

The St Giles Trust Peer Advisor Model: Evaluation Summary

Introduction

Between late 2016 and February 2018, six evaluations have been carried out to assess the impact and effectiveness of the St Giles Trust (SGT) Peer Advisor service and model in a variety of settings and locations including:

- The SET North London and Working Out (Ipswich) projects, both of which have the Peer Advisor model central to the project
- The Peer Hubs in Leeds and London, established with the express purpose of providing Peer Advisor training and development for individuals at disadvantage, as well as a service to support organisations delivering services for disadvantaged people
- The Working Out (Wales) project which involved a similar model to the Peer Hubs whilst also trialling paid Peer Advisor placements in a range of partner organisations
- The Peer Advice model in prisons (over 30 nationally), including providing opportunities to train and work in Peer Advice roles in custody and on release on temporary licence (ROTL)

These services are funded through a variety of sources including Big Lottery, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, the Bell Foundation and the European Social Fund/Wales CVS.

This paper draws together and provides further analysis of the key findings from across these evaluations and other related pieces of research and evaluation. The term 'sector' is used to refer to the range of organisations providing services to people at disadvantage. This can include those delivering services in training & employment, advice & guidance, family & children, health, housing and criminal justice.

Overarching themes

The SGT Peer Advisor model puts people and communities in the lead by enabling high quality and meaningful ex-service user involvement in service design, management and front line delivery.

The model not only creates client facing volunteering opportunities but also provides pathways to paid work and careers. On average, 50% of those training as Peer Advisors move into paid employment, many in caseworker or support work roles: *"The Peer Advisors stand out from people who just have the experience of life, but not the training – the training gives them the skills and confidence to do the job really well, and to get a paid job."*

Importantly, the organisation has robust credibility as a role model. Significant proportions of Peer Advisor volunteers and paid staff within SGT have 'lived experience' and/or are ex-service users, the majority of these individuals coming from what are often regarded as 'high risk' groups such as ex-offenders. SGT respected position in the sector helps to build the confidence of other organisations by demonstrating that employing those from such backgrounds enhances rather than endangers service delivery to vulnerable client groups.

SGT's Peer Advisor model differs from other types of peer support

There is a wide range of what is generally termed as 'peer support from ex-service users and those with lived experience' being delivered in the sector. The key features that distinguishes SGT's Peer Advisor model from other types of peer support include:

- the **industry standard, sector recognised and Level 3 qualification** that enables and promotes participants to **gain paid work after volunteering**, and, in prisons is generally the only qualification of this level available to prisoners
- **access to this significant level of achievement** through community or prison based delivery from skilled staff who have the experience to encourage and enable those who have barriers to learning, most of whom have no qualifications
- training that enables the Peer Advisor to deliver the highly effective combination of **practical advice and help in addition to mentoring support**
- **active inclusion of participants who are often regarded as posing too high a risk** to be a volunteer or paid member of staff working with vulnerable clients
- **supported work experience in real 'front line' roles** in organisations other than those of the ex-service user, developing employment confidence as part of the pathway to paid work
- **a range of wider benefits to the sector**, including enhancing front line skills, knowledge and capacity; tackling stereotyping; developing more imaginative responses to risk assessment and safeguarding; strengthening volunteering cultures and practices.

A number of other organisations offer peer support from ex-service users with lived experience. These more informal mentoring roles can be very helpful. However, training tends to be internal, or, where it includes externally validated courses, is not at a level or depth that would be sufficient for an individual to gain the range of skills and knowledge to get paid work in roles such as casework. Volunteering opportunities tend to be within the ex-service user's organisation and may take the form of back office or reception roles rather than working directly with clients.

Whilst more informal types of peer volunteering are very valuable and can provide an effective starting point for a disadvantaged person to begin to gain confidence, they do not provide the level of professionalism delivered through SGT's Peer Advisor model and are often not sufficient to help individuals into paid work and careers in this area.

Organisations taking up the Peer Advisor training see it as *"the perfect stepping stone for our volunteers"*, recognising the difference in what is offered and benefits that this can bring - *"Our volunteers needed that step up – to do some training and to get a placement out of their comfort zone, away from us"* and *"One of our tenants was just right for the programme and it's really changed her life. At 26, it's helped her to have her first job and to do what she really wanted to do – to be a support worker."*

The unique features of the Peer Advisor model, including the opportunities for progression are also recognised in custodial settings where a number of other peer programmes operate. The Peer Advisor programme is seen as *"much more in depth than other mentoring courses"* and complementary to other peer services such as the 'Listeners' who are able to provide an empathetic ear but without the practical support and help that Peer Advisors are able to give.

Positive impacts at several different levels

The SGT Peer Advisor programme, service and model delivers impact and benefits on four levels:

- **for disadvantaged participants** who train as Peer Advisors: overcoming a range of barriers to training and employment, using their ‘lived experience’ positively for their own self-development and to help others, developing confidence and transferable skills, developing self-esteem through ‘giving back’, taking part in meaningful client facing placements, having the opportunity to get a nationally recognised, Level 3 qualification (most for the first time), contributing to shaping programme and service development.
- **for disadvantaged clients** receiving support from Peer Advisors for a wide range of needs including: housing; finance, poverty and debt; addiction; being in or leaving care; being a refugee; being in custody; being a vulnerable young person affected by youth violence, exploitation and/or human trafficking; experiencing chaotic or challenging family situations; tackling the stigma and issues presented by being an ex-offender or family member of an offender. Peer Advisor support has a positive effect on the emotional well-being of clients as well as providing them with much needed practical support. It is this combination that works so well for clients – in the community and in custodial settings.
- **for partner organisations:** organisations of varying sizes and with a range of different services and specialisms are able to further develop volunteer roles and breadth of service to clients, as well as provide additional capacity for clients which is particularly crucial given the high client demand and the complexity of their needs. The Peer Advisor model enables ex-service users with lived experience to take pivotal roles at the heart of service delivery, for example, in mental health and services for ex-offenders – a new development for many organisations. Partners are being supported to develop professional volunteering cultures that are also effective recruitment methods, as well as developing more appropriate risk assessment and safeguarding processes that do not disadvantage those with perceived ‘high risk’ lived experience, including offending and gang involvement.
- **for the sector and wider communities:** the Peer Advisor model is enabling organisations new to volunteering to become involved, thereby developing ex-service user involvement and opportunities across the sector and enhancing connectivity with and reach into communities. Through working with partners from different disciplines (housing, advice, mental health, addiction etc) in local areas, the model is enhancing networking and partnership between organisations, including helping to raise awareness of the range of support available so that partners can work together more effectively.

Overcoming barriers, stereotyping and stigmatisation

The Peer Advisor model is successfully challenging the unhelpful stereotyping and fear of risk that presents barriers for many excluded groups to take part in meaningful volunteering opportunities and paid work. SGT’s expertise in employing what for many organisations are classed as ‘high risk’ groups, such as ex-offenders, ex-gang members and those with enduring mental health conditions provides the opportunity to support other organisations to consider doing the same.

There can be challenges in enabling volunteers with these kinds of lived experiences to take up client facing roles, especially where organisations regard the risks as too high. The Peer Advisor model provides informed and supportive opportunities to explore anxieties and practical issues, including

appropriate and proportionate risk assessment, safeguarding arrangements and supportive supervision.

SGT staff work with organisations to help them devise systems and change organisational attitudes and cultures so that Peer Advisors with challenging types of lived experience such as serious offending and enduring mental health conditions can bring benefits to those most in need of support from *“someone who’s been there”* not least because *“the level of the training means that Peer Advisors get the skills and knowledge they need to work with challenging clients.”*

Not being stigmatised and being positively included as part of a team is a key strength of the programme - *“you feel like you belong, you’re part of a team and you haven’t got a flashing light on your head saying ex-offender!”* For many, this is the first experience of a non-judgemental and accepting attitude where *“you can’t tell the difference between the paid staff and the volunteers – everyone is trusted and valued equally.”*

In addition, many Peer Advisors comment on how their attitudes and *“stereotyping”* has been challenged for the better by being on the programme – *“You learn how to listen and respect other people’s opinions, even if you might not agree. You also learn to be non-judgemental about people’s backgrounds – it builds teamwork.”*

“I used to be quite judgemental, but now I’m much more accepting of people’s differences” and *“the training has made me challenge myself and my beliefs, so I feel I can now help others to do that if they are negative about things or other people, or they are stereotyping.”*

Breaking new ground for front line volunteering

For organisations that have traditionally only offered volunteers non-contact roles such as office or reception work, the Peer Advisor programme enables them to *“offer progression for our volunteers which helps us to think about how we can use them more fully and give them wider experience.”*

For example, a Peer Advisor supporting people who have a dual diagnosis of substance misuse with severe and persistent psychological disorder (mainly schizophrenia or bi-polar conditions). A former service user, he now assists in group sessions and with assessing client’s progress towards their goals. The organisation had never used ex-service users in a client facing role previously, and the Peer Advisor model *“gave us the opportunity to get Peers involved. We’d tried various things and they hadn’t quite worked, and we had Peers involved in other areas, but not actual service delivery.....this has worked for us and I would definitely want to consider training another Peer through St Giles.”* This is breaking valuable new ground for the organisation in terms of service user involvement, and the Peer Advisor is now paid to facilitate sessions.

The Peer Advisor model has also enabled professional volunteering to be established in organisations that have not previously offered volunteering. Two particularly innovative examples include:

- a former care leaver becoming a Peer Advisor in a children’s home, supporting others making the transition from leaving care – *“it’s been ground breaking and it’s just what we need – people who have gone through the experience of leaving care and that have the training and skills to support others.”*
- A former longstanding Jobcentre Plus client becoming a Peer Advisor now supporting particularly disadvantaged clients in Jobcentre Plus. *“The customers love him. He does a*

really great job. He was a brilliant candidate and he has turned his life around – people don't recognise him!"

Both organisations see these developments as transformational in terms of disadvantaged clients getting better access to public services. The Peer Advisor in Jobcentre Plus is now in paid employment with them.

It could be argued that resources should be focused solely on the third sector because they have the greatest interface with those in most need. However, the clients supported by Peer Advisors accessing services from these statutory providers are some of the most excluded and disadvantaged. The introduction of Peer Advisors has meant that that these clients have vastly enhanced access to and experience of these statutory services, and statutory services have a much better understanding of how to engage those at most disadvantage through skilled ex-service user involvement. In the end, it's the impact on disadvantaged people that counts.

SGT is now exploring the potential to offer Peer Advisor training for those in entry level/low paid jobs to improve their progression into higher paid work. This development is partly in response to VCS enquiries as well as through SGT's strategic development which recognises the need to develop services that make a contribution to tackling the large and growing issue of in-work poverty.

Building skills, confidence, resilience and pathways to careers

The Peer Advisor programme not only enables disadvantaged people to gain skills and knowledge, and to work towards a qualification, but also *"brings out things that you never knew were there, that you didn't think you'd be able to do. That gives you a lot of confidence"*. Peer Advisors develop self-esteem, confidence and resilience and well as gaining greater self-awareness, insight and interpersonal skills:

- *"I've learnt how to talk about my barriers – my depression, and that has helped me to help other people with barriers, and help them to talk so that we can find a way together to tackle them."*
- *"It really makes you think about yourself, how you handle things, how you handle yourself, how you come over to other people – that's really useful in all sorts of ways".*

Importantly, the Peer Advisor programme gives people the opportunity to explore and develop a career path:

- *"It was during my Peer Advisor training that I realised what I wanted to do with my life, which was helping clients transition from one stage in life to another one." (paid support worker in social housing)*
- *"I was lost for a long time. I didn't know what to do. Doing this training has really helped me to find what I wanted to do. It's given me a structure for my life. I've learnt how to conduct myself professionally – to act correctly. When the staff (at the placement) saw what I could do because of the IAG training, they started to give me more to do – more responsibility, and that builds your confidence. The staff have fought for me to get a job offer!" (paid Job Coach)*

The Peer Advisor training is accessible for people from a range of different backgrounds, many of whom have no former qualifications and would not feel confident accessing accredited training in a college setting. *"It's really supportive – I couldn't have thought about doing this kind of thing in a*

college or something – I'd never had had the nerve. But here they are approachable and they help you out if you start to struggle. You feel like you really can do it."

The programme also provides an excellent opportunity for offenders across around 30 prisons in England and Wales, enabling them to take valuable roles in prison and enhancing resettlement through improved skills, a nationally recognised qualification, experience and confidence – *"anecdotally more people are successful on release after the Peer Advisor programme than for any other programme"* (Prison staff member).

In addition, where prisoners are able to undertake training on ROTL, the model provides a highly important 'bridge' from custody to community – *"when I go to the St Giles office, I meet guys who've been inmates with us. It's a really good step up for them, their heads are full of good things and it gets them into a routine for work. Some who've been in for a long time have lost their independence and confidence – this helps to get it back so they can cope when they leave."*

Highly effective support for disadvantaged and disengaged clients

Peer Advisors provide front line support and practical help for clients with a range of often very complex and deep-seated needs. Some examples include:

- a mother of a family affected by poverty, criminal activity and mental health issues
- a foreign national prisoner with little English language
- a person with a dual diagnosis of addiction and psychosis
- a young person being used as a drugs mule, or involved in gang or extremist activity
- a member of the traveller/gypsy community experiencing stigmatisation and housing issues

They will be under the supervision of an experienced paid member of staff, however, this work carries significant responsibility and makes a tangible difference to those in need. Clients getting support from Peer Advisors particularly value the:

- approachable, non-judgemental attitude – empathy and focusing on what needs to be done, rather than dwelling on issues
- range of knowledge – a holistic approach, and supported referral to specialists where needed
- advocacy with other agencies and services – not being left to deal with issues alone
- flexibility of support – adapting to suit changing needs
- willingness to go the extra mile – support, often out of hours and at short notice

It is the unique combination of trust, empathy, listening along with practical, skilled information, advice and guidance that is particularly powerful. Peer Advisors combine the skills of an empathetic listener with the more proactive skills of an advisor. This combination *"empowers you – they help you to understand what the choices are and then it's up to you. They don't do stuff for you, but they help you to do it for yourself, so it makes you feel better about yourself."*

- *"I had been in prison and was suffering from depression. She (Peer Advisor) had a word with me and made me go to the doctors. I'm a better person for it. I had loads of debt – unpaid fines that had racked up whilst I was inside. I had letters from court and it all just overwhelms you. She helped me to sort it all out and make a benefit claim. And she's helping me find a course and some funding for it, to be a fitness instructor. It's really good help that gets you back on your feet."*

- *“The Peer Advisors have such a positive impact. One small meeting can change someone’s life and I think that is what they can do for tenants. They have rapport and say the right things. They’re role models which is a great motivator – it allows the tenants to see that it’s possible. To watch some of the tenants grow (Peers and clients) is amazing.”*

In prisons, Peer Advisors provide “an essential service” that supports the work of the wider prison, “role models – they are active citizens in our prison” and significant help to promote more successful resettlement – *“It makes a massive difference having a Peer, somebody to bounce ideas off...someone to listen, signpost, give information. I feel massively more secure about what happens when I get out.... he’s helped me improve on my future plans.”*

Their unique blend of knowledge, skills and empathy is acknowledged as providing “a serious buffer for people who are stressed. They address the anger, frustration, despair, fear, especially the anxiety of not understanding what is happening to you and feeling helpless and not in control.” Prison staff highlight the fact that Peer Advisors reduce the incidence and risk of self harm and suicide:

- *“I don’t know how we’d manage risk without them. They prevent an awful lot of self harm.”*
- *“Peers undoubtedly helped prevent a suicide.....it isn’t just about saving us time or staffing, but it’s about the Peer being able to do something that we just can’t – it’s invaluable and it saves lives.”*

Whilst this powerful example relates to Peer Advisors working in prisons, these kinds of impacts are also found in the community. In addition, prison based clients will eventually be released and if Peer Advisors have supported them to address issues whilst in custody, they will be more resilient and able to cope, helping them, their families and our wider communities.

Serving organisations and helping to develop the sector

As outlined earlier, the Peer Advisor model provides a comprehensive and effective service for individual organisations. The qualification and training is clearly very highly regarded in the sector: *“SGT is doing a fantastic job. They are renowned for the IAG qualification which is a great opportunity for individuals.” “The NVQ fits very well with the job role, but it does more than that – it gives people confidence and purpose. It’s a great motivator.”*

The ability to offer a reciprocal arrangement of providing trained volunteers from SGT and training organisations’ own volunteers works very well - *“We offered two placements to people (Peer Advisors trained by SGT) and two of our tenants were offered placements in other organisations. It’s worked incredibly well and all four have now got employment”*

The service is also making a significant impact in providing additional front-line capacity for delivering services:

- *“Peer Advisors give me an extra resource which means that we can support more families.”*
- *“It’s a really good model for growing your own group of Peer Advisors.”*
- *“It’s been a massive boost for us. It’s given us an extra resource and a really valuable addition to our team.”*
- *“It means that we can help more people, and with really good support, and that’s a development for us and what we can offer.”*

For organisations new to volunteering, SGT is providing the opportunities and support to develop this valuable service – *“We are new to having volunteers, so we needed to work things through with St Giles. They were lovely – totally receptive and willing to look at how they could adapt things to meet our needs. The fact that they worked with us has been a great development opportunity for us, and for them I think too. We’re hoping to offer another placement now.”*

In addition to these significant benefits for service delivery, the Peer Advisor model is helping the sector to move forward in its thinking and practice, and take forward key strategies:

- *“The lessons that they bring from the training helps their development and ours”.*
- *“My organisation was nervous about involving volunteers in casework type roles, but our involvement with the programme has meant that there’s a gradual confidence building and people can see that it’s a good idea”*
- *“It’s helped me to see how to do more holistic review and support for volunteers that isn’t just technical about the information and service that they are giving clients, but about their personal and professional development too. I hadn’t really taken that kind of role with volunteers before, so it’s been very helpful to find out about a more rounded way of supporting them.”*
- *“Part of our organisation’s strategy for Fulfilling Lives is to develop BME champions. One of them came through the SGT training and is now working nationally for us”*

Through this development, the Peer Advisor model is helping individual organisations to put people in the lead in more meaningful and powerful ways.

The SGT Peer Advisor model delivered across England and Wales works with local/sub-regional partners to ensure that training and services are tailored to community needs. This flexible approach includes relationship building with community focused partners and enables a rich and varied offer to be developed nationally. Delivery in the prison estate adds a further valuable element and is particularly noteworthy in terms of its wide geographic spread across most English regions and parts of Wales.

The SGT centres in the community work collaboratively, and with custodial settings, to learn from these local variations so that ideas and effective practice can be shared.

A partnership approach is central to the “Peer Hub” model, as well as to the project based Peer Advisor activity, and is enhancing networking and awareness across the sector. Organisations feel that *“It’s a great idea to have a central bureau, bringing in and training prospective Peer Advisors and promoting them to other organisations.”* They recognise the complementarity of the Peer Advisor model and the benefits of it being provided by one organisation that can provide not only quality assurance and consistency, but also flexibility and adaptability to meet the needs of individuals and organisations.

STG’s ambition to establish a national network of Peer Hubs that can serve individuals, communities, organisations and the wider sector fits well with the strategic aims of key funders such as the Big Lottery. It provides a real opportunity to roll out the Peer Advisor ethos of people with lived experience in the lead, who, through professional training and development can help to put their communities in the lead.