

Evaluation of the London Peer Hub

Final Report (Appendix to Interim Report) October 2019

Introduction

The London Peer Hub is a three year project funded through the Big Lottery Reaching Communities Fund. The project, delivered in South London, began in July 2016, with the stated outcomes of:

- Improving the employment prospects of ex service users (Peer Advisors) through accredited training in advice and guidance and work experience
- Enabling better life chances for clients from disadvantaged communities in South East London as beneficiaries of peer support
- Enhancing the service delivery of local voluntary agencies through having professionally trained advice & guidance workers in their workforce on placement

An interim evaluation was carried out in November 2017. This final report is an appendix to the interim evaluation, summarising progress, including the response to recommendations made at the interim stage and taking into account the ongoing work to develop and establish SGT's national Peer Advisor Network.

Achievements 2016-2019

The London Peer Hub has achieved or exceeded all but one of its planned targets. Between July 2016 and September 2019, the Hub delivered the following:

Indicator	Target	Actual
Peer Advisors undertake specific Advice & Guidance training	120	121
Peer Advisors subsequently complete a bespoke voluntary placement	80	86
Peer Advisors progress into paid employment	40	59
Clients report progress in tackling barriers eg: housing, substance misuse, debt, family	420*	528
Clients reporting increased confidence in managing their lives	420*	506
Clients feeling more motivated about their future	420*	528
Voluntary agencies hosting Peer Advisor placements and reporting benefits for their clients/service delivery	30	37
Voluntary agencies reporting changes in respect of volunteering	30	25

*targets were reduced with the agreement with the Lottery, from 600 to 420

Enabling those at disadvantage to develop sustainable careers

The London Peer Hub has continued to enable disadvantaged people to gain the self-confidence, experience, knowledge and skills needed to improve their life chances and employability:

- 121 ex-service users from disadvantaged backgrounds have undertaken Peer Advisor training
- 86 Peer Advisors completed training, including volunteer placements to further develop their skills.
- 59 Peer Advisors have now moved into paid employment, 40 of them in advice roles and 29 with the organisation in which they undertook a placement

These results are particularly impressive given the range of barriers facing those who train as Peer Advisors. Enabling people with lived experience to train to professional standards and undertake serious client facing roles brings a variety of challenges. It is the lived experience that presents both the unique advantage and potential for difficulties. Prior traumas and issues give insight and empathy but can, at times, cause some Peers to have periods when they find it difficult to cope. The power of the SGT's approach is that staff understand and support Peers through these challenging periods.

This is exemplified by six Peer Advisors who have now completed their training but who have needed to have time out from training to deal with personal and family issues including mental health conditions, addiction and caring responsibilities. SGT staff kept in contact with the Peers during these difficult periods, enabling them to feel supported and to resume training when they felt able. A further nine Peer Advisors are currently having time out with a view to ultimately completing training.

The incidence of Peer Advisors (and clients) experiencing mental health issues has increased over the life of the project. This, along with other challenges faced by Peers, is resulting in a greater complexity of need and the support required to help people progress. Furthermore, *"Peers often don't reveal or may not be aware of the full extent of their barriers at the beginning of the training – it comes up later and then they need the additional support."*

The London Peer Hub recognised that it needed to provide additional help to enable people to successfully sustain the training and develop mechanisms to cope with issues and challenges. Project underspend was used to recruit an additional part-time worker who could provide the extra support needed. This has resulted in a much higher rate of completions of training than was previously being achieved.

Currently, the initial assessment for those applying to become Peer Advisors is not as detailed as that for clients seeking help. In view of the increased complexity of Peer Advisor need it would be helpful to consider using a more in depth initial assessment in order to help identify potential support needs at an earlier stage which can then be factored into additional staffing requirements.

The trainer assessor takes a lead on the training and work focused aspects of the programme whilst the support worker provides support and signposting difficulties that may include mental/physical health, addiction, housing, family, caring and relationship issues etc. Staff work together to provide a holistic service for Peers that recognises their unique contribution as well as their support needs.

The trainer assessor delivering the Peer Advisor programme requires a unique combination of skills and experience. *"It isn't a straightforward trainer assessor role. You have to have caseworker attributes. You really need to understand the people that you're training and where they've come from."*

London Peer Hub staff (and SGT staff in other Peer Advisor projects) highlighted that it can be a challenge to find trainer assessors with this mix of skills and attributes. Indeed, the London Hub is currently staffed entirely with former Peer Advisors. This indicates the effectiveness of the model but also points to the challenge in finding suitable external candidates.

Improving support for clients

Over 500 clients have reported increased motivation, self-confidence and progress in tackling their barriers, as a result of support from Peer Advisors. This is a significant increase from the number reported at the interim project stage (116) and is very close to the original target which was revised down with the agreement of the Big Lottery.

This success in reaching and supporting clients is partly due to the exponential impact of there being more Peer Advisors, and more who have gained further experience so that they are able to support higher 'caseloads' of clients. It is also due to improved collection of feedback, responding to the recommendation made in the interim report.

Peer Advisors have continued to deliver a wide range of support to disadvantaged and excluded clients, providing bespoke and personalised help with training, employment, housing, finance and debt, mental and physical health issues and disabilities. The lived experience of Peer Advisors is enabling them to form professional yet compassionate relationships of trust with clients, many of whom have complex multiple needs including challenging mental health issues.

Developing the voluntary sector

The London Peer Hub has engaged with 37 organisations of varying sizes and with a range of different services and specialisms, representing a significant growth from the 27 at the interim evaluation stage and exceeding the planned target. Of the 37, 22 organisations have had their own volunteers trained as Peer Advisors, with the remainder being supplied by the Hub. 8 external organisations as well as a number of internal SGT services have come back for further volunteers to be trained. In addition to these figures, the fact that the majority of Peer Advisors that have moved into paid work have done so in the organisation in which they were volunteering demonstrates effectiveness in providing a very successful 'train – placement – recruit' model.

This clearly demonstrates that the Hub is continuing to be valued by an increasing number of organisations that wish to draw on the Peer Advisor model in developing their volunteering opportunities. The services of the London Peer Hub are enabling these organisations to increase capacity for their service users, to provide the particularly impactful support of 'someone who's been there' and to put ex-service users and people with lived experience at the heart of their provision.

One partner organisation has been so impressed by the Peer Advisor programme and the service of the Hub that it is paying for two paid support workers to be trained, and others have begun to express an interest in this development of the provision. This is particularly helpful in terms of building the sustainability required for the new Peer Hub network.

Whilst the evidence in terms of organisational engagement in the project is very positive, getting formal feedback from organisations to confirm this remains a challenge. 25 organisations have completed proforma which is an improvement from earlier in the project, however, the information provided is still fairly brief. Reports of positive progress for Peer Advisors are more frequent and very welcome, but the deeper reflection to identify how the organisation is changing as a result of the experience of being involved with the Peer Hub and Peer Advisor model is much harder to gain.

Organisations on the whole tend to focus their attention on the Peer Advisor providing increased skills and capacity for clients and tend not to consider the actual or potential impact on organisational change. This is probably because volunteer placements have not generally been catalysts for organisational change in the way that the Peer Advisor model is. It may also be that organisations do not feel they need to change, even where this might benefit service users. It will take time for this new way of thinking

about volunteering to filter through, although there are signs that workforces are becoming more representative of their user groups and the London Peer Hub is clearly contributing to this very important and positive change. It may be worth exploring the idea of additional information for participating organisations to try and increase understanding, perhaps highlighting examples from named organisations of how having a Peer Advisor has changed how volunteering is perceived, enabled new volunteering roles to be created or changed policies in an organisation.

The London Peer Hub manager has been very proactive in organising events for participating organisations, with good responses but then much lower participation rates. She has found that informal discussions are the most effective way to elicit feedback around organisational change. Discussions as part of the external evaluation have been fruitful and this would reinforce the idea that a conversation may be the best way to gauge this essential indicator of change and progress.

Contributing to the evolution of St Giles and the national Peer Hub network

The London Peer Hub has made significant progress in raising awareness of its role and function across SGT's services, responding to the finding of the interim evaluation that this was patchy. Peer Advisor placements in a range of SGT services have been established, along with much improved communication with those managing these volunteers.

The successes, solutions and learning points arising from the experience of the London Peer Hub provide valuable input into the ongoing development of SGT's national network of Peer Hubs. Some key factors that would be helpful to consider include:

- **Peer Advisor assessments** – strengthening the assessment process so that it identifies in more depth and detail the nature and extent of barriers and challenges facing those who wish to train as Peers
- **Additional support role** – including some form of additional support role in the hubs so that Peers experiencing challenges and set backs can be supported effectively to complete their training, even if they require some time out
- **Trainer assessors with caseworker attributes** – ensuring that those recruited to trainer assessor roles have the additional attributes, skills and experience to be more than simply a trainer assessor. It may be worth considering re-framing the title of this role and the job specification so that it leads with something more akin to a caseworker description with the added requirement of trainer assessor qualifications and experience
- **Publicity/information materials that showcase the Peer Advisor model as a catalyst for organisational change** – perhaps videos from participating organisations speaking about the changes as a result of being involved with the Peer Advisor model
- **Exploring how best to elicit feedback from organisations through discussion** – perhaps through periodic 'mini evaluation' reviews where semi-structured discussions are held with individual organisations, either using external evaluators or trained SGT staff.
- **Making the Peer Advisor programme available to paid workers** – either through organisations paying for training for their paid staff, or free at the point of access for low paid workers (the latter is particularly important in view of the wider developments around meeting the needs of low paid workers living in poverty).