

Peer Circles:

**Creating Positive Change for People with
Complex Needs**

Interim Evaluation

October 2022

JHCONSULTING

Peer Circles: Summary of findings

- ♦ **Peer Circles is a unique education, training and employment (ETE) project** – with a big difference: it recognises the many personal, social and economic reasons why people with complex needs find it so difficult to get good jobs and change their lives, and it helps them to find bespoke solutions that work. Over the last 5 years it has supported 1333 of some of the most excluded and challenged people, with 40% moving into ETE outcomes.
*“To have somewhere that offers the Peer Advisors, ETE, housing and for it all to feel so friendly for people with complex needs is unique.” **Housing Organisation***
*“My first go to is St Giles Trust because they are just so flexible with what they can offer and they understand the needs.” **Integrated Offender Management***
- ♦ **Peer Circles clients are amongst the most vulnerable and stigmatised people in our communities:** around half are homeless; two thirds are ex-offenders; three quarters have a mental health needs and two thirds an addiction issue; two thirds of all women have experienced domestic violence. Most have poor basic skills and have not been in work for years. Poverty affects all.
*“The project gives really positive responses to even the most challenging situations involving street homelessness, drugs and drink, dual diagnoses, veterans and criminal justice.” **Substance Misuse Organisation***
*“St Giles showed me deep understanding of trauma that helped me understand why I was not trusting. I had tried to push everything – abuse since age 8 – under the carpet. Abi gave emotional support and helped me face it.” **Client***
- ♦ **The successful and ground-breaking ‘lived experience in action’ model is at the heart of Peer Circles-** training, getting experience as a Peer Advisor volunteer and moving into paid support work – completing the circle. It has taken time to develop and is courageous: judging when someone is ready for the role and understanding how to support them is a challenge successfully met by the project.
Clients who became Peer Advisors and are now paid Caseworkers:
“The IAG training was brilliant. It was a bit daunting at first as I haven’t had a lot of education and was worried, but I took it and I loved it. I liked the hands on experience you get from doing the case work and it is a good model because we are not all academic....It makes me feel good to help - many people don’t get support. It’s rewarding giving back to others....I give people hope.”
“Having lived experience does mean that you might be affected by some of the things that you come across at work when you help other people, but nothing needs to go pear-shaped because there’s a team around you. The managers are very supportive and you can offload to them and we have clinical supervision where you can express how you’re feeling. The Peer who’s been working with me currently needed to take some time out. But they come back in and work when they feel able. That flexibility is really important.”
- ♦ **Bringing about real change is not a quick fix,** taking an average of 12 months for sustainable progress. Patience, tenacity and a genuine interest in what holds someone back and how to help them address it is essential, provided by expert and dedicated caseworkers ‘who’ve been there’. Two thirds of Peer

Circles' staff have lived experience similar to their clients. Continuity of support is pivotal and is evident in the high retention rates for staff and volunteers.

"She has been a pillar in my emotional wellbeing and a stabilising element in my life. The support has given me direction and improved my family connections – doing the training helped me to rebuild how to function and have some structure in my life. Working with her for 3 years, having the same person and consistency helps." **Client**

"The caseworker had lived experience which made it feel comfortable. It's been helpful to be able to speak my mind and explore my options with someone who can understand where I am coming from and have some solid solutions to sort me out." **Client**

"Recovery is a long journey and it takes time for people to try things out and find out what they want and what they like. St Giles staff seem to be open to this and this project enables them to stay with the client for the long haul." **Clinical Specialist Occupational Therapist**

- ♦ **Women have particular needs including the trauma arising from being victims of violence and exploitation**, and of having children removed from them. The specialist support from Peer Circles helps them to restore their self-belief and begin the complex and hard work to rebuild their lives.

"It's a hands-on approach, you feel like you are talking to a human being. Being a woman, Abi understands, she sees things from a women's point of view, I'm not saying a man can't do it, she made me more comfortable....I tell you, in that room I was the one that mattered." **Female client**

"BAME women in particular feel that they don't have a voice and to have a caseworker who is a woman and from a BAME background is so important. They identify with someone like her and that makes a huge difference." **ETE Provider**

"Peer Circles gives them holistic and intensive support, a safe place to be themselves, workshop sessions, acceptance, motivation, and help with everyday living such as laptops and ID support. It's a cut above the rest." **Women's Domestic Violence Organisation**

- ♦ **A home, stable finances, good mental health and relief from addiction underpin progress - job outcomes alone don't reflect progress in overcoming huge challenges** – and the vast majority of people need to spend significant time addressing emotional and practical issues before they have the confidence, motivation and 'head space' to think about training or work. Peer Circles should not be judged as a standard ETE project. Funders have shown insight and flexibility in recognising this, working with SGT to understand individuals' progress and project impact beyond ETE targets.

"They help in extraordinary ways, so, for example, they understand how people need things like ID before they can think about moving on and they help to get it." **Substance Misuse Organisation**

"At the start I had my doubts. I wasn't sure whether I could trust Abi the first time, but she was really helpful. Within a week I had a dining table and kettle." **Client with significant past trauma**

"I'm thinking about seeking employment. At first I thought I can't – I have scars from my abuse which would make that so hard but I am considering other options such as working from home." **Client**

"They start at the beginning and have funding for really basic stuff like maybe some clothes or lunch vouchers. This is really important because not everyone is ready as soon as they leave prison. This type of help encourages further engagement and ultimately the engagement is a process which reduces reoffending which is what we want." **Integrated Offender Management**

- ♦ **Peer Circles becomes the ‘go to’ service in a very difficult social and economic environment.** Pre-Covid saw a lack of housing options, accessible mental health support and other public services, and the rise of the gig economy, then exacerbated by the pandemic. Peer Circles continued to support and engage throughout the pandemic, including lockdowns. Now, the record increases in the cost of living place additional pressures on the most excluded, making Peer Circles all the more vital.

“I heard that it may be coming to an end and that would leave a very big hole. There’s nothing else like it out there.” ETE Provider

This is a unique project – it’s a much more person centred approach than the usual job support. I’d be lost without St Giles Peer Circles project – for my clients it is a very important unique project in which they do very well.” Substance Misuse Organisation

- ♦ **Client centred, effective partnership development builds success.** Partnerships are client focused – predicated on their needs and how they can be addressed. Relationships are highly positive, involving referral and cross referral as well as mutual learning to aid service development.

“The inter organisation communication is really good. We always get a rapid responses. I spoke to my team and they are also really keen on the project and building closer links.” Substance Misuse Organisation

“They’ve built a really fantastic relationship with us. We’ve had staff based with Peer Circles with the project and I’ve managed that since 2019....The relationship has developed organically and staff have felt very involved all through.” Housing Organisation

- ♦ **Cost benefit analysis of some Peer Circles cases identifies very significant savings to the public purse.** Taking very conservative estimates and assuming continued progress after leaving the project, average savings per year are around £60,000 per client. These savings don’t take into account the contributions made by clients through taxation on earnings etc. through work. It demonstrates that in addition to the huge positive impact of Peer Circles, the project also gives excellent value for money.

Recommendations

- Funders and commissioners should take urgent note of the success of Peer Circles in reducing the likelihood of people re-offending, experiencing significant mental and physical health issues, homelessness, unemployment and trauma. The personal, social and cost benefits of the approach speak for themselves and therefore funding solutions to continue this unique project should be swiftly explored and agreed. This could include multi-borough funding to continue the current focus in Holloway Road as well as establish outreach services in other locations.
- St Giles should consider developing a best practice guide or similar to share the now successful lived experience in action model for enabling clients to move into volunteering and paid work. Internal review and development of the model should continue.
- Dataset development and collection should continue to be a focus so that more of the backgrounds of clients and outcomes relating to the steps to employment and independence can be captured. This would aid evidencing of impact as well as enabling further cost benefit analysis.
- Peer Evaluator involvement in the project should continue, feeding into regular internal review of findings as well as wider evaluation.

Introduction

The Peer Circles project is jointly funded through the Big Lottery and European Social Fund and has been running for 5 years since 2017. The project is led by St Giles (SGT) and targeted at people aged 25 and over experiencing severe and multiple deprivation (SMD).

This interim evaluation builds on two carried out previously in October 2018 and March 2020. Interviews and cost benefit analysis for this evaluation phase began in June 2022. There are references to a number of areas covered in previous reports, but it is recommended that they should be read in conjunction for the fullest picture of the Peer Circles project.

Figures in this report relate to the period from 2017 up to the end of September 2022. Contributors' names have been omitted or changed to protect confidentiality. Where professionals' roles and/or sector are needed to provide context or sense these are given.

Insightful Peer Evaluation

An innovative aspect of this evaluation phase is that three Peer Circles' clients were offered training and support to carry out interviews with clients to feed into the work. Questions used are included in Appendix A. The Peer Evaluation practice being developed by SGT is giving a valuable peer perspective on the Peer Advisor model, as well as widening the training and development offer available to SGT clients.

Interviews with 11 clients were carried out close to the start of their engagement in the project, with further interviews at approximately two monthly intervals. It was not possible to complete all three stages for all clients, however, really valuable insights were gained into why they felt able to engage with the project, what made them return after their initial contact and how they were progressing, as illustrated by the excerpts included throughout the report.

This report is structured as follows:

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What severe and multiple deprivation looks like: the cohort

From the outset, Peer Circles quickly became established as a much needed and valued programme for people who struggled to access services that could truly help them to tackle their deep seated and serious needs. The project soon reached capacity and to date has supported 1333 people from the following demographics:

- ♦ 26% female
- ♦ 60% unemployed
- ♦ 40% economically inactive
- ♦ 20% over 50 years of age
- ♦ 38% with a disability
- ♦ 60% from BAME backgrounds

The extent and complexity of need across the Peer Circles client group goes some way to explaining how difficult it is for an individual to understand their challenges and begin the often long and hard process of addressing deep seated and complicated issues. Data reveals that:

- 46% of all men and 34% of all women declared themselves homeless
- 79% of men and 48% of women have a history of offending
- A 74% sample of the cohort shows that
 - 64% declare a mental health issue
 - 49% declare a substance misuse issue
 - 31% declare both
- Analysis of a sample of women clients shows that 61% reported being victims of domestic abuse

The main referral routes for the project have remained relatively consistent throughout the life of the project, as shown below. The level of self-referral which includes word of mouth is significant, demonstrating the accessibility of the project which is able to engage even those who are very anxious, mistrustful and/or have had poor experiences with other services.

| Referral sources | | | | |
|--|-----|--|------------------------------------|----|
| Self-referral, including word of mouth | 41% | | Mental health service providers | 5% |
| National Probation Service | 22% | | Substance misuse service providers | 6% |
| Housing providers | 6% | | Other SGT projects | 6% |
| DWP | 6% | | Other | 8% |

Information gathered by Peer Evaluators underlines the importance of the first contact made with the Peer Circles project and its impact on clients feeling welcomed, not judged and able to return and build engagement:

“The Jobcentre told me about it....when I reached there I just liked the way everyone was talking....I just wanted to come back again because I felt good. I am in a (Women’s) Refuge, it was not easy to start.”

“I got shot (gang related) and I was in the hospital and the social worker came to see me and then she referred me to you. I thought I’m enrolled onto St Giles. From the first time I spoke with Kacen and then got in contact with Dalvir, everything seemed to make sense and click, so I came. I’ve even recommended you guys to other friends”

“The staff is really good. Not one of them is judgemental....when I go to Peer Circles everyone is so accepting and I don't feel scared to go in.”

“It was during lockdown. Someone gave me the number and said they are supporting people. I just got my residency (indefinite leave to remain) and I was looking for something to do about education and training. I felt listened to and that this can help. She (caseworker) told me how they are ready to support me...how I can work while supporting my child and I felt this would be good.”

A further remarkable feature of the project is that it not only maintained its level of service throughout the Covid-19 pandemic but also managed to keep the vast majority of clients engaged and stable, even during lockdowns. Taking into account the challenge of maintaining engagement with people with complex needs during periods of high stress, isolation and increasing deprivation, it is testament to the skill, commitment, dedication and flexibility of the front line staff and manager that this was achieved.

It involved moving to video and phone contact whilst keeping the office open on a rotating skeleton staff for those who could not manage to maintain stability without some in-person contact. The manager strove to keep staff and clients as safe as possible during this time, when other services were largely completely absent. The Covid emergency fund set up by SGT, along with relevant funding through the project itself enabled laptops, phones, connectivity and other essentials to be provided to clients. Support via SGT's pantry and food vouchers also helped to protect highly vulnerable people. This practical help not only acted as a buffer against some of the worst impacts of the pandemic but was a tangible demonstration of care that increased the trust and connection between clients and project staff.

Enabling people with complex needs to progress

Peer Circles has overachieved on all project targets in respect of the total number of engagements, target groups and indicators of change. Significant headway has also been made in achieving ETE targets.

In addition to the significant barriers to establishing positive, independent lives outlined previously, Peer Circles clients also experience issues in accessing and being successful in training and work:

- Unemployed clients have on average been out of work for 3.3 years and for economically inactive clients it is significantly longer, with some who have never had paid work
- In comparison to unemployed clients, economically inactive clients are more likely to:
 - Have poor basic skills and poor education (29%)
 - Have a disability (63%)
 - Have issues with mental health and/or substance misuse (53%)
- Women clients are more likely to be economically inactive (54%) than male clients (34%)

This profile explains why it takes an average of 11 months for an economically inactive client with complex needs to move into work, and 8 months for an unemployed client with complex needs. It also underlines why a specialist project such as Peer Circles should not be judged by the same criteria that might be applied to a 'mainstream' ETE project.

Despite their significant barriers and needs, Peer Circles has supported clients with complex needs to develop the self-confidence, self-belief, skills and attributes to move into a range of training, employment and self-employment outcomes:

| Outcome | Project | Actual end September 2022 | |
|--|----------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| | Target % | Number of clients | % of total clients |
| Number who move into education or training on leaving | 17% | 201 | 18% |
| Number who move into employment, including self-employment | 25% | 249 | 22% |
| Of these, the number unemployed when joining the project | 9% | 188 | 17% |
| Of these, the number economically inactive when joining | 16% | 61 | 5% |
| Number economically inactive move into job-search on leaving | 18% | 56 | 5% |
| Number who move into employment, including self-employment, on leaving who sustain work for 26 out of 32 weeks | 14% | 130 | 11% |

Engaging clients who are economically inactive has been a consistent challenge throughout the life of the project and is therefore reflected in the lower proportion of outcomes for this group. The reasons are documented in the previous evaluation reports but, in summary, it is due to a number of factors including those cited earlier, as well as:

- The distinction between ESA and JSA benefit claimants is blurred. Some people claim ‘fit for work’ benefits because it is quicker, less intrusive and often less distressing than undergoing an assessment to be judged as ‘not fit for work’.
- Some ESA claimants fail assessments to remain ‘not fit for work’ and are moved onto JSA.
- The requirements for ESA claimants to get their benefits involves little or no contact with Jobcentre Plus thereby reducing the potential for referral from this source to the project.
- More women than men are economically inactive and there is a lower proportion of women on the project, partly due to the fact that a significant referral source for the project is the probation service and the prison/offending population is predominantly male. That said, the proportion of women engaged has increased over the life of the project.

The indicators of change for Peer Circles clients provide some insight into the foundation work that is necessary before ETE can be considered by someone with complex needs. All project targets have been exceeded with the exception of reporting around positive support from Peer Advisors. This is slightly below target because the number of Peer Advisors trained over the life of the project to date is not sufficient for all clients to benefit from this additional support. In addition, some clients can be at a point in their lives that they are so challenged it would not be appropriate to expect even a trained and experienced volunteer to provide support.

| Project Outcomes | Indicators of Change | Achieved to end Sept 2022 | | |
|------------------|---|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| | | Number of clients | % of project target | Percentage of total cohort |
| | Participants report improvements in their housing | 648 | 172% | 49% |

| Project Outcomes | Indicators of Change | Achieved to end Sept 2022 | | |
|---|---|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| | | Number of clients | % of project target | Percentage of total cohort |
| Participants have improved housing, wellbeing and self esteem | Participants attending mental health and/or substance misuse services | 499 | 174% | 37% |
| | Participants report increased levels of self-esteem | 1090 | 239% | 82% |
| Participants have improved relationships | Participants report positive support from Peer Advisors | 335 | 73% | 25% |
| | Participants report reduced levels of isolation | 488 | 130% | 37% |
| | Participants report improved relationships with positive friends/family | 484 | 129% | 37% |
| Participants are more able to access the services, training and support they need | Participants using other services independently | 591 | 157% | 44% |
| | Participants reporting increased levels of confidence in using services | 692 | 184% | 60% |

Percentages in relation to the total cohort underestimate the true picture. This is because these indicators rely on self-reporting, mainly through an end of project survey. This method of gathering data is notoriously difficult and patchy. It would be really helpful to find other ways of assessing these indicators in the future so that a more accurate picture can be gained of these vital elements of project impact.

The case studies provided on pages 10-17 bring these statistics to light and underline just how important the tenacious, consistent and ‘expert by experience’ support provided by Peer Circles is.

Peer Evaluator feedback gathered from interviews with clients in their early engagement and then over the course of a few months confirms that it is the ‘relatability’ of caseworkers – from their lived experience, approach and flexibility that can help clients overcome a whole range of issues and have the motivation to progress. The following example demonstrates the long and often slow road to moving into work and the obstacles for an ex-offender with complex needs:

Initial interview: *“Dalvir came to see me in the AP (approved premises) I was in....He understands the things I need and we made a plan on how he can help me achieve them. Everything he has said he is going to do he has done, so I am happy to continue.”*

2 months later: *“I was a bit worried about being recalled (to prison) because of a dispute...but Peer Circles helped do a referral to Shelter to help me move out of the hostel. Not having a secure place is always an issue in London. I’m almost halfway doing my CSCS training to be able to work in the construction industry and I’m volunteering as an add-on for a movie set. I have been supported with travel expenses.....and they got funding for clothes for me too. I don’t need to pay for my training. I’ve started to get on track but there is still a lot which needs sorting”*

4 months later: *“I had just started a job in removals which Peer Circles helped me get but I’ve just lost that because I lost my phone and the alarm didn’t go off. I didn’t go to work that morning and when I went they said this is not acceptable and I lost my job. I’ve been revising my CSCS but I keep failing that but I’m still revising and still waiting for my housing allocation. Peer Circles funded a laptop to help with revision for the CSCS and they helped me. Dalvir has helped me a lot with almost any issues that I’ve faced.”*

*I feel very good. I know I haven’t accomplished a lot yet, but I know I’m on the right path and the support I get here is priceless. **If I hadn’t come to Peer Circles I’d be back inside because I’ve never had this kind of support and vision and way for my future.** I’m looking forward to getting a full time job and to live life.”*

Peer Circles clients move into a wide range of employment and self-employment across sectors including construction, hospitality, retail/warehousing, transport and health and social care. Peer Circles not only supports clients to develop the confidence and soft skills needed for work, but also is able access funding for training, clothing and a host of other necessary elements. Support continues once people are in work and is continued for those who may not be successful in their first attempt at employment. This is vital for sustainable outcomes.

The Peer Advisor model and people with complex needs: building success

Making a reality of the idea that people with complex needs can tackle and/or learn to live successfully with their challenges and go onto help others in similar situations as volunteers or paid staff requires significant determination and the willingness to learn quickly and adapt. Understandably, it has taken some time for this key element of the project to come to fruition.

In the first two years of the project, progress was a challenge because of the length of intervention required for clients with complex needs to reach the level of stability needed to take on a peer support role. It was very important not to sacrifice the wellbeing and progress of clients in an attempt to get the model up and running quickly. It takes on average around 13 months for a someone to complete the full Peer Advisor training and qualification.

However, this principle, at the core of Peer Circles, has now become a functioning and key part of the project. To date, 114 clients have completed the initial Learning to Advise training course and of these, 55 have gone on to achieve the full Level 3 Advice and Guidance qualification.

The relatively high drop out rate between course completion and the full qualification appears to be difficulties for trainees in completing placements where they put into practice the taught course by supporting clients. There are a variety of reasons for this including lack of confidence, concerns about triggering trauma and/or not realising what the role would ‘feel’ like. However, the sense of achievement many feel in completing the taught course is not lost – it is a valuable stepping stone in building confidence, particularly for those who have previously had very poor learning experiences.

These results whilst representing a relatively small proportion of the Peer Circles cohort are significant. However, even more impressive is that 13 of the Peer Circles staff are former clients, representing over one third of the staff group. In addition, 22 Peer Advisors who trained with the project are now working in similar front line roles in other organisations, with a further 8 moving to further education. These are people who many might have imagined would never work, let alone in highly responsible roles that

involve supporting people with complex needs as well as working in partnership with a range of professionals.

Significant learning has emerged from the experience of delivering this innovative model of practice, including:

- Careful and sensitive screening and assessment needs to be undertaken with prospective Peer Advisors to ensure as far as possible that they have sufficient resilience and motivation to undertake training and placement.
- Supportive, comprehensive and responsive management of Peer Advisors, including clinical supervision is essential to help volunteers deal with challenging situations that have the potential to retraumatise them.
- A supportive network of family or friends is common to all those who have successfully completed the full qualification, including placement and then gone on to provide Peer Advisor support. It is clear that this is needed to provide the 'work life' balance necessary for volunteers to deal with what can be the very challenging issues presented by clients.

The power of the lived experience model to turn lives around: case studies

For someone who has never held a key to their own flat or spent their lives at the mercy of violence, drug addiction, mental health issues and criminality, learning how to live with confidence and hope, and being able to deal with everyday life are major steps along the way. The following examples show the range, seriousness and complexity of the challenges facing Peer Circles clients and how each person has, with the support of the project, begun to tackle them and establish healthier, more stable and independent lives.

Simon: an ex-offender with a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD and significant mental health issues who was sexually abused and neglected as a child. Simon also has a history of alcohol and drug addiction, has been treated for cancer, was homeless and in significant debt at the point of starting on Peer Circles. After support from a caseworker, he trained as a Peer Advisor and then went on to a part time paid role as a Trainee Support Worker. Simon then got employment as a hostel manager for a homelessness organisation and has recently been promoted to Team Manager.

“Where we’ve come from isn’t great. The only way we can learn is by doing – getting our teeth stuck in. Peer Circles supports you to do that. When I came out of prison I had to go looking for help. But first you’ve got to get to the point of being able to ask for help. Getting a DBS is a nightmare. You need people who really understand that problem to help you tackle it.

Mentoring support from Peer Circles helped me to nail my first paid job after recovery as a Support Worker. And I had some heavy mental health problems during that time that they supported me with. Brendan might be a senior manager but he has time for everyone. It makes a big difference.

Three years after my time on Peer Circles I’m managing to house and rehabilitate others who are ex-offenders, including paedophiles, murderers etc. I’m learning how to manage a team, how to relate to people and I’m setting up a new project which is quite challenging. I have my own key to unlock the

probation office. I'm debt free and buying my first apartment with a mortgage. If I hadn't had the step up in confidence that Peer Circles gave me I wouldn't be where I am.

Every time I walk into the office I see a poster for Peer Circles with my face on it. I need St Giles and my clients need St Giles. I know that if I need them again they will be there for me."

Sean: experienced significant and enduring trauma as a result of the murder of a close family member. Sean has substance misuse and a history of offending. He spent 6 years trying on and off to engage with St Giles but could not sustain this and was in and out of prison during this time. Sean referred himself to Peer Circles again in 2021.

"Everything was a challenge when I started. I needed recovery, help with housing, getting ID, sorting out money and paperwork, and just everything. I seemed to always have a million appointments. Jade helped me get organised and get through the processes and be patient.

Jade is a great support – she's helped me to get organised. St Giles do a good job. It makes life easier for me – smooths the pathway in all areas. Even when she can't do something she knows someone who can or tries something else.

I've done the Peer Mentoring training as well as my CSCS and scaffolding certification, and I've got my passport. I've done Peer Mentoring one day a week on zoom – facilitating groups in a drug and alcohol project. It was very good training but I'm not using at the moment because my life is full on and complicated. I might do some other groups or something else with it in the future."

October 2022 update: Sean has now moved into full time employment and loves his job.

Dave: started with Peer Circles in January 2022, having experienced significant violent trauma as a child, leading to serious mental health issues requiring medication and psychiatric support which has affected all aspects of his life. Dave has a young daughter with whom he has sporadic contact. When he came to Peer Circles he was under further psychiatric treatment and was experiencing panic attacks, anxiety and issues with debt and housing. He attended the Level 3 IAG course on line (due to Covid lockdown) and volunteered via phone and video call throughout the pandemic. His first paid job as a trainee caseworker began in July 2021 and he went on to increase his hours in January 2022, working with a substance misuse project and is now working full time.

"St Giles is very welcoming and they encouraged me to do the Level 3. I liked the lived experience model and it fitted with my goals. This was an opportunity and I took it and turned my life around quite rapidly. They are a great bunch of people from similar backgrounds. There's no judgement and I felt connected. I have to pinch myself that it's real. I was dubious at first but I couldn't of wished for better. Once I knew what the Peer Advisor idea involved I knew it was just for me. It's a great model in and it drew me in. Everyone who knows me said it was and I have the skills to talk to people and to listen to them. My experience of complex needs and the housing was a great help and of course my own troubles made me aware of other people's needs. It's a great motivator and good use of life experiences to be able to support others.

I was meant to do the IAG in person but it changed to online. So it was extended and delayed because of Covid but it worked out better because I got to know more. Getting the qualification was important because I didn't have many before to be honest and I wouldn't have been able to be a success without it.

The support I have doing my job is fantastic. It's why I enjoy my job – I'm one of the team. I still have my own issues like anxiety so the team helps with that and the work helps alleviate it. Previously I didn't have much support and my stress levels were through the roof. All the staff understand and I am looked after – everyone is treated well and offered flexibility and empowered to work from home. It's a good work-life balance."

Heather: started on Peer Circles in May 2018. She has experienced major challenges in her life including poor educational experiences, several custodial sentences, one for 10 years, addiction, sex working, being a victim of domestic violence, homelessness, racism, poverty and the resulting stigma, rejection and isolation. Heather has had some more positive periods through her life but had not been able to sustain this stability. It took some time for her to establish relationships of trust with Peer Circles staff but it quickly became apparent that the Level 3 IAG training and development to become a Peer Advisor would be a way of enabling her to use her skills and lived experience to support others. At this point Heather also began to establish her own cleaning business. She has progressed steadily from a volunteer Peer Advisor in 2018 to her first paid job as a Trainee Caseworker in 2020, culminating in her promotion to Senior Caseworker in 2021.

"When I came out of prison drugs were not part of my life anymore but I was still short of money so I was still doing bits of crime. As a person with lived experiences, at St Giles you don't have to feel that you're the minority and everyone's looking at you because you know that everyone else has their experiences too. It makes you feel comfortable in a place.

When I applied to be a bus driver, the lady who interviewed me persuaded them to give me a chance. That was good, but what is even better is coming to St Giles where they appreciate that your experiences mean you can really help people – that it's a positive thing, not something to hide or worry about.

It was really nice to get the Level 3 because I never got to finish my exams at school, and it gives you that sense of achievement. You have something to show that people recognise. When you first meet a client they're thinking 'How can you help me? You don't understand', but then when I tell clients about my life – the ten years custodial and going to prison six times – you see them start to defrost. They realise that I get it and that maybe things can change for them too.

Many people want to change their lives but don't have the tools to do it. Peer Circles gives them that and it gives them a different outlook. With the help I had to set up my own business whilst working in a paid job too, it meant that I've learnt how to do self-employment and employment and I can pass on that experience and knowledge to others. It means they have more flexibility over their working lives.

Having lived experience does mean that you might be affected by some of the things that you come across at work when you help other people, but nothing needs to go pear-shaped because there's a team around you. The managers are very supportive and you can offload to them and we have clinical supervision where you can express how you're feeling. The Peer who's been working with me currently needed to take some time out. But they come back in and work when they feel able. That flexibility is really important. Also, they realise that working is rewarding and then it makes them want to do more. They supported a client to get a passport and it made the client and the Peer so happy. Having a passport isn't just about ID. It makes people feel like someone. There is real joy in the benefits of doing this job.

We can help in so many ways. The practical stuff is so important too. We get fast help for people who are homeless and I can go to a senior manager and get funding for clothes, bedding and all kinds of

essentials. During Covid this was particularly important. Clients were so stressed about not having money, the kids being at home, isolation, trying to get shopping. High Street vouchers became my best friend! It was a fast and really effective way of helping people to avoid going into complete meltdown. What I'd like to say to funders is – this is what you can do with your money – something really, really good. Through your funding you've saved so many people's lives that you'll never know."

Peter: is in his early sixties and had been doing a small amount of volunteering on another project when SGT were asked to provide him with some support. Peter is disabled and has a history of addiction and mental health needs including a suicide attempt. He has had a variety of office based work previously. Peter became a Peer Circles client and then trained as a Peer Advisor in April 2020, progressing to a paid caseworker in October of that year.

"A friend referred me first. I had been volunteering for St Mungos but I wasn't doing much. Once I heard about Peer Circles I called them and made a start. I was volunteering for about a year, did the IAG training and then applied for a trainee job. I've been working here about a year and a half. I really like the work.

I've got skills. I've had a lot of different work in my life. I've been a banker, an insurance broker, I've worked for AMEX and also flipped burgers for Macdonalds. I've done lots of this and that and I have accumulated the skills but I had got into drugs and had my issues – well lots of them. I've been in recovery for 6 years and I know what it is like for people. I can help.

I had got myself in a mess and then I got involved with Lifeline – supporting the alcohol and drugs work, and did some stuff at St Mungos and then MIND – all voluntary. So when I came to St Giles and the same type of work offered qualifications and a job pathway I was really interested and I got right into it.

The training was intense but I enjoyed it. I felt it was good for me and I was good for it. The assessor was really pleased with my work and told me it was the best clear and considered information. A also studied Health and Social Care and got a Level 3, and now I'm in the second year of a BSc at UEL.

It's really good to see the mentoring working for the clients – building up their confidence. Whatever they've done they deserve a second chance. They come in damaged and over time things can really improve for them like they did for me. Some of the clients are very challenging – all different issues and very complex – it can take time to get to the root of the problem. Clients can feel that everyone's against them so we have to take time and build that trust. We have to accept them and try to get to the root of their needs.

Peer Circles gives really good, positive team support. It's always available when we need it. There's so much experience in the team it makes it easy to get ideas of how to do things with different sorts of clients. Being able to train and become a Peer Advisor is a really good model for those with the right temperament and who are non-judgemental. Listening to what life is for other people and to their stories helps me to make the best of what I've got. It's a good way to give back and you get a lot of job satisfaction too. My journey has been only positive. My skills and lived experiences allow me to work with other people with complex needs when they need support."

Specialist help for women

Peer Circles has established a reputation for successfully supporting women with complex needs. As detailed in previous reports, women's experiences mean that it is important to provide a gender sensitive service that makes them feel welcomed and understood in relation to their specific needs. Some of these issues include being victims of domestic violence, having children removed from them, being a lone parent and experiencing significant levels of shame and very poor self esteem, as the following examples illustrate.

Aysha: a victim of domestic violence and coercive control, her eldest daughter changed gender identity which shattered this family, particularly given its traditional Muslim background. Aysha was then given a custodial sentence for an offence, leading to the father of her children having custody. She was referred to Peer Circles by her probation officer. From a position of crisis and hopelessness 3 years ago, Aysha is now in full-time work and has joint custody of her children:

"I was amazingly encouraged right from the first meeting (with the Peer Circles caseworker). I had been shell shocked and she gave me a window of light to another possibility. She is non-judgemental and compassionate. She believed in me and proved to me that I could get myself together. When you come out of prison you don't have self-belief, you don't think you can contribute. You have internal stigma and shame, trauma and guilt. But Abi's support remained over time. She got me to think about accountancy skills and got me a place on the book keeping course. Then she helped me to apply for a job. Then lockdown came and a zoom interview and I didn't get the job but I learnt a lot about the process. I finally passed AAT Level 3 and got more help to look for work in the right social media and job sites. I finally got a job as an accounts technician. Covid meant I stayed with my parents and then went back to where my kids lived so it meant I could re-initiate relationships with them in a safe space, but money and support from St Giles meant I could cope with them during lockdown.

Regaining my self-belief so that I could get qualifications and a job was the biggest challenge for me. She has been a pillar in my emotional wellbeing and a stabilising element in my life. The support has given me direction and improved my family connections – doing the training helped me to rebuild how to function and have some structure in my life. Working with her for 3 years, having the same person and consistency helps.

St Giles are understanding and tailor timings to make it easy for mums. Issues came up recently and she helped a huge amount – she has wide expertise – children, justice and dealing with partners and authorities, and she's a mum so she gets me.

If you need help they will help to sort you out and point you in the right direction. I would 100% recommend them."

Zafira: a victim of childhood abuse as well as domestic abuse, Zafira fled the UK with her child, eventually settled in Europe, met a new partner and had a baby. She was eventually arrested and returned to the UK for trial. She was sentenced to 6 years in custody and ordered not to have any further contact with her eldest child. Her baby had to remain in Europe with their father.

"When I was released from prison I was in a terrible state and I went to (a local organisation). Although they were nice they didn't really help me. They phoned regularly to check in and tell me 'poor thing' but that was about it. When I found out about St Giles I was relieved with the warmth, knowledge and practicality of the support – it was amazing. First, the response was so quick, secondly they were pro-

active – I didn't have to ask – they saw and reacted – like when they first came to my house and saw me boiling water for tea in a cooking pot they order a kettle and sent it to me.

I had the ex prisoner support through my probation officer but I was in a bad place, didn't know what I was doing and couldn't really think. I had no self-belief. St Giles showed me deep understanding of trauma that helped me understand why I was not trusting. I had tried to push everything – abuse since age 8 – under the carpet. Abi gave emotional support helped me face it. She helped me to hope and I found my strength and now I feel so much stronger. I also got a lot of practical support such as being accompanied to meetings where I would feel under pressure. That made the meetings easier for me and people seemed to treat me better when there was someone else in the room.

I got help to plan to see where I was and where I want to go – we are planning how to get there. I am now able to think what I need to do to get my child back. I'm on the waiting list for parenting courses. I'm thinking about seeking employment. At first I thought I can't – I have scars from my abuse which would make that so hard but I am considering other options such as working from home. Abi helped with my mindset. I still have trust issues but the consistent support from one person is so useful.

I think lots of women going back to prison more and more times might not keep going back if they had this type of support. They need more marketing and publicity so people in prison know they are out there. Working with the Pre release and offending management teams should make sure every released prisoner knows about St Giles Trust.

I'd love to do the Peer Advisor training. I love helping people and it sounds like an option that at some point would be good for me."

October 2022 update: Zafira's self confidence has continued to improve and she no longer sees herself as a victim. She has found her voice and is about to start volunteering with Age Concern.

Ayala: is in her forties and has had a very difficult past including being a looked after child, suffering with PTSD and having criminal convictions. She has children including a three year old. After training and volunteering as a Peer Advisor, Ayala became a part-time caseworker at SGT, breaking the cycle of long-term unemployment and enabling her to "be a role model for my children." She then worked for a women's refuge and mental health charity before returning to SGT as a senior caseworker on another project. Ayala has found studying and working from home challenging with her children. SGT has helped with childcare and flexible working arrangements.

"So I loved the job at St Giles and the training and everything but I couldn't manage working from home in COVID. I need to get out of the house and working from home was hard because I had kids at home and not enough space. They had to do their school and college work and I had to tell them to keep quiet when talking to clients it was really tough. I could not work in St Giles offices and couldn't work from home so I found a job in a Domestic Abuse refuge. That was good because I gained a lot of new experiences in things like domestic abuse, coercive behaviour, immigration, how people don't get all their benefits – no recourse to public funding etc. I like learning so it was great to have that opportunity but I couldn't have done it without the Peer Circles project to start me off.

The IAG training was brilliant. It was a bit daunting at first as I haven't had a lot of education and was worried, but I took it and I loved it. I liked the hands on experience you get from doing the case work and it is a good model because we are not all academic. Added to the qualifications, the experience and the confidence you get a reference which is so important when you are seeking employment.

It makes me feel good to help - many people don't get support. It's rewarding giving back to others....I give people hope. Lots of services say they help but don't. Sorry to be rude but maybe because they don't have the funding or maybe because the waiting lists are too long – things like that – St Giles gives hope and confidence and consistent support.

It can be challenging at times. If clients have substance misuse problem they may want help and need it but at times it is but difficult to get through to them. Some have Mental health issues – they can be angry or suffer from delusions and others just don't engage. That means chasing them and trying to make sure they don't have too many missed appointments. It can be frustrating. Also, it would be good to have more DV training because I've had that quite a few times.

Peer Circles staff and Brendan are really supportive. If things are tough there is always someone you can talk to. Supervision is regular and positive and the support can always help with challenging situations or people . You are not on your own.

The Peer Advisor programme is a great approach to training for employment. When I worked in the refuge I did refer a lot of people as they were leaving when they were in a situation to start to think about training and employment.”

An example from the peer evaluation confirms the accessibility and specialist nature of the support provided for women:

First interview: *“I wanted someone who would listen to me, 'cause I've been through a lot and someone to motivate me, to see things differently. People around me are so negative and I just wanted a bit of a change. It could be training, it could be anything, just getting me to go out, because I was isolated as well. I was looking for someone who believed that I could do something with my life. I'm not young, I'm older, so support really from someone I can trust, as I don't believe that others (services) do listen, so I wanted to think that I can still do something with my life and that's what I was hoping to get. Trust is very important.*

I was scared when I first came in and I went past three or four times..... Because of my history I get scared when I see some people. Abi introduced herself as a women specialist and she listened to me, which allowed me to get my courage. I just needed someone to listen to me. She said that she was just going to listen to me and that we could go through the forms next time. When I came back the following day, she said she was just going to continue to listen to me, as I really had a lot of things to talk about. I have been through a lot of things, and she sympathised with me. I thought to myself I hope I'm not going to make this lady cry as she had a look on her face. She said to me you have made a good decision by coming in here to get support. Not only that she walked me to the bus stop which was really good and then I thought OK, I think I like this place and that's why I came back. I tell you in that room I was the one that mattered.

It's a hands-on approach, you feel like you are talking to a human being. Being a woman, Abi understands, she sees things from a women's point of view, I'm not saying a man can't do it, she made me more comfortable. St Giles Trust mainly support people like me, you go somewhere else, and they judge you, the way you look, I didn't feel like that, she made me a cup of tea and we had a chat.

I'm terrified around people, I would not have been able to speak to you during the pandemic, as I'm very nervous of people. Abi just says 'take a deep breathe, it might not be as bad as it seems'. That's what I did when I got your message, I kept telling myself that it's going to be OK.”

3 months later: *“I’ve just come back from my interview with Age UK. My support worker put me forward and it went great. They want me to volunteer for three days a week.*

At the start I had my doubts. I wasn’t sure whether I could trust Abi the first time, but she was really helpful. Within a week I had a dining table and kettle. I used to look forward to the Zoom meetings, that really helped me with getting back to normal somehow. I am now more confident in speaking than in the past, if I’m talking with my solicitor or probation, I’m treated differently as I have my support worker there. I now can stand up for myself. I no longer feel like I’m stuck as the victim. I now feel like this is just a phase of my life that I’m going through.

Oh my god, I wouldn’t have found the job (volunteering) opportunity without Peer Circles, I don’t think I would have been as comfortable as I am now. Abi is always telling me to stand up for myself and speak my mind with respect, when I’m dealing with probation. I would have been depressed. I can’t imagine my life without St Giles.

I’ve got court coming up to fight for my daughter. I had to do this before, but I didn’t have any support from St Giles then. It will be so much easier for me; I’m looking forward to getting my daughter now. Abi will support me when I’m feeling down and even remind me to eat. I’m looking forward to after volunteering to get a job and maybe help other women. I know I’ve got the expertise because I went through it, and I can help other women to not to even get to the situation and get support before it’s too late. I would just like to thank St Giles for everything and I would like it (my support) to carry on for another year, until I finish my probation at least. Hopefully I will volunteer with you guys and get my daughter back.”

Professionals delivering services for women also commented on the excellent support provided by the Peer Circles’ specialist women’s caseworker, recognising the importance of providing this gender sensitive element of the project.

“We don’t have a women’s specialist in our organisation and it’s very male dominated. It’s hard to find someone who can relate to them, hear them out and help them. When I refer to Peer Circles I know that they are getting the support they need. BAME women in particular feel that they don’t have a voice and to have a caseworker who is a woman and from a BAME background is so important. They identify with someone like her and that makes a huge difference. I’ve had nothing negative ever said about the project. I thank god for her – she’s amazing. For the women, DV is a big one as well as no trust and low confidence. They can’t see how they can manage family and work and Peer Circles helps them to understand how to balance things. It would be great if they could do more on parenting. I heard that it may be coming to an end and that would leave a very big hole. There’s nothing else like it out there.”

Female worker in a housing and ETE provider

“I have signposted clients to St Giles Trust and I have also solicited expert advice from them. Peer Circles is a step up to the support that we offer our clients. The main issues for women are self-distrust, self-doubt, being despondent about the future, unmotivated, barriers as a woman, emotional and cultural barriers. Peer Circles gives them holistic and intensive support, a safe place to be themselves, workshop sessions, acceptance, motivation, and help with everyday living such as laptops and ID support. It’s a cut above the rest. The project works only with 25 plus, perhaps it would be good to lower the age and support them while they are younger.” **Women’s DV organisation**

Peer Circles recognised by other professionals as unique, powerful and effective

The Peer Circles project works with a wide range of partners. Their feedback highlights the value they place on the project and identify it as uniquely able to help those with complex needs. In particular, partners highlighted:

- Effective and flexible partnership working that puts the client at the centre of process and takes support to them
- Positive impacts on reducing the likelihood of reoffending
- Providing realistic yet optimistic support for people with serious mental health needs
- Practical help delivered quickly to alleviate issues that are barriers to living and progressing towards work
- A unique service with nothing similar available for people with complex needs

Importantly, the partnerships that the project has developed over the years are client-centred, with a clear purpose focused on meeting client needs more effectively. This includes referral partnerships to make sure that people with complex needs are able to access the project regardless of their 'presenting need' – being a prison leaver, having a mental health condition etc., as well as ensuring Peer Circles can offer supported referral to experts in housing, substance misuse, immigration, welfare benefits mental health etc. where needed.

The following feedback demonstrates the strengths and unique offer of Peer Circles from a variety of perspectives, as well the range of partners with which the project has established positive and fruitful relationships.

Integrated Offender Management Lead, Probation Service

"I've been referring to St Giles since 2012 and I've found Peer Circles very useful for my clients. It gets people back on their feet. During Covid everything became more difficult. People work better in person and remote working caused disengagement. Everything was shut down and clients were very vulnerable. Their needs changed and there was much more in terms of mental health impacts and anxiety. There was a loss of trust and a reluctance to attend appointments or go out. The main thing was trying to keep clients motivated and St Giles was good at that.

One of my cases was in and out of prison – a persistent offender who wouldn't normally engage. But this time he came out of prison with a different attitude. He has been out now since last September – 9 months – that's a real achievement for him as a prolific offender. He is doing really well.....he was able to remain abstinent and he engaged really well with the caseworker. I think the immediateness was key and that in the first meeting she was able to do the things that he had been struggling with straight away like a passport, freedom pass and a plan identifying possible courses he could do. They show that people do care – having a coffee and a link up means such a lot to people who are quite isolated.

None of mine have become mentors yet but the model is great. Knowing people working in the place have similar backgrounds does I think give the clients hope and knowledge that there are options even if you have a criminal record.

In terms of provision for over 25s there's not really any similar projects. My first go to is St Giles Trust because they are just so flexible with what they can offer and they understand the needs. It's good they have people with specific expertise so if, for example, housing is a problem there is someone who deals

with that. It is so helpful to people leaving prison who are often struggling to get themselves back on track alone. It would be good if they were able to support through the gate at the prison – at the start of the journey.

St Giles and the Peer Circles project allows the probation services' service users to have an opportunity that other providers aren't able to offer. They start at the beginning and have funding for really basic stuff like maybe some clothes or lunch vouchers. This is really important because not everyone is ready as soon as they leave prison. This type of help encourages further engagement and ultimately the engagement is a process which reduces reoffending which is what we want."

Clinical Specialist Occupational Therapist (Mental Health Centre for clients with very complex needs)

"They are so adaptable it is great. So for example MIND would not want to work with people while they are in hospital but St Giles are more flexible about this. The caseworker comes to the ward if the client agrees and that is good as you can imagine how hard it is when on a busy ward to take time out to take clients to an appointment.

It's too early to say about the full impact of the project but it gives them hope. One of my clients wanted to do lots and the caseworker offered more realistic alternatives. It was very carefully thought through. I felt she knew what she was doing and showed a lot of empathy and understanding. Another client wanted to do mechanics and found an apprenticeship, but the caseworker was able to guide him to a place where he could progress without setting him up to fail. She understood that a graded approach takes time, so she kept it open but got him on some keyboard skills and online courses. She introduced him to the idea of the green economy which he is quite interested in. As I say, it's a very long journey for many of my clients.

My main role is on long term rehab – to get people's lives established with community help. St Giles have a good approach working in the hospital. The patient that was assessed last week on the ward clearly stated that the caseworker listened and was looking for the support this patient needs and will get back to them. It's a powerful model and makes the patients more comfortable once they have met the caseworker.

Recovery is a long journey and it takes time for people to try things out and find out what they want and what they like. St Giles staff seem to be open to this and this project enables them to stay with the client for the long haul. The range of support offered is great for my type of patients who will build trust over a period of time. Being so patient focused and looking out for their needs is paramount."

Caseworker, Substance Misuse Organisation

"Since before covid I have been referring my clients to the project. I work with people who are severely marginalised with homelessness, mental health issues, drugs and alcohol, and all manner of complexities in their lives. It has been great to be honest. I remember the manager did the presentation before the lock down and we straight away started referring people. I still refer regularly and so does my team. We always get great feedback from the clients.

The range of help is excellent – I just got housing support for one of them who has now moved into sheltered accommodation. They help in extraordinary ways, so, for example, they understand how people need things like ID before they can think about moving on and they help to get it. Getting ID is so basic but always difficult for the clients. The project also helps with confidence building, supporting access to part-time courses.

I have one who is about to start the NVQ IAG and I've had two who've been on it. I think my team has had a few on this course before and they really do well in the supportive environment where that can get a qualification and then can see that they could also help other people, it is a game changer for many of the people we work with.

The inter organisation communication is really good. We always get a rapid responses. I spoke to my team and they are also really keen on the project and building closer links. In fact a couple of them recently participated in the AGM. The project gives really positive responses to even the most challenging situations involving street homelessness, drugs and drink, dual diagnoses, veterans and criminal justice.

We have not had many going through to become mentors yet – but lots of them end up volunteering. We do have a volunteers in our organisation – it's really great – when they come into recovery it's a supportive environment and makes them feel comfortable and confident and start to think maybe they could actually find employment. Caseloads are heavy and may cause issues at times but any issues always resolved quickly. This is a unique project – it's a much more person centred approach than the usual job support. I'd be lost without St Giles Peer Circles project – for my clients it is a very important unique project in which they do very well.”

Local Authority project for people affected by drug addiction (ADDER funded)

“We're working with Peer Circles to increase the number of long term ETE outcomes for our clients. The biggest impact the project has is for people with the most complex support needs and they're the most challenging to engage and support. It includes some who have been to us before. They have high levels of trauma and institutionalisation. I haven't seen huge ETE outcomes but more powerful is the journey – they are more meaningfully engaged in their lives and the support and that has to come first. The big wins in this environment are very simple – someone feeling that they can stay in their flat for an hour without feeling traumatised. We need to look at how we define outcomes so that we can properly evidence that progress.

What makes Peer Circles different is that St Giles doesn't have the corporate positioning and inflexibility of bigger providers of services for drug users. It allows them to be flexible. It's about limiting severe risks, taking the right steps and finding a way in to begin with and they can do that. So the caseworker we have with us (a Peer Circles client who trained as a Peer Advisor and then went into paid casework), she may go off piste a bit to do her job, but she is a person who is working with people effectively and that gives much better outcomes. Lived experience is really helpful. It's not a universal panacea and blended teams work really well. We don't currently have service users moving into paid jobs but we are looking at how we bring lived experience in at strategic level. We want to work with Peer Circles on that and the work will be informed by Peer Circles.”

Team Manager, Housing Provider

“They've built a really fantastic relationship with us. We've had staff based with Peer Circles with the project and I've managed that since 2019. We take referrals of clients for housing and also offer consultancy – they can talk to us about housing issues and get advice. The relationship has developed organically and staff have felt very involved all through. Before Covid, our staff member was based in the Peer Circles office four days a week, and then overnight she needed to start homeworking. Doing things virtually worked well, but she came into the office one day a week. For the clients, being able to pop into the office is a real advantage, it's really important. Peer Circles kept going in the same way all through the

two and half years of the pandemic. They kept people engaged – outcomes and numbers weren't affected. They maintained the relationships.

The major issues for Peer Circles clients include being stuck in temporary accommodation and hostels, and the local authorities not fulfilling their duties around housing. A prison leaver can be in that situation for 5 years. There's been a big increase in the number of hotels being used for accommodation. It has a big impact on people with complex needs. If you have a mental health issue, it's not a good place to be and for those with addiction issues, if they are placed in a hotel with people who use drugs they know there's a high chance they'll go back to using.

Peer Circles is really unique and needed. There aren't other places to go for people with complex needs. Citizens Advice and others give advice but they're not geared up for people like that. Probation has some support but again it's not the same. Doing this job I've learnt how under skilled the prisons are at helping people for release. To have somewhere that offers the Peer Advisors, ETE, housing and for it all to feel so friendly for people with complex needs is unique. It's a great way for vulnerable people to access services. The client journey is put first and foremost. Local authorities and probation don't know how to work with people who have those needs. For Peer Circles clients, the risk of re-offending or of needing medical intervention is so high if they don't get the right help and Peer Circles makes a huge difference to their lives. They also make working in partnership really easy. It would be great if they could have centres around London. If local authorities worked together on funding they could have a Peer Circles office serving their boroughs."

Clear cost benefits of Peer Circles interventions

The cost benefit analysis has taken a conservative approach, highlighting the **main** costs to the public purse through individuals' involvement in crime and/or their experiences of homelessness, addiction, domestic violence and other trauma – there are a number of other costs such as those for police arrest and interview, court costs and additional health costs that are not included. Calculations also do not include the cost of welfare benefits which are significant, but rather focus on the issues that have affected individuals.

A summary of the savings resulting from clients not returning to offending, drug addiction and homelessness illustrates the scale:

| Case | Cost prior to Peer Circles engagement and progress | Cost of Peer Circles support and other interventions | Minimum savings per year assuming continued positive progress |
|---------|--|--|--|
| Heather | £565,105 | £3,364 | £72,000 |
| Francis | £596,387 | £3,149 | £76,000 |
| Alexa | £971,923 | £4,600 | £43,000 |

The figures clearly show that even taking this very conservative approach, for a very modest investment (around £3,000), people can be helped to move away from all the negative issues that have affected them and at the same time considerably save public expenditure. The following examples give more detail on the backgrounds of the clients and breakdowns of costs.

Case A – Heather, 52 years old

Heather started on Peer Circles in May 2018. Her background is explained in an earlier section of the report, but in brief she has had several custodial sentences, and experienced addiction, sex working, being a victim of domestic violence, homelessness, racism, poverty and the resulting stigma, rejection and isolation. Even when Heather had managed to stop the drug use that resulted in custodial sentences *“when I came out of prison I was short of money so I still did bits of crime to get by.”* Heather has had some more positive periods through her life but had not been able to sustain this stability.

It took some time for her to establish relationships of trust with Peer Circles staff but it quickly became apparent that the Level 3 IAG training and development to become a Peer Advisor would be a way of enabling her to use her skills and lived experience to support others. At this point Heather also began to establish her own cleaning business. She has progressed steadily from a volunteer Peer Advisor in 2018 to her first paid job as a Trainee Caseworker in 2020, culminating in her promotion to Senior Caseworker in 2021. She now contributes around £6,000 per year to the public purse through taxation.

Heather is a highly valued member of staff. In the words of her manager: *“Heather works stronger and longer than any other staff member. She has over time carved out a leadership role, supporting other staff - the person who regularly brings in fruit and veg to ensure both staff and peer advisors are eating --- even managers. Heather is now the lead single point of contact to Hackney Public Health as part of the Hackney Accelerator home office project.”*

| Heather Unit costs | Costs (£) | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| | Prior to engagement with Peer Circles | Peer Circles support and interventions | Post Peer Circles: minimum savings per year assuming continued progress |
| Imprisonment: £48,409 pa including regional/national costs x 10 years | £484,090 (10 years) | | £48,000 |
| Drug offence conviction £16,000 | £16,000 | | |
| Homelessness £24,000 - £30,000 (emergency accommodation, some drug treatment) | £24,000 | | £24,000 |
| Addiction treatment - £1,100-£9,800 depending on type of treatment | £7,000 | | |
| Domestic violence £34,015 | £34,015 | | |
| Peer Circles casework support £2,600 per client average (inc Level 3 IAG & volunteer expenses) | | £2,600 | |
| Other support Business start up £474.58 (vacuum cleaner and cleaning supplies) Public liability insurance £289.46 | | £474.58 £289.46 | |
| Totals | £565,105 | £3,364 | £72,000 |

Case B – Francis, in his early thirties

Francis was released from prison in late 2020 having served a 4 year sentence. This was the most recent period in custody, having been in prison on and off since over the last 13 years. Prior to leaving prison in 2020, Francis’s brother was convicted and sentenced to custody. Francis has been the victim of a shooting (flesh wound) and suffers from PTSD. He is very anxious and on medication. He also had debts of £3,000. Francis was met on release and the caseworker helped to get him a mobile phone, set up a UC application and get a haircut. A referral was made to Shelter for housing support as he was currently living in approved premises, as well as help to buy food and get a bus pass. He was also helped to get a passport, update his CV and to find work. During his time on Peer Circles Francis was again given a custodial sentence for an offence committed prior to his engagement with the project. The caseworker continued to support him during and after his release. After his second engagement with Peer Circles and further support, Francis got a paid 6 month warehouse contract which ended in May 2022 but gave him good experience and something positive for his CV, as well contributing around £1,500 to the public purse through tax. He is now being supported by Peer Circles to train as a personal trainer.

| Francis Unit costs | Costs (£) | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| | Prior to engagement with Peer Circles | Peer Circles support and interventions | Post Peer Circles: minimum savings per year assuming continued progress |
| Imprisonment: £48,409 pa including regional/national costs | £508,294 (10.5 years) | | £48,000 (1 year) |
| Drug offence conviction £16,000 | £64,000 (4) | | £4,000 (1) |
| Hospital ED Minors @ £93 per attendance (gunshot) | £93 | | |
| Homelessness £24,000 - £30,000 (includes emergency accommodation, some drug treatment) | £24,000 | | £24,000 |
| Peer Circles casework support £2,600 per client average (inc Level 3 IAG & volunteer expenses) | | £2,600 | |
| Other support Passport, shopping, haircut, bus pass, phone & credit, clothing Personal trainer grant | | £548.69 £1,200 | |
| Totals | £596,387 | 3,148.69 | £76,000 |

Case C – Alexa in her late twenties

Alexa grew up in a variety of Children’s Homes and was abused whilst living in one of them. She was removed from her mother who also had 11 other children removed. Her grandmother also had 8 children removed, including Alexa’s mother. Between 13 and 27 years of age, Alexa had given birth to 10 children, all of whom have been removed from her care. In 2018 when she engaged in Peer Circles, her youngest child was 6 weeks old. Her mother and grandmother had encouraged her to have children ‘to get back at the Government and make them pay’ – the same justification they had used themselves. Alexa’s mother is a also a drug user although Alexa is not.

Alexa dropped out of school at 12, has no qualifications and has never worked. She loves to write but clearly has some form of hidden disability in addition to the other challenges she faces, as well as some form of delayed emotional development which means she presents and acts as someone well below her chronological age. She has not been assessed or diagnosed. Since leaving care, Alexa has lived in social housing but doesn't manage well and has rent arrears. At the point of engagement, Alexa had had a two year relationship with the father of her youngest child and he lived in her flat. He has a diagnosis of ADHD and has moderate/severe learning difficulties. He came with Alexa to her meetings with the caseworker. She found him activities to do whilst she worked on her own with Alexa.

Alexa also has an offending history including stalking, theft, breach of the peace, sexual harassment and several breaches of court orders. She has had a number of short, frequent custodial sentences.

The caseworker, over 4 years, has address a huge range of issues affecting Alexa including intergenerational abuse and unemployment, very poor self-image and self-confidence, the impact of multiple traumas, learned helplessness, lack of positive social bonds and relationships, limiting beliefs about herself, absence of experience and understanding of daily routines (personal, home, work) to name but a few. Over this time, through painstaking and consistent work, Alexa's achievements include:

- No reoffending
- No new pregnancies
- Self belief in her capabilities, strength and resilience in dealing with life
- Ability to take actions towards her own care and growth – personal, home, work
- Ability to keep boundaries in place for relationships – she is still in the same relationship but the young man now lives in his own flat
- Volunteering in a charity shop
- Movement into part-time sales assistant work which she loves and has been in for 5 months at the time of writing this report

Note that the costs below include only the first year of foster care for each of Alexa's 10 children taken into local authority care, but they do not include the cost of Alexa's time in the care system, or the various legal proceedings in relation to her offending or care proceedings.

| Alexa Unit costs | Costs (£) | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| | Prior to engagement with Peer Circles | Peer Circles support and interventions | Post Peer Circles: minimum savings per year assuming continued progress |
| Imprisonment: £48,409 pa | £96,818 (2 years) | | £32,000 (4 months) |
| Foster care per year | £310,000 (10 babies) | | £31,000 (1 baby) |
| Peer Circles casework support £2,600 per client average (inc Level 3 IAG & volunteer expenses) | | £2,600 | |
| Other support Birth Certificate and Passport Gym membership Kitchen equipment, food & general household Personal items and haircuts for personal hygiene Phone & credit, laptop Clothing | | £2,000 | |
| Totals | £971,923 | £4,600 | £43,000 |

Endnote

Peer Circles has continued to deliver vital and uniquely delivered support and services for highly disadvantaged people with complex needs. Since it began in 2017 it has grown and developed, and since the last evaluation in March 2020 has seen a key project aspiration come to life: people with complex needs moving into volunteer and paid roles supporting others in that position.

During the lifetime of the project, circumstances for people with severe and multiple deprivation have worsened considerably and show no sign of easing – rather they are likely to worsen. Peer Circles has remained a constant anchor point of consistent, non-judgemental yet firm support, much valued by partner organisations as well as clients.

It is hoped that the work of the project will be recognised, not simply as a safety net but rather as an innovative, highly cost effective and evolving service that has significant best practice that should continue and be shared widely.

Appendix A: Key questions used by Peer Evaluators

First discussion:

1. How did you hear about Peer Circles?
2. What made you decide to come to the service?
3. What are the main things that you'd like to get help with?
4. What was it like when you first came to the centre/hub/office? How did you feel?
5. What was the good thing about your first visit? What do you think could be improved?
6. What happened when you left? How did you feel?
7. What made you come back?
8. Have you been to other services? How do you think Peer Circles is different?
9. How do you feel about the future on Peer Circles?

Second discussion:

1. How have you been getting on since we last met?
2. What support/training/opportunities have you been involved in?
3. Thinking about Peer Circles overall, what have you enjoyed/found helpful so far (support, training, making friends, environment etc.) and why?
4. How do you feel in comparison to when you first started?
5. What are you looking forward to? Why?
6. What are you concerned/anxious about? Why?
7. Have there been any things that haven't worked so well for you or any suggestions for improvement?

Third discussion:

1. How have you been getting on since we last met?
2. What support/training/opportunities have you been involved in?
3. Thinking about Peer Circles overall, what have you enjoyed/found helpful so far (support, training, making friends, environment etc.) and why?
4. How do you feel in comparison to when you first started?
5. Where do you think you might be now if you hadn't have come on Peer Circles?
6. What are you looking forward to? Why?
7. What are you concerned/anxious about? Why?
8. Have there been any things that haven't worked so well for you or any suggestions for improvement?

Appendix B: Sources for costings

Costs per place and costs per prisoner by individual prison, HM Prison & Probation Service Annual Report and Accounts 2020-21 Management Information Addendum. MOJ Information Release, 27/01/22

Evidence Review of the Cost of Homelessness – DCLG, August 2012

Parents with Problem Drug and Alcohol Use – Investing in Families Workbook, Public Health England/HM Treasury, May 2021

Economic & Social Costs of Domestic Abuse, Research Report 107, Home Office, January 2019

The Economic and Social Costs of Crime, Second Edition, Research Report 99, July 2018

The Economic and Social Costs of Reoffending, Analytical Report, Ministry of Justice, 2019

Greater Manchester CBA Model DBASE 2017, Greater Manchester Combined Authority