

The Leeds Peer Advisor Centre

Final Evaluation

Introduction and background

The Leeds Peer Advice Centre (PAC) is a three year project funded through the Big Lottery Reaching Communities Fund. The project began in September 2015 and its key objectives are that:

- the employment prospects of ex service users (Peer Advisors) are improved through accredited training in advice and guidance, and work experience
- there is improved confidence and motivation in very disadvantaged clients using the services of voluntary agencies in Leeds
- the service delivery of local voluntary agencies is enhanced through having professionally trained advice and guidance workers on placement in their workforce

The project has secured some continuation funding to the end of 2018, however, discussions for the final evaluation took place in August and September so that this could contribute to the wider strategic development of a national St Giles Trust Peer Advisor model. The key objective for discussions was to assess the impact of PAC for Peer Advisors, clients, participating organisations and the wider sector, with a particular focus on:

- How Peer Advisor training and placement opportunities can help individuals into employment
- The role of 'lived experience' – for Peer Advisors and in organisations that provide volunteer placements and employment for those with lived experience
- How PAC is helping to break down barriers and negative stereotyping for people with mental health needs, offending histories, those in recovery from addiction and other groups
- How the Peer Advisor Centre is supporting a range of organisations in the sector
- Exploring how the Peer Advisor model can be financially sustainable

This final report builds on the interim evaluation produced in 2017 and the early findings for the final evaluation produced in September 2018.

Methodology

The methodology for the evaluation included:

- discussions with key SGT staff involved in the delivery of the PAC project;
- one-to-one discussions with Peer Advisors – in training, qualified and some who have moved into paid work, and with partner organisations involved with the project, and
- desk research into similar provision/projects and into employment for people with lived experience.

Discussions were guided by a set of key questions, tailored for each respondent group, to ensure consistency of approach. Direct quotes are shown in italics and speech marks but are not attributed to individuals in order to protect confidentiality.

Project achievements

The project has delivered very well on its objectives and targets, as illustrated below:

Indicator	Target over 3 years	Actual achieved	Comments
Peer Advisors undertake IAG training	120	131	All have completed the taught course element 37 have achieved an IAG qualification, with a further 8 expected to complete soon
Peer Advisors complete voluntary placement	80	114	48 with SGT 66 with partner organisations
Peer Advisors progress into paid employment	40	54	11 with SGT 43 with other employers
Clients report progress in tackling barriers, managing lives, feeling more motivated	600	640	460 clients using SGT services 180 clients using partner services These figures are estimated
Voluntary agencies hosting Peer Advisor placements	50	33	Organisations have between 1 and 8 placements, often within different projects within the organisation. In addition there have been 8 different SGT projects that have hosted Peer Advisors.
Voluntary agencies reporting changes in respect of volunteering	50	33	All agencies involved in the project have reported a positive impact on their organisation through hosting Peer Advisor placements. This information has been collected through three way meetings, feedback forms and focus sessions.

The project has overachieved on the number of Peer Advisors training and taking up placements, with 131 participants who have trained/are training as Peer Advisors and 114 taking part in a wide range of volunteering placements that have helped to develop their confidence and transferable skills.

Whilst only around one third of Peer Advisors have achieved the full nationally recognised qualification, this represents a very significant outcome for many. 54 participants have moved into paid work, demonstrating the project's ability to help improve the employment prospects of participants and illustrating that the confidence and skills gained can help people to get good jobs even without the full qualification. The fact that 43 jobs have been gained with employers other than SGT also shows that the project is providing a very valuable service to the sector as well as to participants.

33 local organisations receiving a range of support, enhancing the services that they can offer their clients. Whilst the number of organisations receiving support is lower than planned, largely because multiple placements were provided by organisations, the range and intensity of that support has been greater than anticipated, providing excellent value for those involved.

Organisational support includes: being provided with trained and skilled volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds; providing a progression route for the organisations' volunteers; introducing volunteering to

organisations that have not had volunteers before; supporting the development of new volunteering roles across many organisations; enabling additional capacity and skilled support for clients; supporting the development of volunteering 'culture', including *"more holistic volunteer support and development"*; providing valuable networking opportunities.

Over 640 clients received support from Peer Advisors across over 40 different services and for a wide range of needs including housing, finance and debt, addiction, coping with leaving care, being a refugee, tackling the stigma and issues presented by being an ex-offender or family member of an offender. Peer Advisors' support has clearly had a positive effect on the emotional well-being of clients as well as providing them with much needed practical support.

Summary of key themes

It is important not only to identify the impact of the work, but also to understand its place in the current operating environment – for individuals and for organisations. In particular, highlighting the unique aspects of the Peer Advisor model and the package provided by SGT is essential in order to evidence how it fulfils significant need that is not being met elsewhere.

Providing access and raising aspirations for people with 'a past'

Whilst SGT is not unique in offering opportunities for people who are disadvantaged and/or excluded from training, employment and 'mainstream community', it is important to acknowledge the welcoming yet professional culture of the organisation highlighted by many participants.

'Disadvantage' covers a very wide range of educational backgrounds, including people who may have *"never been academic or very good at school"*, those who have learning disabilities such as dyslexia and those who have had university educations but who have lost their careers and confidence because of offending, addiction issues and/or mental health breakdowns.

It is clear that the project improves prospects and inclusion for people at disadvantage and with the types of lived experience that can result in barriers and negative stereotyping:

"St Giles alleviates problems with employers and organisations by freely promoting people's past experience as a positive thing and making sure that it doesn't define you in a negative way."

"St Giles is professional but not formal or rigid. It makes people feel like they are human beings. You're not judged. It tackles barriers that no-one else does."

"There's a mixed staff group that has a sense of community and equality."

"They are warm and approachable, and at the same time really professional. You understand how people in an organisation can do a really good job and tick all the boxes, and at the same time be human beings. That rubs off, so you can see how you would do it in a job."

"What St Giles did is to break down the barriers of adversity. This was the greatest thing, to be given a second chance at my age. You don't feel scrutinised, you feel accepted."

"It is brilliant to see people who have struggled with life given the opportunity to explore a positive career path without stigma and prejudice."

Developing tailored and meaningful volunteer placements

The Peer Advisor model provides meaningful volunteering opportunities that develop skills, experience and confidence. The placements are very clearly seen as stepping stones to employment and many Peer Advisor roles are very close in remit to those delivered by paid staff. PAC has invested significant time to develop such roles with partner organisations, some of which had not previously offered client facing roles to volunteers.

The employment focused and client facing nature of placements set the Peer Advisor experience apart from many other volunteering roles. Placements are intended to enable Peer Advisor to gain work-related experience and skills as well as providing the client centred activity that is necessary for them to complete the practical modules that are critical to achieving the NVQ Level 3.

Peer Advisors commented that:

“the range of things that you get to do on placement is so different from most volunteering”

“it’s a step up from other kinds of volunteering. I’d done mentoring training and volunteering, but the IAG role is different, more comprehensive somehow.”

“The placements are bespoke. You wouldn’t get that with a college – you’d just get stuck somewhere.”

“I’ve had such a wide range of opportunities on placement. I’ve been into the prison and the court – I never thought I’d have the chance to do that and it’s been brilliant.”

“I’ve been given real responsibilities as a volunteer – a proper caseload of clients to support, and I get really good support from my supervisor. The placements aren’t about being in the backroom or the office. You learn real skills and get proper experience with clients. It means that I can now apply for good jobs and have a good chance of getting one.”

The difference between the Peer Advisor role and other volunteering can make finding and sustaining placements challenging. As one partner commented, traditionally, *“many organisations view volunteering differently. St Giles sees them as placements that are a pathway to work whereas the organisation may see them as volunteers that they want staying for a long time and not moving on. But wherever there is a problem, St Giles comes up with a solution and the solution for this was to mentor organisations so that they could help them develop the right placement opportunities.”* SGT has needed to work with organisations to help change cultures to enable Peer Advisors to benefit from placements that support them into paid work when the time is right.

Supporting progression into well paid work with prospects

The approach adopted by the Peer Advisor model means that volunteers are provided with significant support to help them move into paid work when they ready and able to do so. SGT often works with partner organisations to support this progression, as well as providing a wide range of help in terms of identifying suitable jobs, CV and interview preparation, providing references and testimonials and *“just giving you the encouragement and confidence you need to take that step.”*

Participants felt that the support provided by SGT is more effective in helping them to progress:

“in some places you get the feeling that they don’t really want you to go into work, because they don’t want to lose you as a volunteer – St Giles is exactly the opposite – they really encourage you into work and they send you through job details all the time.”

“It’s given me a second chance to create a career. I’ve just qualified as a social worker and doing the Peer Advisor programme opened up that door. I’ve now been offered a job as a community care officer”

“Doing the IAG spurred me on to do a Level 2 mental health course through NCS. So it’s enabling me to build on the training. NCS has been very different – no help at all!”

“On the course you learn about how organisations work – policies, legislation, procedures and all that. It’s really helpful because you then understand the organisations that you’re trying to get a job in – having that knowledge gives you confidence.”

“I sat on the interview panel for the new St Giles area manager and it gave me such an insight into what it feels like to be on the other side. That really helps when you’re applying for jobs. And it made me feel that I was valued liked a paid staff member and that my opinion and experience really counts too. They took me seriously – that’s a massive confidence boost.”

“Because SGT networks with so many organisations like mental health, prisons, the police, local Government, the university, it opens up load of opportunities for training and work. It transforms people’s lives because they see that they can really do something with their life – they can have a proper career.”

“I’m 30 and this has given me the platform to do more study, to move up to Level 4. I’m now a qualified youth worker and I think the training helps people to move on in their jobs too. I’m in recovery and an ex-offender. St Giles in not just willing to help people with a past, they openly seek to do that and by doing that they are really breaking down barriers.”

“I’ve just applied for a drug & alcohol worker post which I wouldn’t have been able to do without the course, and I wouldn’t have known about the job if St Giles hadn’t sent me the details.”

“They go above and beyond to help you. They keep in touch and send through information and job adverts. They took time out to read my personal statement to help me with my job application even after I’d finished training with them.”

Peer Advisors have moved in a variety of paid roles, including those that are directly relevant to their experience with PAC, such as being a qualified Social Worker and Youth Worker. These and other participants felt that the training and support provided by PAC, including the experience of placement with a partner had equipped them *“not just for any old job, but for something meaningful with prospects.”* This includes aspirations for promotion and taking on roles with greater responsibilities when the time is right.

This indicates that PAC and the Peer Advisor experience is able to support career development rather than simply moving people into some form of work. In the current climate of more people in work claiming benefits than those out of work this is particularly important and noteworthy as it points to the ability of this model to result in employment that is economically sustainable for individuals.

PAC provides a unique and accessible offer

All respondents (Peer Advisors and partner organisations) stated that they were not aware of anything similar being offered: *“What’s unique is the combination of the training, placement, support, flexibility. Even if you could do the Level 3 somewhere else, they wouldn’t provide that wrap around service that makes the Peer Advisor programme so successful, and you’d probably have to pay which none of the volunteers are in a position to be able to do.”* It is this combination of elements that is unique and that enables people to successfully engage in industry standard training and work related roles, many of whom have previously thought *“there was nothing out there for me – that I could achieve and help me to do something worthwhile, until I came across St Giles.”*

In an environment where there are a bewildering array of ‘projects’ and where truly valuable services are competing for funding in an ever more challenging financial climate, it is essential to underline the unique

offer that SGT's Peer Advisor model offers. Other services are, of course, important, however, it is clear that the Peer Advisor Centre in Leeds and sister services in London, Ipswich and Cardiff are vital for people who require the comprehensive and holistic offer of SGT.

Peer Advisors and partner organisations highlighted the unique features of the SGT Peer Advisor offer:

"I couldn't have done this at a college. There, there just isn't the flexibility to take into account things like children and that you may need some support too."

"There isn't anything else out there like it (PAC). Doing the IAG at college would have cost about £400 and I'm on benefits. St Giles gives you so much more than just a course, it's free and they have sorted it with the Jobcentre so it doesn't affect your benefits – that makes it all achievable in a way that other things just aren't."

"I dread to think what my options would have been if it wasn't for St Giles and the IAG. It's a really vital course to help people become productive members of society. I'm in recovery and am now a Detox & Rehab Link Worker and I absolutely love it."

"You get really good training – it's intensive but the trainer is fantastic and helps you all the way. The constant and really supportive supervision on placement means that you can really feel confident about using what you've learnt on the course."

"As a partner organisation in this sector, I would say that St Giles Trust is unique in what they offer, particularly for those from the criminal justice system. The Peer Advisor model is a really valuable one."

"The Peer Advisor training and role is different from what is offered by other, more specialist organisations. Whereas with them you may train to work with a particular group, but the Level 3 is broader and that is good for volunteers who are wanting to explore what they want to do. It's a valuable part of the offer in the area and having an accredited Level 3 really stands out."

"We have a really fruitful partnership with St Giles and because they welcome people with all kinds of lived experience it means it complements organisations like us with a more specialised client group."

Desk research supports this view and confirms that PAC provides a service that is not delivered by any other organisation. As discussed later in the report, participating organisations are also very concerned to see the Peer Advisor Centre continue to help them provide high quality and specialist services for their clients, as well as innovative developments in volunteering and employment. Indeed, the number of organisations that provide placements, including on a rolling basis, underlines the need for and significant contribution of the Peer Advisor model as delivered by SGT.

Organisations value PAC highly and are open to making financial contributions

As in the interim evaluation, partner organisations were unanimously positive about the experience of working with SGT and offering placement opportunities to Peer Advisors.

Voluntary sector organisations (and those in the public sector) experience continuing and increasing pressure on funding and finance. However, those taking part in the evaluation recognised the significant value of having Peer Advisors volunteering in their organisations:

"the course is so beneficial. It makes massive changes to them (Peer Advisors) and really builds their confidence. The course content gives them a very good grounding and then we can do additional training which helps us to build a relationship with them too. We would look into contributing to the costs of programme from our volunteering budget because it's worth it."

“It’s really good training of a high standard. It helps people to understand listening skills, boundaries and supports their personal and professional development. It also really helps them to understand how organisations work which is so helpful.”

“It’s enabled our customers to feel comfortable asking questions about issues that really affect them and that they may not have felt able to voice before. We love having Peer Advisors on placement – it’s brilliant. If we weren’t struggling to pay our own staff, we would happily contribute to the costs of the programme because it’s really brilliant.”

“We have a great volunteer on placement who is a massive support in helping to research opportunities for the some in the hostel and then work with them to explain their options. It’s working really well and provides added value for us. At the moment we contribute volunteer travel expenses. I’d love to be able to contribute more if we had the funding to make that possible.”

“They (Peer Advisors) provide great support to our service and the clients, providing clients with alternative views and for them to see it is possible to have a life after addiction/struggles. St Giles provides a great way for people to return to education who may have in the past struggled to see their life with any real meaning.”

As previously identified, PAC has enabled organisations to review and develop how they involve volunteers and ex-service users, creating more client facing roles that can help develop the skills that Peer Advisors need for volunteering and paid work whilst delivering an enhanced service with greater capacity for the organisation.

There is clearly a willingness on the part of participating organisations to make financial contributions to supporting the SGT Peer Advisor service, however, this commitment can only be realised where realistic volunteer budgets can be included in funding applications. This would allow organisations to cost in, for example, part funding the cost of the Level 3 IAG qualification or some of the SGT staff time required for managing and delivering the PAC.

One contributing organisation made an interesting observation that *“if organisations made a financial contribution, they’d want to have more of a say in the training and having it tailored to their particular needs. That wouldn’t necessarily improve it because one of the selling points of the programme is that the training is broad and people can spend time choosing which direction they want to go in.”* This potential consequence is important to consider to ensure that the Peer Advisor model can maintain its unique features and integrity.

Some partners engage with SGT on a number of different levels, not only providing placements for Peer Advisors recruited by SGT and referring their own volunteers to PAC as a progression route, but also working with SGT to deliver specialist training as part of the Peer Advisor training. One organisation has been working closely with SGT in this capacity by providing mental health training for Peers, commenting that *“it’s a great way of keeping links with SGT whilst we sorted out our DBS process and I was really impressed about how switched on the trainees were.”*

This involvement demonstrates the good partnership working of SGT and the response to key issues such as mental health needs, one which was highlighted as a potential area of development by another contributor.

Getting consistent and comprehensive feedback from the clients that are helped by Peer Advisors has been a challenge for PAC. This is particularly the case in relation to clients being supported by Peer Advisors in partner organisations. Improving this key function is another way in which organisations could support PAC more effectively, by providing additional evidence of the positive impact of services that can be used to demonstrate to funders the value of the model.

Communicating the offer

Differentiating the Peer Advisor model can still be a challenge. As touched on earlier, there are distinct differences between being a Peer Advisor and being in other volunteer roles. In addition, the name of the Level 3 qualification – Information, Advice and Guidance – does not fully describe the nature of the support provided by Peer Advisors which is a holistic approach that may involve some mentoring and emotional support as well as helping people to make informed choices about their futures.

Nationally, SGT is continuing to explore and develop how best to communicate the richness of the Peer Advisor model and role, including making clear that mentoring is part of the offer but that it encompasses much more - *“St Giles is very strong in distinguishing between advising and mentoring, but other organisations don’t necessarily see it that way. We can sometimes struggle to explain the different to clients.”*

Involving colleagues from across the varied geographical and other settings for Peer Advice in these continuing dialogues will be important, including external partners that are in a unique position to feedback on what might work best in accurately portraying and promoting this work.

The wider context for training and employing people with lived experience

Some of the partners involved with PAC employ people with lived experience as paid staff. The proportion of such employees and the way in which this facet of the organisation is publicised and promoted varies significantly. In addition, processes such as DBS vary and can present barriers to employing ex-offenders (including as volunteers), even in organisations where this is a clear and supported policy.

All organisations interviewed for the evaluation felt that there was much more work to be done to change the culture of employment across all sectors so that people with lived experience were able not only to compete for jobs on a level playing field, but also to have their experience recognised as an asset rather than a risk.

There is no figure for the proportion of organisations across the board that employ people with lived experience, and there may be many that are not aware of such employees in their companies. The results of google searches around ‘employing people with lived experience’ reveal a variety of activity promoting the benefits of employing people with lived experience – mental health, addiction, offending. Mental health is the most common result, with recovering from addictions also being a key theme.

However, a significant finding from this brief research is that there is a real need for continuing work to change the culture and attitudes of employers – in the public, private and third sectors. This points to a continuing need for the SGT Peer Advisor model and its work with employers. The recent developments to develop further the ability of SGT Peer Advisors to work in employer facing roles – supporting people into and at work – could be of real benefit in terms of supporting this systemic change.

A small selection of the results of internet searches that exemplifies the very broad range of what is being developed/talked about in a variety of different fora:

Business in the Community has produced a leaflet outlining the social case for, and benefits of employing ex-offenders. Also promotes Ban the Box.

<https://www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/ex-offenders/employing-ex-offenders>

Central & North West London NHS Trust – report on their Peer Support Worker project. Southbank Uni accredited training and placements for ex-service users across a variety of mental health settings. 2016. Looks good but is very much an in-house project. Not entirely clear how many go onto paid work.

https://www.cnwl.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/Peer_Support_Worker_Leaflet.pdf

Drink Wise Age Well - Lottery funded organisation. One of its centres in Sheffield. Provides a range of advice and training around alcohol and over 50s, including for employers. Quotes some research on how employing recovering alcoholics isn't as risky as people think, carried out by Sheffield Hallam.

<https://drinkwiseagewell.org.uk/employing-former-alcohol-addicts-risky/>

Talk Business - Article on the benefits of employing recovering alcoholics and link to Sobriety Services.

<https://www.talk-business.co.uk/2016/09/21/concerns-business-owners-might-employing-someone-addiction-drugs-alcohol/>

Recommendations for moving forward

- There may be some mileage in considering developing some form of good practice guide for **employing** people with lived experience. This link is to a paper which covers quite a wide brief and comes from a mental health perspective but has some interesting elements and includes a 'practical guide for people with lived experience'. http://peterbates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/how_to_take_your_lived_experience_to_work.pdf
One of SGT's strengths is in the range of different types of lived experience held by Peer Advisors and it may be useful to consider something that is able to reflect this diversity and that can be used widely to support the necessary culture change.
- Strengthen the SLA to include a much more directive piece about collecting and making available client feedback so that this very valuable evidence can be used for evaluation and support funding applications.
- Work with existing partners to explore how they could raise more finance for volunteer training and development, including being able to contribute to the costs of delivering the Peer Advice model where they choose to use this option.
- Consider how the Peer Advisor programme could be offered to people in low-waged or zero hours jobs. The huge increase in the 'working poor' indicates that PAC could usefully offer support to these individuals who are often ineligible for much other provision or cannot afford to pay for it. This would require further financial modelling including the potential for employer contributions, however, this may be unrealistic in respect of companies with poor employment practices.
- Continue the work that has already started to develop more work-focused training for Peer Advisors so that they can support clients into and at work more effectively.
- Consider including mental health awareness/first aid training as a core element of Peer Advisor training, acknowledging the significant rise in the number of clients who experience these challenging issues.