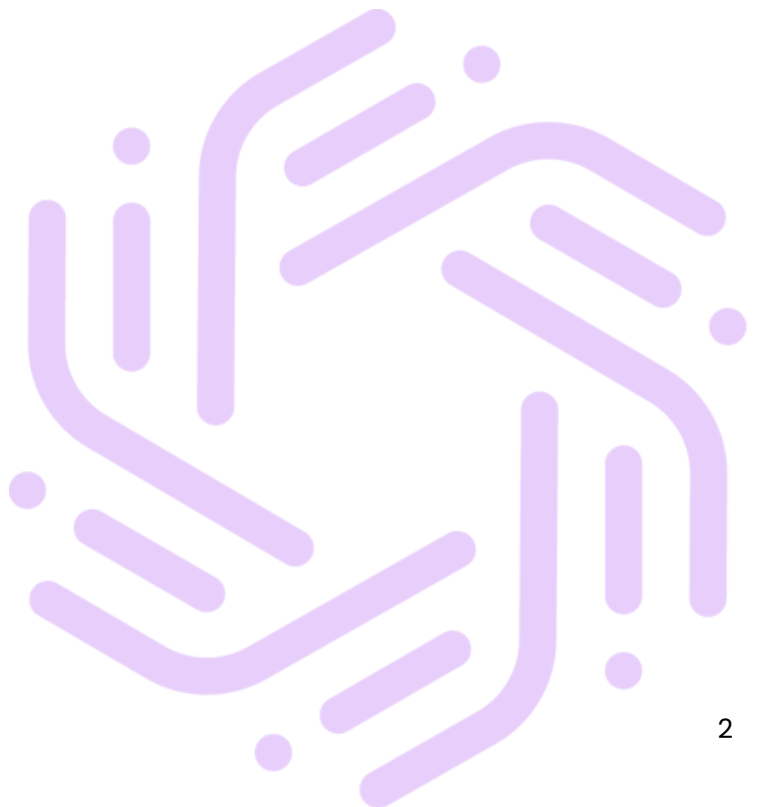


Figure 1. Key themes & subthemes



1. Acknowledging the impact and having an impact

The first key theme in this analysis highlighted the symbiotic nature of contributing a lived experience of strangulation to IFAS. Survivors described how engaging with IFAS meant that they had to acknowledge the impact that their experience had on them and those around them. On the other hand, a motivation for being involved was having an impact on others through education and sharing their lived experience. The subthemes in this section explore their experiences of acknowledging the impact and having an impact with powerful take aways for other victim/survivors and those around them.

1a. Strangulation, shame and isolation

It was evident that experiencing strangulation left the survivors feeling completely isolated due to a lack of understanding from others about what they had been through. A lack of understanding of what they themselves were going through and the impact that the experience was having on them was also identified as something that amplified the feeling of isolation. Contributing their lived experience to IFAS combatted against this sense of isolation through providing a deeper understanding of the impact of strangulation through research, speaking to professionals whose sole focus is strangulation and meeting others who have been through similar experiences:

"I started to read a bit, and I thought well, I didn't know even a service or any sort of research like this existed and in fact I always thought I was on my own, with my own experience without thinking how much of a wider picture or how socially it was a bigger issue...I mean, that's all I could think about for years and years was that, and I think that if anybody else, it's reading that and acknowledging that they're not alone. I think that if I had been able to read something a while ago and understand, I might have been able to engage a bit better, or I might have been able to think I wasn't alone because you are alone for a long, long time, you feel alone, because it's just that effect, that, that type of violence has on you." - Julie

In addition to isolation, it was clear that experiencing strangulation elicited feelings of shame. This was an experience that was not specific to those who had experienced strangulation in the context of domestic abuse.

The group articulated that shame made it hard to talk to others about their experience. They described feeling like others didn't want to or didn't know how to talk about the strangulation with them and the impact that that specific form of violence had on them. However, they also identified that the shame they, and others, experience around strangulation is misplaced, articulating that it should be on the perpetrator rather than the survivor or those around them.

"I always think when you mention strangulation, it's, there is a taboo thing attached to it because it such a violent act and people are a bit like 'oh, right'." - Julie

"I'd had a young client who was 15 who told me her boyfriend a year ago had strangled her and I've been working with this client, because I'm a therapist, I've been working with her for a year and a half. And she didn't even feel so safe to tell me because she did not want to be known as the girl it happened to. So, she was holding her abuser's shame." - Saige

1b. An experience that changed them forever

Experiencing strangulation was described as an event that changed the survivors as people, forever. It changed how they thought and felt about the world and how they responded to situations. The impact of this experience was so profound they described being unable to go back to who they were before. A sense of loss was described.

However, the group also shared that the changes and the impact can be harnessed for good in different ways. They described the impact of strangulation as something that requires help and support from others as well as an enormous amount of personal awareness and effort. The group articulated how the changes they experienced in time could be viewed as a positive. For example, some personal changes that mean they worry less about unimportant things in life as well as using their experience to contribute to societal change.



The process of getting through some of the darkest times was conveyed as something that made them much stronger and contributing their lived experience to IFAS was identified as something that helped turn something so negative into a positive.

"Those experiences stay with you for your whole life. They might just be tiny things that pop up for me, even though you know my experience might be quite some time ago now, there'll be little things that pop up all the time that remind me, and it helps me to sort of kind of like feel as if I'm still kind of in control, I'm still being positive, I'm still making a positive experience out of what happened, that it's not taken over my life in like a negative way and so yeah, I think that just because like I say that it will always be with me and it'll always be part of me, I can never just make it fully go away, I can never return to the person that I was before. I can make something new and better out of it now." - Aicha

"It's something that's always going to be with us and it does change us, each experience does change us. But it's, it's empowering to know that we're doing something, for me personally, if I'm doing something good with it, so trying to turn it into a positive where we can help others through IFAS and the information that I've learned through IFAS, I can help others as well." - Saige

Ic. Reclaiming control for themselves and others

It was evident from the group that, for them, contributing their lived experience to IFAS reduced the feelings of shame and isolation that stemmed from experiencing strangulation. They disclosed that sharing in this way aided them in helping to feel more in control of their own experiences. They articulated a sense of regaining control after this was taken away from them by the perpetrator and the systems in place designed to help.



"I think unfortunately that there's such lack of understanding throughout the system that you're not actually able to recover, and I think a lot of women speak out because they want change to not only help themselves, but to help other women so that they don't feel that." - Sam

Being part of a lived experience group specifically on strangulation gave the survivors a feeling that they were not alone in their experiences, even when previously they may have felt alone. The sense of collaborating with others who have been through something similar as well as taking action as a group, had a positive impact on the survivor's individual recovery.

"I would say definitely coming off the last group, it was so amazing hearing other women talk about their experiences. And knowing that I'm not alone" - Sam

The group also shared experiences of disclosures enabling others to disclose and therefore a sense of just how important sharing is for helping others to not to feel alone with what they are going through or have experienced. The sense of community gained in sharing and being part of the group was highlighted.

"So, I thought given that, actually I'm gonna step outside my comfort zone, I'm going to share just on my Facebook. I didn't mention any names or anything. I'd put a link to IFAS and some information that I've learned from IFAS and shared the experience and that had a really direct impact on a lot of ladies people who I know well, who I know idea it happened to them, so I think there was about 24 comments, people saying things like, 'I'm sorry that happened', but then one person said 'thank you so much for sharing because this happened to me too'. And that one comment of somebody saying, but other people who would like to have said something nice to me also come back and all of a sudden there was everybody was sharing." - Saige

On the other hand, being the voice for survivors who may not feel able to use their voice or for those who have lost their lives was an important finding and motivation for participating. The responsibility or indeed privilege of being able to use their voices to inform change was clearly articulated by the survivors. The personal impact that contributing to IFAS had on their recovery was clear but the value and importance of having an impact on others was also evident and from their perspective aided their recovery.

"There are many women who have lost their lives, however, they are women who have saved many other people's lives as well. And it's almost not letting them die in like vain... but knowing that their legacies are protecting women and knowing that as a survivor, I'm reinforcing that every single day to help other women to feel empowered." - Sam

1d. Educating themselves and others

Another benefit of contributing to IFAS as described by the group was the process of educating oneself to gain a better understanding of what happened to them. They shared that this process validated how and why they felt the way they did in the months and years that followed. It was clear that they personally gained a great deal through understanding research about the impact that strangulation can have on victim/survivors both physically and psychologically. This learning also contributed to feeling less alone and isolated with their experiences.

"The support side of it has been excellent for myself, informing me with the knowledge that helped my recovery has been really, really useful. For normalising things that I was going through, it's given me some closure." - Saige

Education was a theme that emerged as something for survivors to both gain and provide. They gained a deeper understanding of their own experiences and the impact that strangulation can have, whilst simultaneously educating others on what the lived experience of strangulation was truly like for them.

"Educating people kind of starts with educating ourselves, then trying to help others to the best of our ability. That's how I see it, and if it's hard, it's hard, you know." - Sam

"I think doing the video with yourself, which was my contribution, [researcher name]. I know that from the feedback some healthcare professionals found it useful to have lived experience voice, cause there's nothing more real than lived experience is there" - Saige

The group shared that having an impact on professionals and on society was an essential part of their reason for doing it. They highlighted that combining lived experience with education and a desire for change could make things better for other survivors and the next generation.

1e. But... it's not always easy

The impact of survivors speaking out and contributing to this work was explored and the group described the challenges. They explained how it can sometimes feel "triggering" or "taxing" but how on balance they felt it provided more good than bad for them as individuals. This reinforced the power and importance of contributing to IFAS for themselves and others as part of their recovery.



"But knowing my story is so important on its own, as well as others that we can push forward and make sure that we can make changes for our children, for our children's children, and all the other women that we don't know but could come into contact with that perpetrator later down the line." - Sam

"And as much as I've wanted to sit back and recover my own personal experience has been a fight to get people to associate my illness and mental health problems with the result of somebody else's actions." - Sam

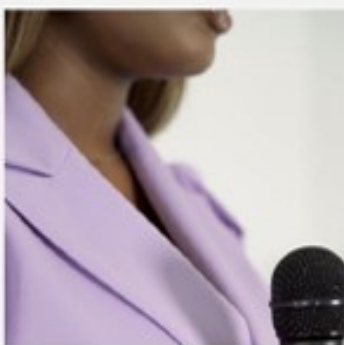
"Triggers" were acknowledged by the group, and they described how often these are unexpected things or very specific things such as specific foods or smells, rather than talking specifically about strangulation. However, attending events specifically on strangulation (e.g. conference) was identified as something that provoked an emotional and physical reaction and therefore requires future attention from the survivor and us at IFAS.

"...when you're triggered, because triggering isn't just psychological, it's physical as well...Time's helped me, but not when you're triggered, you know triggers don't acknowledge time. You know that's the thing, that's the difficulty you've got with that..." - Julie

"My husband objects to it a bit, he's like, 'I don't want you to talk about all that stuff' and you know, and 'it's gonna upset you and it's gonna give you nightmares and things', but grating cheese gives me nightmares because that's one of my memories that he [perpetrator, not husband] would always want grated cheese on his food and things like that. So, you know it's more complex than just talking about it [strangulation]." - Aicha

The idea of an "ideal victim" came through under this subtheme. Survivors articulated not knowing how they should or should not act or behave or what to do with their experience, given that sometimes sharing can lead to negative feedback or criticism from others. Again, the group shared that although this happens and has an impact on them, the sense that they are doing something positive to make change outweighed the risk of criticism.

Recovering from strangulation was described as something that from their experience takes a long time and requires a great deal of individual hard effort as well as support from others. Although contributing to IFAS was portrayed as something that enhances recovery, it was highlighted that it may not be for everyone. Helpfully, survivors also shared other types of support that were helpful to them, for example referrals through the GP to access treatments such as talking therapies and EMDR.



transforming lives



2. IFAS and the bigger picture; survivor needs and concerns

This theme presents the key takeaways and priorities for IFAS and society more broadly from the survivors' perspectives. The subthemes in this section highlight the current gaps as they see them and give voice to their concerns about the impact that strangulation is currently having on society and will continue to have in the future without intervention.

2a. The need for specialist services and expertise on strangulation

The importance and value of IFAS being a body that focuses solely on strangulation (something the group conveyed as having a long lasting and permanent effect on them) was clear. Experiences of having to advocate for themselves to get professionals to listen or take their concerns seriously emerged. Their experience of IFAS acknowledging and drawing attention to the seriousness of strangulation, in a way that other services do not, came through as something that was extremely important to their recovery. Practical suggestions included, at the very least, individuals with specific expertise in a service for example the police, to consult with and support colleagues engaging with victim/survivors and perpetrators.

"The strangulation aspect of it was something that was really enormously difficult to manage and physically, and most psychologically to be honest with you because I feel like that was the threat to my life. That was, it was hugely traumatic for me, and it was a traumatic episode I went through. Yeah. So, I think that knowing that something out there that acknowledges the impact of that type of harm is, it's good to hear that that's there." - Julie

2b. A developed approach to survivor involvement

The survivors conveyed that they were unsure of what to expect when they had reached out to IFAS to share their experience. Some shared that they had imagined just having a call and telling someone what happened and that the experience of developing material for training, writing blogs or creating videos had far exceeded their expectations. It was highlighted that the attention and time they had been given to share what they had been through felt appropriate and different to other experiences, for example with journalists. The trauma informed knowledge and approach from IFAS was described as an essential part of feeling able to contribute in a way that felt safe and supported.

"I think working with IFAS is completely different because it's more... there's obviously just so much in depth knowledge about what might have happened to you mentally, physically, in any other way. And there's so much respect for your space as well, and what, you know, what kind of memories you hold and stuff like that. So yeah, it's a lot more like therapeutic in a way you can discuss as much as you want, you know, and I've got, I've got so much more knowledge from it as well." - Aicha

"...as I've said before, the recovery lasts and lasts. To me it's like it's almost like the yellow brick road. It does go on and on. You know, there's no point where you just say that's it, and there never will be." - Julie



2c. There's a long way to go

Education for professionals and the public was shared as something that still needs to be addressed. The survivors shared experiences of the police and health showing a lack of awareness on strangulation. In these cases the survivors described having to advocate or as one described "fight" for professionals to take them seriously. The evaluation and evidence of the dissemination of strangulation research and resources was something the group felt was needed.

"I think from my experience, I was... the language that was used, I think I bullet pointed when I got home about five or six different phrases that were said to me like, well, 'there was no marks on your neck'. And so then quoting stuff that I've learned from yourselves with percentages that you know... and so for police to actually turn around and say, 'I know' and I'm like, well if you actually know then why are you questioning this? So, how do we get everything in the police, across police forces, across hospitals that's what I was wondering... so how do we actually get the information there and being used?" - Saige

2d. The broader context

Strangulation in the broader societal context was acknowledged, and the group raised the presence of strangulation in the media and in popular culture as something to be concerned about. They shared that strangulation should not be portrayed as an act that is acceptable or tolerated in our society and that professional responses such as that of the criminal justice system plays a role in making that message clear. The group highlighted that strangulation becoming a 'normalised' and accepted part of society would be detrimental to any progress that is being made to tackle violence against women and girls.

They acknowledged the challenges and how big an issue this is to address but identified key areas in need of education and prevention for example young people and offenders.

"I mean, I don't know whether it's like in the scope of things already or whether it's something that's possible, but I think more, I think more noise in the media and social media about the way that non-fatal strangulation is talked about and joked about and the general attitudes to that type of action and maybe some kind of intervention program in like schools or some other type of institution." - Aicha

"Amongst young people it's very normalised, it's just normal thing to do now and especially in sexual activity. And so in schools, maybe some education with services? I'm unsure it's, I guess what we can do is keep reinforcing it and reinforcing it." - Saige

"I think unfortunately social media plays a huge part in it; I think dating apps need to be safer" - Sam



Summary

The Reclaiming My Voice project explored a group of survivors' experiences of contributing their lived experience of strangulation to IFAS. Although this was a small-scale project, something which reflects the capacity and resourcing of IFAS, it was an opportunity for survivors to share in depth their experience of contributing to IFAS and the impact that this has had on their recovery. The hope, from the group was that this research might enhance the lives of other victim/survivors through validating and acknowledging the severity of strangulation and by improving societal and professional responses to disclosures of strangulation.

The first of the key themes focused on how the survivors' found contributing to IFAS, how they experienced it and what others could learn from their experiences. *"Acknowledging the impact and having an impact"* was an attempt to learn from the group about what contributing a lived experience is really like. The findings from this theme and its subthemes can be used in two ways. One, to inform survivors on what to expect after experiencing strangulation, what help and support is available and the potential role that contributing to organisations such as IFAS might play in one's recovery. Two, education for professionals and the general public. For example, the subtheme of *"Strangulation, shame and isolation"*, and the impact of this on survivors should not be underestimated by professionals or those around survivors. Talking about strangulation was experienced to be one way of reducing the feelings of shame and isolation elicited by strangulation. And talking about it in the context of making change was highlighted as a way for survivors to regain control and autonomy over their own experiences, when often they felt this had been taken away from them. Although addressing the difficult impact that participating can have on survivors was essential, the group felt the positives outweighed any negative emotions or feelings they had around sharing their experiences.

The second key theme, *"IFAS and the bigger picture; survivor needs and concerns"* highlights issues for IFAS and society more generally to address from the survivors' perspectives. There is a long way to go. It was clear that from their experiences education and awareness on strangulation is paramount for victim/survivors' safety and recovery. This goes for professionals and the general public and connects to the subthemes under *"Acknowledging the impact and having an impact"* which highlighted the need to talk about strangulation to reduce the shame and isolation that strangulation provokes. They expressed wanting to see education continuing to be implemented into services such as health and the police, and they saw a role for IFAS in evaluating and monitoring the scope of implementation and its effectiveness.

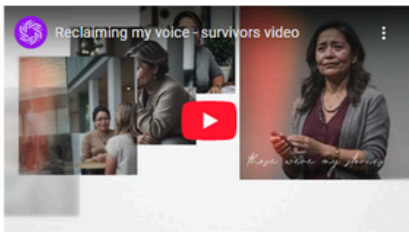
The broader context of strangulation was also highlighted, for example strangulation as part of sex and the normalization of this among young people was something that concerned the group. Likewise seeing strangulation being glamourised in mainstream media was addressed as something that needed to be changed for the benefit of future generations. The group identified the need for specific interventions aimed at perpetrators and young people to prevent this issue from growing across the UK. They had questions about how such interventions could be developed and what role IFAS might play in this.

It was powerful for IFAS to gain an understanding of the role that lived experience has played in the survivors' recovery. The findings reflect our aims; that the work is trauma informed, survivor led and empowering. But we also have much to learn. The discussion on triggers is important for any organisation seeking to embed lived experience in their work and should be explored with survivors on an individual basis. The survivors in this group were able to identify triggers and often this wasn't from talking about their experiences. Survivors in this group wanted to talk to others about their experiences and felt this aided their recovery and wellbeing. We would encourage anyone reading this not to shy away from acknowledging survivors' experiences and talking about strangulation to reduce shame and isolation.

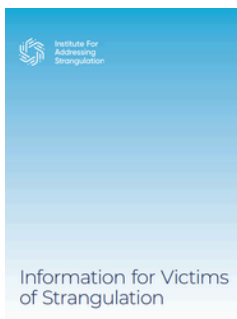
The output from this project is an animation that is now live. It should prove helpful to victim/survivors of strangulation, friends and family members as well as professionals and anyone coming into contact with victim/survivors (details and links below).

From this research it is clear that giving those with lived experience the space to use their voice in a way that works for, and benefits them, is an effective approach which could be implemented across sectors and services for example domestic abuse, sexual violence or mental health.

We hope you will use and share these resources and if you have any questions about our work or the project please do get in touch!



This [short video](#) is one of the outputs from the Reclaiming My Voice project. The video hopes to show other victim/survivors of strangulation that you can reclaim your voice, that your experiences are valid and that your voice is important.



This [leaflet](#) was produced in collaboration with survivors. It provides information on the short and long term medical symptoms of strangulation and how to seek help and support. It is available in a number of languages.

Access the full set of IFAS [resources](#) and our [blogs](#).

***“...I think that it’s part of your recovery is to reclaim your voice. That’s so important because you get that taken away from you.”
- Julie***

Appendix

Appendix 1. Semi structured interview questions

1. How have you found being involved with IFAS?
 - a. What's been helpful?
 - b. What contribution do you feel you have made?
2. What impact do you think you have had on other survivors of strangulation?
 - a. Did you have any prior expectations before engaging with IFAS compared to how it transpired?
3. What would you like to see as an output of survivor involvement at IFAS?
 - a. What would you like to see as next steps?
 - b. What would you see the future of strangulation work in UK?
4. The title of the project is reclaiming my voice, what does this mean to you?





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