



The Peer Circles Project

Interim Evaluation Report

Introduction

The Peer Circles project is a three year programme funded through Big Lottery/European Social Fund (ESF) Building Better Opportunities (BBO), running from January 2017 to December 2019, with participant engagement commencing in April 2017. The lead provider is St Giles Trust (SGT), with end-to-end delivery partner Evolve.

This interim evaluation will assess the performance and impact of Peer Circles at its mid point. In particular it will assess the extent to which the project is reaching its overall aim to provide support and activities for people with complex needs and severe and multiple disadvantage (SMD), which results in them having improved employability and/or progressing into sustainable employment.

The interim report focuses on:

- Key areas of strength and innovation, including particularly important elements of the project such as the Peer Advisor model, partnership approach and response to the complex nature of the client group, including illustrations of beneficiary experience and impact from the project interventions
- Any significant deviation from planned project activity, challenges and/or critical areas of underperformance, the reasons for these and how they have been addressed
- How the project is operating in the wider context including complementarity with the Crisis led BBO project, the impact of the changing and challenging backdrop of austerity measures, housing pressures, reductions in public services, welfare cuts/changes and a changing labour market, and the targets of funders and commissioners

A set of action based recommendations is also presented to inform planning and delivery of the remainder of the project as well as to contribute to wider stakeholder development of provision and services for this highly complex client group.

Methodology

The evaluation took place between September and October 2018 and included:

- Group and individual discussions with participants: 10 Peer Advisors and 15 clients across SGT (project lead) and Evolve (project partner)
- Individual discussions with 8 SGT and Evolve project staff and managers,

- ➔ Individual discussions with key personnel from 11 external organisations including: sub-contractors, referral partners, specialist providers working with Peer Circles and the Crisis led BBO London project
- ➔ Review of all paper/electronic project monitoring and internal review data and information

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. Where participants have named staff and volunteers working with them, these have been changed to 'caseworker' or 'Peer Advisor' to maintain confidentiality.

Key findings

- ◆ At this interim delivery point, the Peer Circles project is performing well in engaging people with severe and multiple disadvantage. At the end of September 2018, 451 participants have been engaged and have received very valuable and bespoke support to help them tackle a wide range of issues including housing, finance/debt, mental health, addiction and barriers to training and employment. 51 participants have moved into education, training, employment or further jobsearch.
- ◆ Peer Circles is delivering in the context of significant challenges arising from the complex nature of the target group and the external pressures posed by issues such as lack of suitable and affordable housing options, access to mental health and support services and changing employment patterns and practices. There is increasing recognition that where there are cuts in local authority and support services, those people requiring them will move to other services, placing increased pressure on these. SGT's services, and in particular the Peer Circles project, is experiencing this pressure, particularly given the high level of need in the target group. The traditional demarcation lines between being out of work and employed have become blurred with the rise of zero hours contracts and the gig economy. Earning a living wage is becoming increasingly difficult in this environment.
- ◆ Employment and training targets are proving very challenging to achieve for this group because of a number of factors including their severe and multiple deprivation. The vast majority of participants need to spend significant time addressing a range of housing, mental health, addiction and/or financial issues before they can consider training or working. In addition, caseworkers are reluctant to exit participants through education/training and jobsearch outcomes because they require further support to move into employment. Despite these challenges, Peer Circles staff are continuing to support participants to progress towards and into employment and training options.
- ◆ Participants contributing to the evaluation were universally positive about the project, and many felt that *"This is a lifeline – there is no other service that helps in the way that Peer Circles does. They accept you and focus on finding ways forward – solutions to overcome all the problems. No-one dwells on the past, it's very positive."* It is clear that the project is achieving against the indicators of change including building people's confidence and self-esteem, reducing isolation and helping to improve access to vital services for housing, mental health and addiction.
- ◆ Women appear to be well served by Peer Circles with a number of features that enable them to engage and progress. The specialist women's caseworker is highly skilled and experienced, and *"really knows how to connect with women who typically have not engaged at all with other services."* She works with a range of very vulnerable participants including women whose children have been taken into care and those experiencing domestic violence and exploitation.
- ◆ The Peer Advisor model is central and unique to the project. It provides supported access to a nationally recognised, industry standard Level 3 qualification and placements for those interested in delivering skilled support to their peers. To date, 37 participants have completed the Learning to

Advise element of the programme, with 5 achieving the full qualification. 5 Peer Advisors have moved into paid employment in similar roles, demonstrating that the model helps people with complex needs to get work and indicating that successfully sustaining training and volunteering opportunities provides excellent building blocks for doing so.

- ♦ Peer Advisors and those who are being supported by them were very positive about this facet of the project. Peer Advisors felt it gave them opportunities to *“give back”*, develop skills, *“feel good about ourselves”* and get a qualification for the first time, as well as being a potential pathway to paid work. Participants really valued the especially powerful nature of *“being helped by someone who’s in the same boat as you.”*
- ♦ Piloting the Peer Advisor model with people with complex needs is resulting in a range of very helpful learning that is enabling the model to be further developed for this target group. The complexity and severity of needs of participants means that the process of becoming a fully fledged Peer Advisor can be slower than for other groups. 8 Peer Advisors have experienced relapses demonstrating the fragile nature of the participants and the need for a flexible approach that means they can resume training when they are ready.
- ♦ Peer Advisors on placement with project caseworkers also require far higher levels of support and supervision than was anticipated which places added pressure on caseworkers. The project manager is currently engaged in a range of development work to address these challenges including addressing the need for greater support for Peer Advisors on placements and how to embed more effectively the model with the project partner Evolve.
- ♦ Two of the original project partners, Look Ahead (end-to-end provider) and CGL (specialist addiction partner), are no longer part of the Peer Circles project. Look Ahead experienced staffing issues which meant that they were unable to continue delivery and CGL experienced some contract changes which made it difficult for them to continue the commitment to providing specialist support for participants with addiction. SGT has absorbed these difficulties and has continued to deliver despite the potentially negative impacts of these unforeseen circumstances.
- ♦ The relationship with Evolve, the ‘end to end’ project partner is positive and has potential for development in a number of areas including sharing expertise on mental health training and services, and different models of peer support. It has been challenging for the Evolve caseworker to cover such a large geographical area on her own without the ‘team base’ that is available to SGT staff and that enables outreach caseworkers to offer informal mutual support and information exchange when they meet. SGT is in the process of exploring ways to strengthen the relationship with Evolve and to provide more support for the caseworker.
- ♦ Peer Circles has a range of excellent partnerships with organisations that provide supported referral to the project, as well as specialist help for clients on an individual basis according to need. All organisations contributing to the evaluation were very positive about the project, identifying it as a unique offer for this particularly challenging group – *“Peer Circles will have people that find it difficult to get a foot in the door elsewhere”*, and confirming that they see positive changes in client progress and engagement.
- ♦ A key feature of the successful relationships with partner organisations is caseworkers who are flexible, dedicated and who travel to the participant rather than expecting them to come to a centralised office. The ability of caseworkers to gain the trust of participants was stressed by a number of organisations – *“they take the time to build relationships with clients before they are formally enrolled on the project – it’s a sensitive process that means that some of our really hard to*

engage people can successfully build the trust that they need to have if they are going to engage and sustain the engagement with the project.”

- ♦ The project funders, the Big Lottery and LEP/ESF have shown flexibility in adapting funding requirements in recognition of the challenges faced by the target group, particularly around evidence for the right to work for those who do not possess official identification documents such as a birth certificate and passport, and proof of employment outcomes. This is welcome and demonstrates a willingness to understand the difficulties of people with severe and multiple deprivation. That said, the employment and training outcome targets do not appear to reflect or measure adequately the positive progress that is being made by participants on the project – people who have very long and complicated paths to sustainable positive lifestyles.

Recommendations

- Efforts should continue to explore how best to achieve employment outcomes that are sustainable for participants – in terms of paying a living wage, being able to meet the commitments of holding down a job, managing a Universal Credit claim on an ongoing basis, and managing a budget independently.
- The piloting of the Peer Advisor model should continue so that SGT can develop it fully for people with complex needs. Key actions should include:
 - ♦ Ensuring that Peer Circles participants are only offered the opportunity of training as a Peer Advisor when they have the necessary resilience and distance from their own needs to be able to provide support without hindering their own progress
 - ♦ Strengthening the preparation of Peer Advisors before placement so that they have the skills and confidence to undertake one-to-one support of Peer Circles participants
 - ♦ Providing additional support for Peer Advisors once they are in placement, preferably through a Peer Advisor Co-ordinator role, with access to clinical supervision if required
 - ♦ Incorporating mental health training as a core element of the taught course
- Continue to strengthen data collection and analysis to help inform project delivery and development, and to feed into wider developments at strategic level. This should include:
 - ♦ Information on the characteristics of those engaging on the project eg: housing, mental health, addiction etc. so that a full picture of the cohort can be provided for internal and external planning
 - ♦ evidence on participant progress, including, for example, the number and type of training courses taken up during their time on the project. This should be fed into discussions about the best way of measuring progress and achievement for this target group.
- Explore the potential for new partnership opportunities to develop the project, for example:
 - ♦ Crisis - Peer Advisor shadowing and co-facilitated staff and Peer Advisor joint development sessions
 - ♦ Evolve – incorporating their mental health training offer in the Peer Advisor course
- Continue to develop the partnership with Evolve to ensure that the caseworker is well supported and involved. This could include consideration of how additional resources might be provided.
- Explore with the funders, Big Lottery and LEP, and other stakeholders/future funders where relevant, the development of more appropriate targets that reflect and promote participant progress but avoid the potential for driving provider behaviours that do not benefit sustainable progress into work for people with complex needs and multiple disadvantage. This could include considering recasting education/training and job search outcomes if they are not appropriate for the target group.

If Peer Circles is able to be extended beyond its current funding period, consideration should be given to focusing this additional time on securing the sustainability of outcomes – training, employment, Peer Advisor volunteering etc. – rather than imposing additional pro-rata targets. This would enable further helpful learning for the delivery organisations and funders/commissioners about what really works for this particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable group.

Brief background and context

The Peer Circles project is intended to provide tailored and bespoke support to help people who experience severe and multiple disadvantage (SMD) to improve their employability and, where possible, move into sustainable employment. The project is delivered by the lead organisation, St Giles Trust (SGT) that provides a wide range of services for people experiencing disadvantage, and end-to-end project partner Evolve that provides housing, support and services for homeless people.

To deliver successful outcomes for participants, key project features were planned, including:

- Bespoke casework support delivered by experienced and skilled staff on an outreach basis across central and south London boroughs
- Peer to peer support delivered by trained and supervised Peer Advisors who are participants in the Peer Circles project and can provide the unique support of ‘someone who’s been there’
- Partnerships with a range of organisations – to ensure targeted engagement of those in most need and a range of specialist services to which Peer Circles participants can be referred as needed

Peer Circles draws participants from London Central and South boroughs. The term SMD encompasses a wide range of barriers and needs, with many participants experiencing two or more of the following issues:

- Being roofless and homeless
- Having substance misuse problems
- Being offenders and ex-offenders
- Having experienced domestic or sexual violence
- Having a history of being involved in street sex work
- Having a mental health condition

Participants recruited are aged 25 and over and are without dependents and/or not in touch with family and other support networks.

The Building Better Opportunities programme

The Peer Circles project is funded through the Big Lottery Fund’s Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme. BBO matches funds from the Big Lottery and European Social Fund (ESF) 2014-2020 with the aim of investing in *‘local projects tackling the root causes of poverty, promoting social inclusion and driving local jobs and growth.’* The priorities for this funding are set regionally by each of the Local Enterprise Partnerships, which in London is the London Economic Action Partnership (LEAP). LEAP’s role is to *‘bring entrepreneurs and business together with the Mayorality and London Councils to identify strategic actions to support and lead economic growth and job creation in the capital.’* The ESF element of the funding comes via LEAP.

19 projects (including Peer Circles) were approved for funding under London’s BBO programme. These include projects for women, people from BAME backgrounds, refugees, people with mental health conditions, carers and people with complex needs.

Peer Circles and its sister project The Tackling Multiple Disadvantage (TMD) project, led by Crisis have the same target group – people with complex needs – and operate in different London boroughs to provide

capital wide coverage. Crisis' partners include Thamesreach, St Mungos and Mind in the City, Hackney and Waltham Forest. The two projects liaise periodically to talk through progress and challenges. A key difference between the projects, apart from the number of partners, is that Crisis does not have the Peer Advisor model. During the evaluation, ideas for potential joint working were explored and are discussed later in the report.

Challenging times with increasingly complex needs

Homelessness has been steadily increasing over the last 10 years, with rising numbers of people sleeping rough, rents soaring and waiting lists for housing at crisis level. Added to this, many organisations report significant increases in the levels and complexities of people's needs. Mental health needs are becoming a frequently identified issue for many service users, making engagement all the more difficult to achieve. The pressure on mental health services means that it can be difficult to facilitate timely access to the help that people need to tackle these issues which often have pervasive negative impacts for many areas of their lives. As a result of austerity measures there has been a significant reduction in support services for this client group.

Ex-offenders, another common group for this project, are unlikely to have had constructive support in prison to address their complex issues. They will leave prison not only with the same set of problems (and possibly more) with which they entered, but also with a criminal record which will make it even harder for them to rehabilitate and establish positive lifestyles.

The picture for employment is challenging for people with complex needs. Whilst unemployment levels have dropped and there are significant numbers of job vacancies in London, the skills levels (even with training) and lack of work histories alone of the majority of Peer Circles participants will mean that entry level jobs, including zero hours contracts are the most likely routes into employment. Given that the number of in-work benefit claimants now outstrips claimants who are not working, it is highly likely that Peer Circles participants, along with many other people, will struggle to make ends meet. Whilst participants will have the support of caseworkers once they move into work, including help with navigating the complex Universal Credit system, their mental health and other needs will make coping with these stresses particularly challenging.

Peer Circles is delivering against this complex, difficult and ever-changing backdrop. As the report will describe, it is managing to deliver a range of impactful benefits for participants. However, the report will also reflect how the project is under pressure due to displacement and 'channel shifting' because of the reduction in public and support services. In this context, it will explore how the targets for the project may not be in the best interests of enabling sustainable progress for participants. T

here is significant evidence that progress for this target group is not linear and people regularly have setbacks even after a period of significant progress. A greater understanding of how sustainability can be achieved could help commissioners and funders to develop better ways of ensuring and incentivising performance that recognises the true challenges of the target group, their complicated paths to stability and the difficult operating environment.

Targets and delivery

Over 3 years, Peer Circles plans to engage a total of 571 people. To date, the profile of the 451 participants engaged in the project is as follows:

	Total planned over 3 years (of 571)	Actual to end Sept 2018 (451)	
		Number	Percentage of current total (451)
Women	228 (40%)	118	26%
Men	342 (60%)	332	74%
Unemployed	200 (35%)	213	47%
Economically inactive	370 (65%)	238	53%
Over 50s	57 (10%)	86	19%
Disabled	228 (40%)	192	43%
Ethnic minorities	313 (55%)	238	53%

About 75% of the cohort are JSA claimants, with the remaining 25% on ESA. Currently there is no summary of the characteristics of the participants (housing, mental health, addiction etc.) to enable an overview of the profile of the Peer Circles cohort. Whilst these details are held in individual case files, it would be very helpful to consider finding a way of including them in statistical spreadsheets to inform current and future services.

Overall engagement numbers are on profile to achieve the total target by the end of the project although there are challenges in terms of ensuring sufficient positive exits to create the capacity for further referrals. In addition, if education, training and employment (ETE) targets are to be met, the project may need to recruit over the total target number. These issues are discussed later in the report. Engagement figures have recovered very well after a slow start in 2017.

The proportion of women engaged is lower than anticipated. A key factor is likely to be that men are over-represented in the cohorts of the referring organisations – the probation service, approved premises etc. Interestingly, Peer Circles has engaged a greater proportion of people over 50 and disabled people than planned. This may also be due in part to the referral sources but demonstrates the project's ability to engage those with significant barriers to training and employment. It may also be a factor in the difficulties in achieving the ETE targets.

Referrals to the project have come from a variety of sources, demonstrating the partnership approach and links with specialist organisations. The significant number of self referrals also illustrates the high profile of SGT.

Self referral	93 (21%)	Housing providers (90 Look Ahead, 40 Evolve, 55 hostels, approved premises etc.)	185 (40%)
Probation services	59 (13%)	Women's services	19 (4%)
Mental health services	11 (2%)	Addiction services	16 (4%)
Various others - Providence Row, Prisoners Abroad, libraries etc			68 (15%)

The overall targets for Peer Circles for the three years to the end of 2019 and the actual achievements to the end of September 2018 are as follows:

Outcome	Target end Dec 2019		Actual end Sept 2018		Additional notes
	Number	% of total (571)	Number	% of total (451)	
People recruited onto project	571	17%	451	79%	
People progressing into education and training	97	25%	11	2%	An additional 4 education & training outcomes have been achieved*
People progressing into employment	143	25%	43	8%	An additional 13 employment outcomes have been achieved*
People sustaining employment for 26 out of 32 weeks	81	14%	7	1%	An additional 3 sustained employment outcomes have been achieved*
100 economically inactive people progressing into further job search	100	17%	6	1%	
Peer Advisors complete initial Learning to Advise training course	50	n/a	37	n/a	On track to achieve expected total
Peer Advisors achieve full Level 3 Advice & Guidance qualification	45	n/a	5	n/a	Peer Advisors are taking longer to complete the qualification than anticipated

The outcomes marked with an asterisk have not been claimed because participants have left the project and not responded to requests to provide signed exit paperwork. This difficulty is experienced by many projects that require such evidence to substantiate claims. Participants who have successfully moved into positive outcomes frequently cut all ties with organisations that have supported them into their 'new lives'. It is extraordinarily difficult and takes up large amounts of staff time to get the required signed exit paperwork completed. It may be worth SGT considering some form of incentive (voucher etc.) to help address the issue. It is also worth funders developing more trusted relationships with providers to reduce this type of paperwork requirement masking results.

In addition to this issue, a further feature of the target counting means that much of the training and education undertaken by participants is not represented. Where training takes place as part of ongoing support, rather than a destination at the end of the project, this is not counted as an outcome, even if it is towards the end of the period of project support. It would be worth finding ways of including this in reporting statistics so that there is a much more complete picture of project achievements. This is particularly important in respect of this target group where most people have not previously engaged successfully in education or training and sustaining this activity represents a very big step forward.

It is clear that, whilst Peer Circles is highly effective in engaging a range of people with severe and multiple disadvantage, the project is experiencing challenges in achieving ETE outcomes, especially sustained employment and further jobsearch outcomes. This is not unusual given the nature of the target group and is discussed in detail later in the report. That said, project staff are continuing to focus their attention on improving participant movement into these outcomes where it is in their best interests.

In addition to hard outcomes, the project has a number of soft outcomes and indicators, as shown below:

Project Outcomes	Indicators of Change	Target	Achieved to end Sept 2018
Participants have improved housing, wellbeing and self esteem	Participants report improvements in their housing	376	157
	Participants attending mental health and/or substance misuse services	286	146
	Participants report increased levels of self-esteem	457	183
Participants have improved relationships	Participants report positive support from Peer Advisors	457	61
	Participants report reduced levels of isolation	376	61
	Participants report improved relationships with positive friends and family	376	93
Participants are more able to access the services, training and support they need	Participants using other services independently	376	66
	Participants reporting increased levels of confidence in using services	376	72
Peer Advisors develop the skills to support their peers whilst becoming more employable	Peer Advisors report improved confidence in their employability	50	24

The data for participants improved housing, wellbeing and self esteem show that the project is having a very positive effect for many participants, with these figures representing just under 50% of the total project target over 3 years. That said, the quantitative data collected does not accurately reflect the qualitative and anecdotal information gathered through internal client feedback mechanisms and through this evaluation. This is presented in the report and illustrates that project outcomes and indicators are being achieved and that there are significant positive impacts from project interventions.

In the last 3 months, information gathering has improved significantly which will provide a much more accurate picture over the remaining project delivery period. This will be important, not only to satisfy funder requirements but also to provide SGT and Evolve with very valuable data that can be used to inform further project delivery, development and quality assurance.

The project had a relatively slow start in 2017 and has experienced a reduction in project partners as well as a change in project manager. The caseworker team has expanded which has helped to provide the capacity needed. The average length of stay on Peer Circles is expected to be around 9 months, with good progress expected to be shown within 3-6 months. Some participants have stayed much longer and this has caused some difficulties in terms of establishing the necessary throughput for the project. However, the new project manager is addressing this issue.

Making a real difference for people with complex needs

The Peer Circles project is clearly delivering a range of highly effective support for very vulnerable and highly disadvantaged clients – *“It’s like a giant umbrella – they help with everything so that you can get your life back on track.”* Both SGT and Evolve aim to provide this type of holistic support, recognising that complex needs are interconnected and require a bespoke and flexible approach to enable people to move on with their lives.

The skills, dedication, empathy and flexibility of the Peer Circles caseworkers are commented on by participants and partners alike as illustrated in this report. Many of the caseworkers have lived experience of homelessness, addiction, offending, mental health conditions and other issues, providing an essential source of understanding and role models that participants can draw upon to help them progress. Those that may not have had direct lived experience exhibit the type of ‘cultural competence’ that means they can build relationships of trust and respect with participants. As discussed in more detail later in the report, the support from volunteer Peer Advisors is also invaluable.

Non-judgemental and able to connect with people

SGT and its partner Evolve share the same values of accepting people, regardless of their backgrounds, when they want to make positive changes in their lives. This non-judgemental approach exemplifies equality of opportunity in action and was commented on frequently by all respondents. It is clearly a key component in enabling people to feel comfortable about engaging with the project, many of whom previously would not engage in services.

“The stigma of a mental health diagnosis doesn’t exist at St Giles and the opportunities are there for you. You talk to them and they say ‘oh, you want to do that – let’s find a way’. It doesn’t matter what the problem is, they focus on the solution.”

“The staff have really good skills with people and you know that they don’t care where you’ve come from as long as you want to give things a try and change things.”

“They are compassionate and caring, but not in a missionary kind of way. They don’t parachute in and just pretend that it’s all going to be OK, they work through the issues with you. They look for a way to get things right with you. You feel like somebody’s in your corner.”

“I was in prison for 10 years and I’ve got mental health problems. The caseworker came to the hostel but I was in a bad way. I hated the hostel and I got recalled (to prison) because I moved without telling probation. When I got out again, I moved to St Mungos supported accommodation. It’s really difficult when you’re an ex-offender but St Giles gives you the opportunity – to get social skills, training and certificates. It’s an amazing thing.”

“I’ve been to some other good organisations, but St Giles is number one for people skills.”

Giving structure and hope for the future

Most of the participants in Peer Circles have chaotic backgrounds that lack the support and structure that we all need to function effectively. For some, mental health issues, family breakdown, homelessness, severe trauma and other factors mean that they have lost direction. For others, being in prison, whilst

imposing a routine of sorts, has disrupted their lives and left them with no support networks, as well as the stigma and real barrier of a criminal record.

Participants commented on the way in which Peer Circles provides them with the routine and structure that they need to begin to “*work my way back into the world.*” This is a vital first step towards regaining, or for some, gaining for the first time, the security needed to build confidence, hope and aspiration.

“I have severe PTSD. It’s been very difficult. My children have been taken away from me. Peer Circles is really, really good. When they started helping me, I thought ‘these people really do want to help’. I didn’t have much structure in my life and this gives me a regular thing to do each week and a group to be with.”

“It’s invaluable – a second chance. Having the help, the structure and the support. I’ve been in a bad place but I haven’t hit rock bottom because of having the support there to look forwards and plan for something better that you can believe will happen.”

“Before, I wasn’t coming out of my room at all and I wasn’t doing well. Now I’m going to a music course. I taught myself quite a bit when I was inside, and it’s fantastic to be doing this. I go to Morley College which means travelling on my own. I have somewhere to be each week, and homework, and the teacher is really good. It releases me. It makes me feel so much better. They’ve also sorted out proper ID for me – a birth certificate, and a CV. I go to the gym now as well. I have a proper routine of things that are doing me good. They’re so humble (SGT staff) and so helpful, it’s brilliant. It really helps that they’ve been offenders too – they understand.”

“The Peer Circles caseworker has been a life-saver. I was homeless for four years, I have mental health issues including undiagnosed PTSD, ADHD and autism. My mum was psychotic and I was disowned by my family so I was in care. I’ve always tried to work hard but I need to re-direct myself into the way that society needs me to be. I needed to get a birth certificate for ID. It was really difficult but with the perseverance from the caseworker and me we have got me a passport. She understands life like it is. She is a really good friend but with professional boundaries, a great bedrock to work from. I’ve now got my own flat, I’ve passed my SIA training, been referred to Suited and Booted to get me kitted out for work and I’ve just done a CCTV course too. I’ve started to believe in myself and I’m budgeting to pay off my debts. If everyone at Evolve could have Peer Circles it would make it so much better.”

“I believe it’s transformational. There’s hope, step by step.”

Referral partners to the project commented on the much needed structure and support that the project provides – *“We have many clients who have cut themselves off from life. Peer Circles is really effective in finding different ways of engaging them and getting them back into taking the first steps back to life. We have a guy who became a real recluse, he just wouldn’t come out of his room. The caseworker has got him out, going for a walk, having a coffee and a chat. The caseworker finds things that interest them to get them back into the swing of life. We’ve got someone that she’s found free university lectures for – it’s a first step to re-engaging.”*

These small first steps are the essential building blocks for participants to develop the confidence and self-esteem that they need to begin to think about more challenging opportunities such as training and employment. As discussed later in the report, this often means that employment outcomes are delayed.

Whilst all involved in the project agree that participants need firm support and an understanding that they must commit to progression, if these vulnerable and fragile people are pushed too quickly, any positive

outcomes will be built on unstable foundations and will not be sustainable. This not only means that they will require significant support again to try and progress, but also that their self belief and confidence will be badly shaken and may lead to relapses in recovery from addiction, re-offending and host of other undesirable and unintended consequences.

Responsive support for women

A key element of Peer Circles is to provide specialist support for women. The project has a mixed team of male and female caseworkers and Peer Advisors which provides a good gender balance in terms of the overall service. That said, it was felt that a specialist caseworker for women would be important in terms of guaranteeing not only a female worker where required, but also someone who had significant experience of working with women and an in-depth understanding of the issues arising from factors that disproportionately affect women such as domestic violence, sex work, sexual exploitation and separation from children.

These experiences have huge negative impact for women, as reported by one specialist provider:

“Vulnerable women have really significant trust issues with regard to professionals. Even asking what appear to be simple questions that are necessary when you want to take a woman onto a service are really difficult for them to answer. When you’re asked about your children being taken away from you, immediately you feel judged and you don’t trust that person. The caseworker was brilliant with my client who was extremely anxious and had refused to engage with anything else. We needed to go very slowly to build the trust before the caseworker could ask any of the questions she needed to so that my client could go on the project. But it’s worked, so far.

The first meeting was at the Women’s Hub in Peckham which was great because it’s a really welcoming space and it’s great that the caseworker is there. Then eventually after many discussions my client went for an interview for the IAG course and she came away feeling excited about it. The change in the last 6 weeks is incredible. She has a long way to go still, but the time that the caseworker has taken with her shows that if you prepare well and don’t rush it, even women who find it really difficult to engage can get engaged.”

Another example of the specialist support for women again highlights the long and emotional journey that many women are needing to take to begin to rebuild their lives:

“Both my children have been taken away from me. One has been adopted already and I’m fighting to try and get to see my baby. I’m really pleased about the work that the caseworker has been doing with me. She’s given me confidence and got me into counselling that I really needed. I have a lot of trust issues with professionals, but she (caseworker) doesn’t judge me. My aim at the moment is to have a positive relationship with the social worker. The social worker doesn’t take my concerns seriously. My caseworker is helping me to find a way of improving things so that she will listen and make a home visit to see the effort I’m making to make a home for my baby.”

The women’s service is particularly important in locations where facilities and services for women have been shut due to funding and other external factors. One partner working with women ex-offenders commented that:

“We had a women’s hub but it shut down. It’s really important that the (Peer Circles) caseworker comes

out to us to provide that women only service. Most of the women are very upset and unhappy. They can be swearing and irate when they come in. When the caseworker talks to them there's a complete change in attitude. She has a calming effect. She involves them in a way that makes them feel that they have control. They feel part of a team – that we are here with them, but that they have some responsibilities as well. She is really good. She'll advocate for them, go with people to appointments, fixes up training for work, and even things like fixing up for a woman to do something as a family. It's this all round support that makes a real difference – and we can't do that for them."

In an operating environment where services for women are under threat and diminishing, the specialist women's caseworker provided through the Peer Circles project is clearly filling a gap, without which many women would not be able to put their lives back together and establish positive lifestyles for themselves, and, for some, their children.

Interventions that save lives

This is a dramatic but true statement. A significant number of participants and Peer Advisors used this terminology and it is clear that the Peer Circles project does save lives – not only in terms of preventing people from hitting rock bottom and getting them back into positive life, but also in preventing suicide.

In the course of discussions for the evaluation, three unsolicited examples were reported of how the project has enabled people to see a future that has prevented a first or subsequent suicide attempt. These are presented below.

The first is a stark and succinct assessment by one participant. The second example demonstrates that having a professional career does not protect from the potential for a rapid and severe decline in mental health, and that the support offered by Peer Circles is able to intervene and bring someone back onto a positive path. The final example is from a Peer Advisor's perspective and illustrates the value of the support provided by these skilled volunteers in helping to prevent suicide in this extremely vulnerable group.

- ♦ *"Earlier this year I was in hospital being resuscitated from a Valium overdose, now I'm thinking about what I want to do with my life, looking at all the options with the support of the caseworker."*
- ♦ *"I was in a professional public sector job and I had a drink-drive conviction so I lost my job as well as getting the conviction. I felt that it was the end of everything, the end of my life, I couldn't see any way back from what had happened. I was suicidal and I was working out how I would end my life. I am a widow with children in their twenties. I felt I had no support and I was so ashamed.*

I was referred to Peer Circles and straight away the caseworker made me feel comfortable and explained how they could help. He was wonderful and he made me see that what had happened wasn't the end – that there was life. I left that day feeling that there was hope. When I started working with the caseworker, I still was in a very bad way. I would shake so much when I came to sign in that I could only do my initials. I spent so much time crying in the toilets. But gradually with their support things have changed. I have my voice back – I could hardly speak and now it's stronger. I feel so free here. Other clients exchange their stories and you feel part of so much support. I have shadowed the caseworker to learn about this type of

work with the aim of getting a similar job. I now have an ambition to get into working with people who are homeless and I have an interview tomorrow. The caseworker has shown me how I can use all my experience in a different job that is just as rewarding as my old career.

Even if I don't get this job, I know I will be OK and I'll keep on trying. One of the barriers is the conviction, but I've learnt through Peer Circles about how and when to disclose it. I know that if I tell people early and they know how sorry I am about it, it is much better all round. The first time I had to talk about it was very hard but the interviewer said how sincere she thought I was. The caseworker had predicted this and then it came true – that gave me so much confidence. To have the confidence to do that is so different from how I felt at the beginning.

Without St Giles Trust people would be reading about a woman who committed suicide and the reasons why. I am going to write to as many people as I can about St Giles because they need to know the work they do. Other organisations register you and then you never hear, nothing happens. People need to know that St Giles saves lives.”

- ♦ *“I had been working with my client and one day I couldn't seem to get in touch with him and I was concerned. He was at his flat and he was trying to kill himself. He ended up in hospital – I called the services. And then I've been going in and meeting with him and the crisis team each day to work out our next steps.”*

The Peer Advisor giving the last account was extremely modest about his involvement in supporting this highly vulnerable client. Other Peer Advisors and the caseworker responsible for this client not only corroborated this account but also stressed that health professionals had made it clear that without the intervention from SGT this man would have succeeded in his attempt.

Accessing specialist support

Peer Circles participants have access to a range of specialist support to tackle specific barriers such as addiction and mental health issues. A significant proportion of participants are taking up services to help improve their mental health. Prior to coming on the project, many did not want to engage with this vital element of support. Caseworkers and Peer Advisors are able to work with participants to build the relationships of trust that enable people to *“begin to open up and recognise that taking up these kinds of services is a really positive thing that will help them get their lives back together.”* For example:

“My doctor has referred me for talking therapy – that wouldn't have happened without their help.”

“I bury my emotions deep so it's not been easy to get the help I need. I've had therapy sessions at Evolve that have really helped and the caseworker helps me to get things off my chest.”

The Warrior Programme is an option for some participants on Peer Circles. It is a short residential training course with follow up 'refresher' sessions to help develop resilience, particularly but not exclusively for people who have experienced some form of significant trauma. The small number of participants that have taken part in the programme report very good results, for example:

“Peer Circles referred me to the Warrior Programme and it was absolutely fantastic. Within the space of 2 days I learnt a lot more than on a full residential with (another veteran's organisation). I smile a lot more. They teach you very good tactics on the programme and it works. I have goals for my career and family and I'm working towards them – it's very different from before. My partner, keyworker and the caseworker have all noticed a change in me – I've got more oomph! I would recommend it to anyone.”

Given the difficulties that many people face in accessing mental health services and specialist programmes, it is highly positive that Peer Circles is finding ways to facilitate this. SGT's project partner, Evolve, is currently in the process of expanding its mental health support, including being able to deliver psychotherapy in addition to the existing counselling service. This will be of significant benefit to many existing and future Peer Circles participants.

Peer Circles works with specialist health and addiction organisations. Recent feedback from one provider highlighted the positive impact of the casework given to the client who has now moved into employment, citing it as *"partnership working that is working well"*. A significant number of Peer Circles have issues with addiction and this type of close joint working exemplifies the best practice that leads to successful outcomes.

Realistic and aspirational

Raising the aspirations of people who often feel they have no hope of success, whilst at the same time keeping expectations realistic and achievable so that people are not set up to fail is key to Peer Circles. The project is clearly achieving this balance and is helping people to progress:

"My previous experience was that in other places they have activities to keep you occupied, but not to help you move on, to progress. At St Giles you feel like you are really making progress."

"I was locked up for a long time and then deported back to the UK. I hadn't lived here for years. I didn't know about anything. I found out about Peer Circles from a friend. They've helped with everything – getting accommodation and now with my business plan. The opportunities are there and you get a boost from the staff. It's great."

"I was released from prison 4 months ago. The chances of me getting a job on my own are non-existent, but with their (caseworker and Peer Advisor) help I feel more confident and I'm improving my computer skills. They've helped me to do a disclosure letter and I'm just about to do the training for a CSCS card. They're so calm and reassuring – I feel there's hope now."

"I was living in approved premises after coming out of prison. The caseworker and Peer Advisor came to see me and they really helped. They helped me update my CV and understand and recognise the transferable skills that I had from previous work. It's amazing. They've all been so friendly and I'm so grateful that the project is here. They've also been a bit like counsellors – someone that you can talk to – so encouraging and non-judgemental. If I'm feeling a bit low, he (caseworker) makes me realise that I'm doing well. I didn't realise until very recently that the staff and Peers have got experiences like me – but I think it's what makes them empathetic. They've supported me to go into catering and I've just got a job in a pub restaurant. They've found me help to get a uniform and boots, and with training too. It's just been great."

"I'm a veteran with 10 years service and a medical discharge. I've been a customer champion for Evolve for 2 years which has been great, but having the caseworker on Peer Circles has meant that I can have a proper plan in place. She is the go-to person for anything to do with work and a whole load of other things as well."

As part of individually tailored and co-produced plans, Peer Circles participants have accessed a wide range of training to support their movement towards and back into the labour market, including industry 'gateway' cards such as SIA and CSCS. These short courses are manageable and they are also motivational

because they can lead directly to employment, therefore providing the impetus that someone may need to take the often scary step of engaging in training when they may have never, or not recently done this.

Unfortunately, where training courses are not part of a participant's exit plan, they cannot be counted towards any project target. Whilst it is important that destinations for Peer Circles participants includes sustainable movement into education and training, it would be helpful if there was some means of reflecting the progress that they are making in this respect during the project. Many participants have had poor and/or negative educational experiences and re-engaging with learning is a highly significant step forward.

Achieving movement into education and training as an outcome is proving difficult for a number of reasons. As highlighted above, the courses that participants are keen to engage in (and that do directly relate to jobs) tend to be short. Caseworkers are reluctant to refer participants for a short, often part-time, training course as the exit route from the project as they know they will require some support to help move into employment subsequently. This is also the case in respect of the movement into further jobsearch outcome. Whilst there is some follow up support built into the project, it is light touch and may often not be sufficient to ensure that a participant is sustainably employed or housed.

These learning points should be drawn on in discussions with the funder/commissioner to find the most constructive way forward with regard to the hard outcome targets. If the education/training and further jobsearch destinations are not appropriate for the target group, this needs to be explored and other more meaningful targets agreed. This does not mean that aspirations for people with severe and multiple disadvantage should be lowered, rather, that targets support and recognise sustainable progression.

Sustainable employment is a challenge for many

At this point in project delivery, outcomes for movement into employment are low in relation to targets. SGT has a very good track record of delivering on employment outcomes in its other projects, however, the target groups for these projects whilst experiencing multiple barriers, do not have the level of complexity and challenge evident for the Peer Circles participants.

The major factor affecting employment outcomes is the nature of the target group, combined with the external environment of rising housing costs and the increasingly insecure low skilled jobs market through which many will enter employment. That said, the slower than anticipated training of Peer Advisors is also a contributory factor because it has affected the capacity of caseworkers to provide the level of intensive work required to support participants into jobs. The challenges around Peer Advisor delivery are discussed in the following section.

The Peer Circles cohort is extremely diverse, for example:

- 40 years old, homeless with a history of offending and substance misuse and never having been in work
- Qualified and experienced professionals who have lost their jobs and homes through mental health issues and/or offending, one of whom was suicidal
- An army veteran with PTSD and significant mental health issues, living in hostel accommodation, separated from his family and with no recent work history
- Two parents whose children have been taken into care, who are living in hostel accommodation, with mental health issues and one with a significant learning disability and no literacy
- Someone newly released from a 6 year imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentence, homeless, with historic substance misuse, panic attacks and other mental health issues

- A person who entered the UK as a refugee, is now a British citizen but has no family here. Previous substance misuse, mental health issues, homelessness and some unskilled work. In approved premises having been released from prison with one set of clothes, no ID and no prospects of support.

Peer Circles is intended to combine a range of support for issues such as housing, health, family relationships, addiction, finance/debt and other important elements including getting the ID necessary for active citizenship and employment, together with support to help participants move into education, training and employment (ETE). As shown above, the range and complexity of issues presented by participants means that caseworkers need to work hard with each individual to address their non work-related barriers and needs before it is possible for there to be a sharp focus on work. Most people need to feel secure in their housing and personal lives before they can even consider taking the steps needed to get a job and stay in that job.

The comment of one referral organisation sums up the challenge:

“The result that the funders want is to see someone in employment. We all want that, but some of our clients are so far from employment they often don’t even get the first step because other providers don’t think they can get them into a job and so they won’t reach their targets, so they won’t take them on. Peer Circles is different. They are successful in helping with the fundamentals like getting someone out of a hostel and into their own accommodation so that other things can start to fall into place and eventually they will move into work. But it takes time, and if you just try to shove people into jobs they won’t last, and worse still, things can go really badly wrong. Peer Circles is making a really positive difference and I really want to see it continue.”

As identified at the beginning of the report, moving into employment brings its own very real challenges for people who are in poverty and have complex needs. The majority of participants on Peer Circles do not have the transferable skills that can help people to sustain new employment and it is highly likely that they will move in and out of several jobs before they settle – *“My client really wanted to work at Tesco – she said it was her dream job. We did a lot of work to prepare her for a supermarket job. I had to do the online tests with her just to enable her to get a foot in the door. In the end, she had 3 supermarket jobs and left each one after a week because she found going to work everyday too hard. She said she just wanted to work at Tesco and we finally got her a job there. She lasted for four weeks, which was an improvement on the previous ones, so we’ll keep on trying.”*

Added to the huge shift required of participants to enable them to develop and sustain an employment culture, financial and other pressures can be major reasons for people not succeeding on a first, second or third attempt. Universal Credit, high rents and unstable, poorly paid employment create very significant stresses that can push someone back into addiction, crime, sex working and other very negative behaviours.

For those living in hostel accommodation there are often major barriers to making the jump to employment which also means moving into the private and social housing sector. A significant number have only or largely know institutional life – from being in care to prison to a hostel. The responsibility of paying your own rent and being in charge of a budget is a very significant psychological barrier. This can take some time to overcome and it is not unusual for the first attempt at independent living to fail. Peer Circles is able to support such participants but it takes time, tenacity and understanding to move towards sustainable solutions.

Caseworkers and project managers are under pressure to achieve employment targets. SGT’s and Evolve’s core values mean that this pressure is not passed on, for example, by ‘cherry picking’ participants who do not have particularly complex needs and are therefore more likely to move into employment, or

progressing participants at a faster pace than they can cope with. The latter type of provider behaviour can result in unintended and negative consequences, for example, movement into employment that is financially unsustainable or that places unmanageable stress on people that causes them to lose their self-confidence and motivation and go back into decline.

Whilst it is vital that all those working with people who have complex needs keep in mind the aspiration of employment, it would be helpful if commissioners and funders worked with delivery partners to draw up a set of indicators that were able to reflect more realistically the milestones that result in sustainable change in people's lives.

Big Lottery and LEP/ESF have shown understanding and flexibility in changing the evidence requirements for participants in terms of providing proof of right to work in the UK, and proof of employment outcomes.. This demonstrates a welcome openness to dialogue for ground breaking projects such as Peer Circles that are attempting to do what many other providers, services and projects would shy away from because the challenges posed by the target group are too great. SGT, Crisis and other partners are taking significant risks in trying to deliver this type of service, and the learning experience is clearly proving very helpful. It would be a very positive and innovative development if the funders were able to continue this dialogue to include reviewing how more meaningful targets could be set.

The Peer Advisor model: effective support and useful trialling

The Peer Advisor model is central to SGT's ethos and work: enabling people with lived experience to achieve a Level 3 IAG industry standard qualification and experience high quality volunteering placements that can form tangible steps towards paid employment. This is a key feature of Peer Circles which seeks to establish circles of support for clients from 'people who have been there', in the form of trained volunteer Peer Advisors that work alongside paid caseworkers.

The Peer Circles project is pushing the boundaries in terms of piloting the Peer Advisor model with a client group with such high levels of need. This is a very positive and bold move, but not without its challenges. The recruitment and training of Peer Advisors is taking longer than planned, however, the project is working towards its target of 50 Peer Advisors with 37 having completed the Learning to Advise element of the qualification. That said, 8 of these Peer Advisors have experienced relapses with regard to addiction and mental health issues, illustrating the fragility of the target group and the need to take a flexible and supportive approach to enabling them to progress despite setbacks.

Completion of the full qualification requires a number of observations of Peer Advisors delivering client facing sessions whilst on placement and to date 5 participants have achieved this. The challenges with regard to placement are explored later in this section.

The Peer Advisor element of Peer Circles is helping participants to move into work. 7 Peer Advisors have moved into paid employment, 5 in similar roles and 2 into other jobs in construction and railway maintenance. A further Peer Advisor has moved into further education and training. This indicates that the Peer Advisor model is making a significant contribution to helping people with complex needs move into employment. That said, it also shows that participants need to be able to sustain training and volunteering opportunities before they can take this step into the labour market.

Accessible training

The trainer/assessor provides Peer Advisors with support to complete the 12 week Learning to Advise element of the Level 3 IAG qualification, which for many will be the first experience of 'classroom' learning since school. A significant number have had poor school experiences and may feel unconfident about tackling a course. However, feedback shows that the way in which the course is delivered enables people with all levels of ability and experience to successfully meet the challenge. It is also helping participants to think about the next steps in their careers, thereby making a valuable contribution to supporting employment focused progression.

"Everything is explained clearly. You learn a lot about things like equality and diversity, and other things that are really important for volunteering and for life generally."

"I'm 40 and I've never worked. This is the first qualification that I've ever got – it's amazing! They help you to do it and it feels so good to have achieved this."

"I'm just about to go to uni to start an HND in Health & Social Care – I never would be doing that without Peer Circles and the Peer Advisor programme."

Once they have completed the taught course, Peer Advisors become volunteers on the Peer Circles project, supporting clients under the supervision of a paid caseworker. They have an initial period of shadowing to understand in more detail how to work with clients including best practice in the actual interaction with clients, planning, research and record keeping. The caseworker will then assess when the Peer Advisor has sufficient skills, confidence and knowledge to undertake one-to-one work with clients without the caseworker being present. At this point the caseworker will still provide close supervision and support for the Peer Advisor, and the trainer/assessor will arrange observations of client facing sessions in order to complete the final elements of the Level 3 IAG qualification.

Peer Advisors support and give practical help to Peer Circles participants with a very wide range of issues and needs including:

- Support to get the ID required for all areas of life, but particularly employment
- Signposting to a variety of other services including finance & debt advice, children and families services etc.
- Researching and talking through training and employment options, and supporting clients with filling in application forms and preparing for interviews
- Liaising with other services such as probation, housing and Jobcentre Plus

In addition to this practical help, the Peer Advisors provide essential emotional support, whilst observing clear boundaries and professional guidelines, and under the supervision of a fully qualified caseworker. This has a positive effect in helping to keep participants engaged or re-engaging them *"if they've had a wobble – when something happens in your life in can make you take a step back. We're here to try and help people over that, because we know how it feels and we have a bit of a relationship with them. It's really important because generally there's no-one else that will do that, apart from us and the caseworker."*

Whilst the number of Peer Advisors who are ready to provide independent support to participants is still relatively low, where this is happening, they are clearly having significant positive impact:

"The Peer Advisor has really helped – having someone who's in the same boat as you is good and she has helped me with my PIP as well."

"It's so good to get help from someone who understands because they've been through it too. You feel

like you're not on your own and that there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

The Peer Advisors who are taking part in the training and placement opportunities are also very positive about the impact that it is having for them and their own development, as well as the support that they are able to provide to fellow participants:

"I'd lost my confidence and this has given me my self esteem back. It's given me a sense of purpose – I can actually talk about the dreams I've had about careers and there's a real chance it can happen."

"I've spent a lot of time taking in my life. I genuinely wanted to help people – to give something back – and that's what being a Peer Advisor is about."

"I feel like even though I'm not in paid work, I'm not wasting my time and it's nice to have a volunteer position that is leading to work – that's different from other volunteering I've done before."

"Being a Peer Advisor gives me something positive to hang onto. We've all come from difficult backgrounds and it means that we can use that negative experience in a positive way. It reminds you of what you have, not what you've lost."

"It gives you the courage to try something new. I'd describe it as the path from desolation to empowerment."

"Working on Peer Circles as a Peer Advisor is really rewarding. You really see the difference that you can make to someone's life. I definitely want to get a job working with people – young offenders or women."

Challenging to deliver the Peer Advisor model with people with complex needs

The aim to establish 'circles of support' is especially important for people with complex needs who have no support networks, and the Peer Advisor model provides a very good vehicle with which to achieve this. The trialling of the model through the Peer Circles project has identified a number of challenges arising from the nature of the target group. These are now being addressed so that this vital and valuable element of the project can more effectively enable participants to benefit from giving and receiving Peer Advisor support.

As explained earlier, Peer Circles has taken longer than planned to recruit and train Peer Advisors. This is because the severity and complexity of participants' needs has meant that not as many as anticipated have been able to take on the training to date. Some have experienced relapses which has put their training on hold for the time being. In addition, of those Peer Advisors who have successfully completed the taught course element of the training and have moved into placements with caseworkers, fewer than anticipated currently have the skills and self confidence required for the planned one-to-one work with clients:

"Sometimes Peer Advisors can be very inconsistent. They still have challenges and some move in and out of chaotic lifestyles. They can be a Peer one minute and then need help as a client the next."

These difficulties are putting very heavy demands on caseworkers who need to support people with particularly complex needs as well as Peer Advisors with additional support needs, without the help that was anticipated to be provided by the Peer Advisors. This challenge is being experienced in SGT and Evolve, however, the Evolve caseworker has the additional factor of being geographically distant from the rest of the caseworker team as well as the Peer Advisor model being a new approach in the organisation.

The content of the taught course is relevant and accessible for Peer Advisors but the link and flow between this element and what is expected in terms of one-to-one support of clients once trainees are on placement would benefit from strengthening for this target group. Many trainees lack the transferable and 'people' skills, and self confidence needed for being an effective Peer Advisor because of their challenging life experiences to date. It is clear that, given sufficient time, training and support these invaluable attributes that are necessary for successful work – volunteering and paid – can be developed. The Peer Advisors who are able to provide effective support to others on Peer Circles are proof that this is the case.

Better preparation is needed in terms of developing trainees' skills in supporting clients with complex needs before they move into placement. This element of training, along with the ongoing support of Peer Advisors, is currently the joint responsibility of the trainer/assessor and caseworkers. In addition, the trainer/assessor, whilst very experienced in delivering the Level 3 qualification, is new to the SGT Peer Advisor model. There is a need for more clarity and teamwork between staff to ensure that the Peer Advisors have the greater level of support that they need (in comparison to Peer Advisors on other SGT projects). Ideally, a Peer Advisor Co-ordinator role should be created to provide a single point of support. In addition, feedback indicates that Peer Advisors may require more in depth debriefing after distressing or very challenging sessions with clients – and this is more common with Peer Circles clients because of the nature of their needs. Ensuring that Peer Advisors are encouraged to access to the same clinical supervision as caseworkers would help to address this issue.

An added factor in the challenges of delivering this model has been that one of the original partners, CGL, an addiction specialist, has not been able to play as active a role as anticipated. If Peer Advisors had had greater access to placements and support with this organisation it may have been of benefit.

SGT is currently putting in place a number of developments to address these challenges so that the circles of support principle can work more effectively for this target group. These include:

- Improving the preparation for placement and the connection between the taught course and what is required of Peer Advisors on placement by including a day of role play training and assessing to help begin to develop their skills and understanding before they undertake shadowing of caseworkers.
- Creating and communicating a pathway of responsibilities that more clearly identifies the roles of the trainer/assessor and caseworkers in supporting Peer Advisors.
- Including a greater emphasis on Peer Advisor support in the trainer/assessor's role. The trainer/assessor has also now begun weekly visits to Evolve's participant drop in sessions in Croydon to enable better support for Peer Advisors delivering in this location.
- Exploring the potential for a Peer Advisor Co-ordinator role – someone who is experienced in the Peer Advisor model and who can provide the additional support that the Peer Advisors on Peer Circles need, in close partnership with the trainer/assessor and caseworkers.
- Ensuring proper access for Peer Advisors to the caseworker's clinical supervisor
- Incorporating mental health training as part of the core taught course content – recognising that this an almost universal need in the Peer Circles cohort and better preparing Peer Advisors for some of the more challenging aspects of their work. Evolve has recently further developed their health and wellbeing service, including providing mental health training for a range of staff/organisations which could potentially contribute to the Peer Advisor training.

Some interesting further possible developments arose from discussions that took place as part of the evaluation.

Evolve is currently developing a Wellbeing Peer model to enable their customers to undertake in house training so that they can provide support for other customers. Whilst this is a different type of role to that of the Peer Advisor, there are some common aspects between the two and it could provide another potential progression route for Evolve participants.

There may be the potential for Peer Advisors to shadow workers on the sister BBO project delivered by Crisis. This would be highly beneficial in providing additional opportunities for Peer Advisors and in promoting practical partnership work between the two projects. Crisis is also happy to explore the potential for some co-facilitated development workshops for paid workers and Peer Advisors across the organisations to provide opportunities to understand more about each other's practice and learn from each other.

A unique offer through partnership and an outreach approach

As mentioned earlier in the report, the principle of taking the service to the participant is working well and is highly appropriate for this target group. Caseworkers deliver support in a variety of settings including approved premises, other hostels and social housing, women's centres, probation offices and many other locations. This model of delivery is challenging for any project in terms of ensuring coverage and that caseworkers have enough time to spend with participants. Caseworkers are clearly committed to providing the best service possible and recognise that taking the service to the participants is essential in getting engagement in the project.

Service providers are very positive about the improved engagement their clients show as a result of Peer Circles intervention, demonstrating that the project is delivering on this key indicator.

"Our clients are really distrustful of anyone from an agency, but St Giles is flexible. The caseworker comes here and has an informal meeting with them and they say 'I really like that person, we click, I'll see them again' – and so clients that haven't previously engaged with any other organisation have done really well with St Giles."

"It's not just working together, I'm so grateful for the help that I've received as a fellow professional, as well as for my clients. I've learnt things, I can talk through issues in confidence with the caseworker and we exchange information about what might be available for my clients."

A number of referral partners commented that *"we don't have the time or resources to do what Peer Circles can, and we're often not the right person anyway as they need someone who's coming at things from a different angle."* All contributors felt that, whilst there are other projects available in London, Peer Circles offers something unique that *"our clients with really complex needs can't get elsewhere – the breadth of what they do and the quality of the staff makes it work very well."*

"Although we do provide support for our customers, we don't have anything like Peer Circles. I have seen customers with really big challenges who all needed counselling from our service really grow in confidence on the project. One was worried about potentially losing her place on the Peer Advisor course because she wasn't quite ready for it, which shows just how committed she had become – that hadn't happened before. And of course she was welcomed onto the course when she was ready."

For participants that are moving from hostel or other forms of temporary accommodation where support may be provided by the host organisation to their own accommodation *"Peer Circles provides continuity – we wouldn't have contact with our customers once they move, but the caseworker carries on seeing them which is really vital in getting them established and continuing to progress."*

Some contributors also commented that whilst there were other training providers, such as colleges, that could offer courses to participants, *“they have a very different offer to Peer Circles, they’re not able to offer the type of support that our clients need. We have tried it and it doesn’t work. For example, we worked with our client to put together a ‘passport’ about emotional regulation so that she could explain to another organisation what might be otherwise interpreted as bad behaviour, like missing an appointment. It explains things like ‘it’s not that I don’t care, could we please talk about this one-to-one so that I can explain why’. That works really well with Peer Circles – it helps them and they will take the time to use it.”*

Originally, the project had another end-to-end delivery partner, Look Ahead and a specialist provider CGL. Unfortunately, Look Ahead had difficulties with staffing which meant that they were unable to continue their involvement and CGL experienced some changes with other contracts which limited the potential to provide a service across the two sub regions. SGT quickly addressed this situation to ensure that Peer Circles could provide the geographical coverage and number of participants and outcomes originally tendered for, avoiding any negative impacts resulting from the departure of these partners.

A caseworker from Shelter is embedded in the Peer Circles team and provides specialist support to help participants into sustainable housing. This is clearly essential for many of the participants and in one month alone resulted in 12 positive outcomes for housing, including working on complex and challenging cases involving other service providers such as the probation service and local authority housing departments. Having this type of advice, support and advocacy means that participants have real prospects of sorting out a key fundamental building block that has to be in place if they are to have the mental and emotional space to think clearly about their futures.

Conclusion

Peer Circles is delivering well at this point in the project’s life, making a tangible, positive difference for the project participants, including establishing a culture of hope and aspiration amongst a group of people who have been affected by some of the worst of human experiences. The piloting of new ways to help people through Peer Advisor support is yielding very important learning. This is being used to develop a model which has the potential to be scaled up and replicated but will need time and patience to get it right.

Those organisations working with the project, as well as the participants themselves stress the unique offer that Peer Circles represents in engaging people who have lost all trust and faith in ‘agencies’ and ‘services’. In addition, it is clear that Peer Circles is playing an essential role in supporting people with very high and complex needs who have been displaced by the reduction in other public and support services.

The participants and the project are making steady progress to achieving a range of objectives to improve lives – economically, personally and socially. This progress may not be as fast as some would like, but clearly focuses on making the real, lasting difference that benefits individuals, families and communities.

The recommendations put forward in the report are intended to help the remaining period of delivery and provide suggestions that can be explored at strategic level, including with funders, to inform any potential extension of the project and further planning for people with severe and multiple disadvantage.