

Peer Circles:

Creating Positive Change for People with Complex Needs

Interim Evaluation

January 2023

“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.”

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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 38% 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**

“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.....I would have been depressed. I can’t imagine my life without St Giles.” **Client**

- ♦ **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 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:** clients training, getting experience as Peer Advisor volunteers and moving into paid work supporting others with complex needs. Over one third of Peer Circles staff are former clients, with a further 22 working in support roles in other organisations. 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.

“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 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.” **Caseworker and former client**

“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.” **Caseworker and former client**

- ♦ **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’. 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

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

“Being a woman, Abi understands, she sees things from a women's point of view.....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 and job outcomes alone don’t reflect progress:** the vast majority of clients 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

“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 response. I spoke to my team and they are also really keen on the project and building closer links." **Addiction 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 significant savings to the public purse.** Peer Circles costs around £2,500 – £3,000 per client, comparing very favourably with, for example, the Government's recent Restart programme (£2,429 for less complex people). Identifying the costs to the state arising from a client prior to their engagement on Peer Circles (criminal justice, social care etc.), assuming continued progress after leaving the project average savings per year are around £60,000 per client – using a very conservative approach. This figure doesn't include the contributions made by clients through taxation on earnings etc. It demonstrates that in addition to positive impact for individuals, families and communities, Peer Circles 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, and in tackling the impacts of significant mental and physical health issues, homelessness, unemployment and trauma. The personal, social and cost benefits of the approach speak for themselves: 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 establishing 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 with complex needs 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

Running since 2017, Peer Circles is jointly funded through the Big Lottery and European Social Fund. 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. There are references to a number of areas covered in previous reports, but it is recommended that they should be read in full for the most comprehensive picture of the Peer Circles project. Interviews and cost benefit analysis for this current evaluation phase began in June 2022 and figures 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

This evaluation phase included an innovative element of Peer Evaluation. Peer Circles' clients were offered training and support to carry out interviews with clients. The Peer Evaluation practice being developed by SGT is giving a valuable additional perspective on the impact of services including 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, very helpful 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, 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 serious and complex needs. The project soon reached capacity and to date has supported 1333 people, of which:

- ♦ 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 them. 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 a project 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 challenges faced by 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.

Staff moved to video and phone contact from home whilst keeping the office open on a rotating skeleton staff for clients who needed some in-person contact to maintain stability. 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, combined with Peer Circles funding enabled laptops, phones, connectivity and other essentials to be provided to clients. Support via SGT's Pantry, along with 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.

Project partners commented on the positive impact that Peer Circles had during the very challenging times of the pandemic:

“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.” **Probation Service**

“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.” **Substance Misuse Project**

“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.” **Housing Provider**

Providing the right environment for people with complex needs to progress

Peer Circles has overachieved on all project targets for engagements, targeting and indicators of change. Good headway has also been made in achieving ETE targets.

Peer Circles clients experience significant 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 explains why it takes an average of 11 months for an economically inactive Peer Circles client to move into work, and 8 months for an unemployed client. 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 these challenges, Peer Circles has supported clients to develop the self-confidence, self-belief, skills and attributes to move into a range of training, employment and self-employment outcomes as follows:

Outcome	Project Target %	Actual end September 2022	
		Number of clients	% of total clients
Number who move into education or training on leaving	17%	201	15%
Number who move into employment, including self-employment	25%	305	23%

These impressive outcomes have been achieved during a period that includes the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath when training and jobs were either unavailable or much more difficult to access. Even when the worst of the pandemic had passed, client anxiety about mixing with others and using public transport and the impact of the cost of living crisis – revealed in ongoing research – means that supporting people into these positive outcomes is even more challenging.

Engaging clients who are economically inactive (as distinct from those unemployed) 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, is due to a number of factors including those cited above, 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.
- Women are more likely than men to be economically inactive but form only one quarter of the Peer Circles cohort – partly because the probation service is a significant referral route and the prison/offending population is predominantly male. That said, the proportion of women engaged has increased over the life of the project.
- Ex-offenders face particular barriers to employment and may also have restrictions related to their offending/licence conditions.

It should also be noted that the move to the gig economy followed by the economic impact of the pandemic has created very challenging conditions for employment for people who have significant barriers to work. Current and ongoing research highlights how particular cohorts such as people from BAME groups, women and those affected by disadvantage have been disproportionately adversely affected by the pandemic in terms of health, education and employment. This highlights the additional structural challenges facing Peer Circles clients.

Achieving vital progress leading to ETE outcomes

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	% of total cohort
Participants have improved housing, wellbeing and self esteem	Participants report improvements in their housing	648	172%	49%
	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. Peer Circles would benefit from developing other ways of assessing these indicators in the future to gain a more accurate picture of these vital elements of project impact.

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 can also access funding for training, clothing and a host of other necessities. 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 difficult 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 taught course completion and achievement of the full qualification largely arises from completing the practical placements where trainees use their skills, under supervision, to support clients face-to-face. Difficulties include clients lacking confidence, concerns about triggering trauma and/or not realising what the role would 'feel' like. The pandemic also impacted on course delivery and the availability of placements for face-to-face practice.

That said, 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 clients who have previously had very poor learning experiences:

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

“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. I also studied Health and Social Care and got a Level 3, and now I’m in the second year of a BSc at UEL.”

Partners also commented on the value of offering the qualification: *“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.”* **Substance Misuse Provider**

The IAG training, whilst relating to a relatively small proportion of the Peer Circles cohort, is significant given the complex needs of clients. An even greater achievement 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 vulnerable individuals, as well as working in partnership with a range of professionals.

“I have to pinch myself that it’s real.....Once I knew what the Peer Advisor idea involved I knew it was just for me.....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."

"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."

Arising from the experience of developing this innovative model of practice, essential features for successful delivery include:

- Careful and sensitive screening and assessment for 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 (and those who go on to paid roles), including clinical supervision to help them deal with challenging situations that have the potential to retraumatise them, and flexible working when required.
- A supportive network of family or friends is common to all those who have successfully trained and become a Peer Advisor. It is vital for volunteers to have good work-life balance and positive relationships outside of their role in order to deal with the sometimes very challenging issues presented by clients.

The support provided for Peer Advisors and those in paid caseworker roles, and the importance of this in enabling them to sustain and flourish in their work is reflected in their feedback.

"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."

"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."

"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."

"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."

The power of the lived experience model to turn lives around

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 brief examples show the range, seriousness and complexity of the challenges facing clients and the impact of Peer Circles support. All three are now in employment in a variety of different roles.

“Three years after my time on Peer Circles I’m managing to house and rehabilitate others who are ex-offenders. 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 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.” **An ex-offender, victim of abuse, with significant mental health issues who has also experienced addiction and homelessness**

“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.....St Giles do a good job. It makes life easier for me – smooths the pathway in all areas. 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.” **An ex-offender who experienced serious trauma as a child, followed by addiction issues, and who took a number of years to finally engage with St Giles through Peer Circles**

“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 what I’ve learnt...I can pass on that experience and knowledge to others. It means they have more flexibility over their working lives.” **A serial offender, former sex worker, drug user and victim of domestic violence who has experienced homelessness**

Specialist support 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, being a lone parent and experiencing significant levels of shame and very poor self esteem, as the following examples illustrate.

“When I was released from prison I was in a terrible state.....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 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. 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. I still have trust issues but the consistent support from one person is so useful.” **Victim of childhood and domestic abuse involving fleeing overseas, she was denied contact with her children when given a custodial sentence. She is now volunteering as a stepping stone to paid work.**

"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. Regaining my self-belief so that I could get qualifications (AAT Level 3 Accountancy) and a job was the biggest challenge for me.....

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." **Victim of domestic violence and coercive control, lost her home and custody of her children as a result of a custodial sentence, now working and has reconnected with her children**

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....I was looking for someone who believed that I could do something with my life. I'm not young, I'm older, so I need support really from someone I can trust, as I don't believe that others (services) do listen.*

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. She said that she was just going to listen to me and that we could go through the forms next time.....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."

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. 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**

"Peer Circles is a step up to the support that we offer our clients. 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 DV organisation**

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

The partnerships that Peer Circles has developed over the years are there for the benefit of the clients, focused on meeting their 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', as well as ensuring Peer Circles can offer supported referral to experts in housing, substance misuse, immigration, welfare benefits mental health etc. where needed. Organisations' feedback highlights the value they place on the project and identify it as uniquely able to help those with complex needs, in particular:

→ **Effective and flexible client centred partnership working that takes support to them**

"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." **Probation Service**

"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." **Substance Misuse Organisation**

"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." **Clinical Occupational Therapist**

"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.”
Local Authority Substance Misuse Project

→ **Positive impacts on reducing the likelihood of reoffending**

“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.” **Probation Service**

“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.”

Housing Provider

→ **Providing realistic yet optimistic support for people with serious mental health needs**

“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.” **Clinical Occupational Therapist**

→ **Practical help delivered quickly to alleviate barriers to living and progressing towards work**

“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.” **Probation Service**

“The range of help is excellent – I just got housing support for one of them who has now moved into sheltered accommodation.....Getting ID is so basic but always difficult for the clients. The project also helps with confidence building, supporting access to part-time courses.” **Substance Misuse Service**

→ **A unique service with nothing similar available for people with complex needs**

“In terms of provision for over 25s there’s not really any similar projects.... 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.” **Probation Service**

“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.” **Housing Provider**

Clear cost benefits of Peer Circles interventions

A cost benefit analysis was not originally planned for the project but some estimates have been worked through to identify the scale of savings that result from the support provided by the project. A sample of Peer Circles cases in the table below illustrates this.

Peer Circles costs, on average £3,000 per person, including the Level 3 qualification and provision of a wide range of items/training etc. for individual requirements eg: ID, furniture, clothing, equipment, external training etc. Caseworker support alone is costed at around £2,600.

Calculations for public sector costs focused on key issues experienced by clients prior to engagement on Peer Circles (Column A), for example:

- Imprisonment: £48,409 pa including regional/national costs
- Drug offence conviction: £16,000
- Homelessness: £24,000 - £30,000 (emergency accommodation, some drug treatment)
- Addiction treatment: £1,100-£9,800 depending on type of treatment
- Domestic violence: £34,015
- Foster care (for children removed from client): £31,000 pa per child

Figures for public sector costs are estimated and a number of other costs are not included such as those for welfare benefits whilst not in work, police arrest and interview, court costs and additional health costs.

Savings (Column C) are calculated on the basis that clients are all either working and/or are training for a specific career and have stabilised their lives. The figures do not include the contributions to the public purse through taxation made by clients once they are working.

	A	B	C
Client	Cost prior to Peer Circles engagement and progress	Cost of Peer Circles support and other interventions	Minimum savings per year assuming continued positive progress and reduced or no cost to the state
A serial offender, former sex worker, drug user and victim of domestic violence who has experienced homelessness.	£565,105	£3,364	£72,000
A serial offender over the course of 13 years, with the last sentence of 4 years. Suffering with PTSD from being a victim of a shooting, very anxious, in debt and homeless.	£596,387	£3,149	£76,000
A former looked after child and victim of intergenerational abuse, with multiple births from her early teens and all children removed. Diagnosed with ADHD and a learning disability. No qualifications or work record	£971,923	£4,600	£47,000

These client case summaries demonstrate the significant savings from engagement in Peer Circles, added to the personal, family and community benefits that the project brings.

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

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.