

The Peer Circles Project

Final Evaluation Report

Introduction

The Peer Circles project is funded through Big Lottery/European Social Fund (ESF) Building Better Opportunities (BBO). The original funding period ran from January 2017 to December 2019, and funding has subsequently been granted to extend the project for a further 2.5 years. The lead provider is St Giles Trust (SGT), with end-to-end delivery partner Evolve. The project aims to provide support and activities for people with complex needs and severe and multiple disadvantage (SMD), with the intention of helping them to improve their employability and/or progress into sustainable employment.

An interim evaluation and report were delivered in 2018. This evaluation builds on this earlier work, assessing the performance, impact and development of Peer Circles up to December 2019, focusing on:

- Key areas of strength and innovation, including particularly important elements of the project such as the Peer Advisor model, partnership approach and response to the complex nature of the client group
- Any significant deviation from planned project activity, challenges and/or critical areas of underperformance, the reasons for these and how they have been addressed
- How the project is operating in the wider context

This report seeks to avoid duplication and will therefore make reference to key points raised in the interim report rather than repeating them. For this reason, the two reports are best read in conjunction with each other.

Methodology

The evaluation took place between December 2019 and February 2020. Methodology included:

- Group and individual discussions with Peer Advisors and clients engaging with the project through SGT and Evolve
- A group development session held with front line and management staff (SGT & Evolve), and Crisis, in early December 2019 to review the project, identifying key strengths, areas for development and actions to take forward Peer Circles
- Individual discussions with SGT and Evolve project staff and managers, and key personnel from external organisations including referral partners and specialist providers working with Peer Circles
- Review of all paper/electronic project monitoring materials, including a recent internal data analysis of the client cohort

Discussions were guided by a set of key questions, tailored for each respondent group, to ensure consistency of approach. Direct quotes are shown in italics and speech marks but are not attributed to individuals in order to protect confidentiality. Where participants have named staff and volunteers working with them, these have been changed to 'caseworker' or 'Peer Advisor' to maintain confidentiality.

Overview January 2017- December 2019

Peer Circles is intended to help support those experiencing severe and multiple deprivation (SMD) so that they are able to tackle their complex issues, develop their self-confidence and skills and progress towards and into work. The term SMD encompasses a wide range of barriers and needs, with many participants experiencing two or more of the following issues:

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

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

This section of the report provides an overview for the 3 year period from January 2017 to December 2019. It is followed by a second section that looks in more detail at the progress made since the interim report in September 2018.

Clients with highly complex and challenging needs

By the end of December 2019, Peer Circles had engaged a total of 824 clients – representing an overachievement of 44% on the target of 571. The additional client numbers were agreed between SGT and the Big Lottery with the purpose of enabling the project to attract more women and economically inactive clients, and to help provide further opportunities to meet employment related outcomes.

As shown in the table below, Peer Circles has continued to target the specific cohorts for which the project is intended:

	3 year target	Actual Jan 2017- Sept 2018		Actual Jan 2017 - Dec 2019		% in relation to the 3 year target number
		Number	% of total clients (451)	Number	% of total clients (824)	
Total clients recruited	571	451		824		144%
Women	228 (40%)	118	26%	226	27%	99%
Men	342 (60%)	332	74%	598	72%	175%
Unemployed	200 (35%)	213	47%	447	54%	223%
Economically inactive	370 (65%)	238	53%	378	46%	102%
Over 50s	57 (10%)	86	19%	162	20%	284%
Disabled	228 (40%)	192	43%	336	41%	147%
Ethnic minorities	313 (55%)	238	53%	447	54%	143%

In terms of **number**, all the planned cohort targets have been achieved or overachieved, demonstrating that the additional recruitment has enabled the project to meet its commitment to engaging women and those who are economically inactive. That said, the profile of the cohort illustrates the difficulty in reaching these groups – and experience shared by TMD, the sister BBO London project led by Crisis. The challenges and progress with regard to recruiting more women and economically inactive clients are explored later in the report.

95% of clients come from the target boroughs, with one third coming from Islington. Significant numbers of clients also come from Lambeth, Camden, Southwark and Lewisham boroughs. The majority of clients are aged between 35 and 49 years old.

Referral data for the project show that self-referral accounts for 42% of client engagements – double the proportion at the interim evaluation stage. It indicates that the project has a good profile and that clients encourage others to come to the project because of the positive impact it is having for them. The probation service is the next largest referrer at 24%, again representing a significant rise from the previous 13%. Housing providers remain an important referral source although the proportion received from these organisations has reduced from 40% to 13%. A key factor will be the that one of the original project partners, Look Ahead which is a housing provider, left the project at an early stage.

Self-referral (word of mouth, direct contact with SGT/Evolve)	357	42%		Mental health service providers	38	4%
National Probation Service	202	24%		Substance misuse service providers	24	3%
Housing providers	113	13%		Other SGT projects	25	3%
DWP	62	7%		Other	34	4%

Data collection and analysis has been developing throughout the life of the project, responding to the recommendation in the interim evaluation. It is beginning to reveal useful information that can help to shape service development and delivery, including the extent and complexity of clients’ needs and issues on engaging with Peer Circles:

- Of the 824 clients recruited, 48% declared themselves homeless. Slightly more female clients (58%) declared themselves homeless than men (45%).
- 67% of men and 42% of women in the cohort have a history of offending. There are likely to be a number of contributing factors to this difference including the fact that there a simply far more male ex-offenders than female and that SGT has another service, Footsteps that is specifically for newly released women ex-offenders with mental health issues.
- An 80% sample of clients for which data is available shows that:
 - 59% declare a mental health issue
 - 41% declare a substance misuse issue

These figures are likely to increase once full data capture is completed.

- The average length of time for which an unemployed client has been out of work before they move into employment on the project is 4.5 years.

- The average length of time it takes an economically inactive client to move into work once they are on the project is 11 months, and for an unemployed client it is 8 months
- In comparison to unemployed clients, economically inactive clients are more likely to:
 - Have poor basic skills (33%) and poor education
 - Have a disability
 - Have issues with mental health and/or substance misuse
- Women clients are more likely to be economically inactive than male clients.
- Analysis of a sample of women clients shows that 40% reported being victims of domestic abuse
- There are emerging gender differences in patterns of presenting needs/issues. Housing appears to be the most common issue presented by men, whereas mental health and domestic abuse are more frequently reported by women.

Outcomes

Client outcomes have continued to be achieved in the remaining project period with some notable successes in terms of improvements in achievement rates, as detailed in the table below.

Outcome	Target end Dec 2019		Actual end Sept 2018		Actual end Dec 2019	
	Number	% of total (571)	Number	% of total (451)	Number	% of total (824)
People recruited onto project	571		451	79%	824	144%
People progressing into education and training	97	25%	11	2%	82	10%
People progressing into employment	143	25%	43	8%	137	17%
People sustaining employment for 26 out of 32 weeks	81	14%	7	1%	49	6%
100 economically inactive people progressing into further job search	100	17%	6	1%	39	5%
Peer Advisors complete initial Learning to Advise training course	50	n/a	37	n/a	77	n/a
Peer Advisors achieve full Level 3 Advice & Guidance qualification	45	n/a	5	n/a	25	n/a

As highlighted in the interim report, education, training and employment (ETE) outcomes are particularly challenging to achieve for people with SMD. This is reflected in the outcome figures for the period up to December 2019. However, it can be seen that there has been very significant improvement across the board in the period from September 2018 to December 2019. Rates into the range of ETE options have doubled or more, demonstrating significant progress in finding ways of supporting people with complex needs into positive outcomes.

Sustained employment outcomes show a particularly impressive improvement. This is also probably due to the fact that project experience demonstrates that it takes on average between 11 and 13 months to help an economically inactive person into work, and therefore many who joined the project in 2019 will not have reached this point of stability until some time in 2020.

It is also important to note that data collection and staff understanding of how the project outcomes are measured and the fact that more than one outcome per client was eligible to be counted has meant that a significant number of positive outcomes were not recorded in the first 18 months of project delivery. This means that Peer Circles is likely to have achieved a higher number of ETE outcomes, particularly in respect of exit into education, training and jobsearch.

Peer Advisor recruitment and initial training has continued to increase, however, the project is still finding it challenging to progress trainees through to achievement of the full Level 3 qualification. This is considered in more detail later in the report, along with the other learning from the project's trialling of the Peer Advisor element.

Soft outcomes are key to progression

Hard ETE outcomes are only a part of the story of progress and achievement for Peer Circles clients. The table below shows the important progress made in supporting clients to access services and overcome barriers so that they are able to move towards more stable lives and, eventually, employment.

Project Outcomes	Indicators of Change	Target over 3 years	Achieved to end Sept 2018	Achieved to end Dec 2019	% of 3 year target
Participants have improved housing, wellbeing and self esteem	Participants report improvements in their housing	376	157	346	92%
	Participants attending mental health and/or substance misuse services	286	146	285	99%
	Participants report increased levels of self-esteem	457	183	488	106%
Participants have improved relationships	Participants report positive support from Peer Advisors	457	61	201	44%
	Participants report reduced levels of isolation	376	61	223	59%
	Participants report improved	376	93	233	62%

Project Outcomes	Indicators of Change	Target over 3 years	Achieved to end Sept 2018	Achieved to end Dec 2019	% of 3 year target
	relationships with positive friends and family				
Participants are more able to access the services, training and support they need	Participants using other services independently	376	66	238	63%
	Participants reporting increased levels of confidence in using services	376	72	247	66%
Peer Advisors develop the skills to support their peers whilst becoming more employable	Peer Advisors report improved confidence in their employability	50	24	49	98%

It is important to note that the information on soft outcomes is self reported. Whilst it provides a very useful indicator of trends, this type of data collection often suffers from under reporting. Clients may forget to fill in feedback forms, or only respond to the questions that they feel most important. Nonetheless the results are very positive.

The most notable achievements are in respect of improvements in tackling issues around housing, mental health, substance misuse and lack of self-esteem. As highlighted, these are essential building blocks required for outcomes in other areas. There are good levels of improvement in other areas such as relationships, reductions in isolation and greater independent use of other services – key parts of the ethos of the Peer Circles project. It would be expected that these elements will take longer for clients to achieve – as with ETE outcomes, those who joined the project later in 2019 will need time to build their self-confidence to levels that enable these outcomes to be realised which is likely to happen in 2020.

With regard to Peer Advisor related outcomes. The relatively low reported rate of 44% of clients receiving positive support from Peer Advisors is due to the lower than planned number of Peer Advisors working on the project which means that not as many clients as anticipated have received support. This is discussed in more detail later in the report. That said, it is very positive to note that 98% of those training as Peer Advisors felt that their employability had improved as a result.

Building on experience: developments from mid 2018 to December 2019

This section of the report examines and reflects in more detail on key themes and learning arising from this final evaluation, including the project review and development session that took place in December 2019. A summary of notes and actions arising from this session is presented in the appendix to this report.

The interim evaluation findings in respect of the positive impacts for clients, Peer Advisors and partners are confirmed by this final evaluation phase. New information and feedback is included here to add to the evidence and analysis provided in the interim report.

Continuing to create positive impact for the most disadvantaged

Peer Circles has continued to provide holistic and high quality support for people with a wide variety of significant and complex barriers to finding stability and paths to sustainable employment. The project is making a real and positive difference to the lives of those that it supports. Clients interviewed for this final evaluation echoed the comments of those taking part at the interim stage:

“When I came out of prison I needed help. St Giles is just the right place – they’ve done the lock up, they know how you feel. It’s a little nugget of gold that they have and other charities don’t. It means you have a connection. They’ve supported me through some really dark times. I’d been away a long time – 15 years. The digital world was a real shock. I had no idea how to do things. But they’ve helped me to get PTS training and now I’m looking into doing further training for a career like an OLEC apprenticeship. I wouldn’t be doing any of this without the confidence and help that St Giles has given me. They are a godsend.”

“When I came to Peer Circles I had so many problems. My daughter was an alcoholic and she had come on the project and got help. She is doing well now. My health was really bad and I wasn’t going out at all. I felt ashamed at where I had ended up. But they don’t look down on you. They cuddled me. They made me feel that I was cared about. With all their support my mobility is gradually improving. I didn’t have any clothes to fit me and the manager just said ‘Come and meet me at the shop’. So I did and I haven’t seen any manager be like that. He chose things with me. He treated me like a lady. I can’t tell you what that meant. He is so humble and caring. It’s a long journey but I do voluntary work now and I see a future. I have some confidence back.”

“Peer Circles is much better than just getting medication from the mental health team. They just fill you up with pills, but the project really helps – real progression needs real people.”

“My biggest challenge was always housing. I knew it was making me really anxious but I had no idea how badly it was affecting my kids. They are thrilled to be moving. My next challenge was fear of going out and meeting people, but the project has really helped me to overcome that.”

“I came to Peer Circles when I needed support. My history includes gang affiliation, homelessness, mental health issues and domestic violence. I needed a new look at life. I got so much help it has transformed me, and then I thought I can do what I want to do.”

"I was suffering mental health issues and was homeless having just moved back to London. Things were tough but once I got into Peer Circles I started to stabilise and the all round support was a great help. They supported me when my dad died. This place feels like family."

"I'm now doing a cooking course and hope to work in a restaurant some day. It's good for my health because now I cook. Before I just opened tins and packets."

This feedback and other testimonials previously reported demonstrate the breadth and depth of need and support experienced by the Peer Circles cohort. The soft outcomes presented earlier in the report reflect the positive progress that the majority of clients experience, as well as the 'baby steps' required by many, especially those with the most complex needs who are farthest from even considering entering the labour market.

The impact that caseworkers are able to achieve is particularly notable given the high caseloads that they carry – an average of 25 active clients plus a further 30 who have more chaotic levels of engagement but are not disengaged because many of them will eventually be able to be fully involved with the project and begin to make progress. This latter point is very pertinent. It is one of the factors contributing to the over recruitment to the project and it is one of the key reasons why highly vulnerable clients and partner agencies alike single out Peer Circles as a uniquely accessible, flexible and positive service.

Housing and 'decent living' support is critical – the holistic approach

Since the interim evaluation, more detailed data has begun to be collected on the specific support given to clients. From mid 2018 to the end of December 2019, data for 403 clients who have experienced improvements in their housing circumstances has been gathered and reveals that:

- 144 were supported to get furniture for their flats
- 89 were provided with financial support to improve housing situation
- 241 were supported into supported accommodation
- 27 were supported to sustain tenancies
- 70 were given assistance to save their homes
- 263 were given additional specialist housing support
- 163 were referred to a housing provider

Since the client cohort has not changed in any significant way since the beginning of the project, it is reasonable to assume that further analysis of the whole project client group will reveal a similar pattern.

What these outcomes don't illustrate is the immense positive impact resulting from such interventions. If these 403 clients had not received support to help them with housing issues, they are highly likely to have either remained or be made homeless, adding to the rising street homelessness statistics. For those clients (and their families) living in poor conditions and poverty, the help to get furniture, bedding, white goods and other very necessary items for 'decent living' will have meant that they could focus on improving their work situations knowing that they have a basic but functioning home to go back to.

These basic comforts that we may too often take for granted are the essential pre-requisites for providing people with dignity and a little optimism to help them feel confident enough to engage in the other activities that can lead them to greater economic independence and a better quality of life.

Financial help has been sourced by SGT to help with these and other vital needs that are often not regarded as eligible under BBO funding rules. This includes emergency help with electricity and gas costs,

clothing not specifically for ETE and mobile phone/travel costs not specifically associated with project activity. In order to provide this support, SGT has drawn on a number of charitable funding streams that provide discretionary payments for people in dire need. Nearly £13,000 worth of funding has been levered in by SGT over the 3 years of the project. Without this additional support some clients would have been completely unable to continue their engagement and progress.

The flaws and delays in the benefits system, particularly Universal Credit, and the cuts in public funding undoubtedly contribute to the level of need for this type of support, along with the channel shifting discussed in the interim report. Peer Circles recognises that individuals should not be penalised for these systemic problems, particularly when they are motivated to try and overcome their not insubstantial challenges and barriers.

BBO funding has enabled SGT to help clients with other essential items including ID documents (passports, driving licences, birth certificates), travel and clothing costs related to ETE activities and, for some, reconditioned laptops. Again, these items are vital to client progression demonstrating that such financial support helps to remove significant barriers. That said, it would be helpful for BBO to consider widening the eligibility criteria for 'discretionary' funds so that the non-ETE focused barriers to training and employment can be addressed without the significant additional work involved in staff trying to find other funding sources for essential items. This would put into practice fully BBO's commitment to a holistic approach to supporting clients with SMD.

Employment and training outcomes show significant improvement

Since the interim evaluation in the summer of 2018 there has been a steep increase in employment and training outcomes. By December 2019 the proportion of clients moving into employment had doubled from 8% to 17% and the proportion of clients moving into education and training had risen from 2% to 10%. There have also been significant improvements in job sustainability and movement into jobsearch.

This progress is very positive, particularly given the key challenges that were identified at the interim evaluation stage and remain in place. In summary, these include:

- The nature of the Peer Circles client group, typified by poor skills (including transferable, interpersonal and digital skills), lack of work record/experience, enduring mental health conditions that require management, the negative impacts of institutionalisation (children's homes, prison, hostels, hospitals etc.) and/or domestic violence, chaotic lifestyles and substance misuse. These barriers and issues take significant time to address and the journey is often characterised by 'two steps forward, one step back' because clients need to develop resilience and stability to sustain progress.
- The nature of the labour market where zero hours contracts and the gig economy are very often the entry points for people who have difficulty moving into employment – this type of unstable, low paid and often poor quality employment can be stressful to manage and sustain, particularly given the histories and circumstances of clients. Added to this, the digital skills required to apply for and manage work in the modern labour market are very often alien to clients and require significant self-confidence even when skills are acquired, as discussed in more detail later.
- The complexities of the Universal Credit system, especially when transitioning into paid work, and into the type of work where pay may fluctuate from week to week. Managing the online reporting system and very tight budgeting is challenging for most. For those who are unused to

digital systems and to managing their finances it can be extremely difficult, including the very real fear of the penalties for mistakes. For people who already experiencing mental health issues this is particularly stressful and can hinder their progress.

- The housing market in London which demands high rents and presents a particularly difficult barrier for those who are required to move out of hostel accommodation on getting work, and for those who do not have any or a stable home (as highlighted earlier in the report). The combination of the psychological and practical challenges in finding, securing and maintaining decent living accommodation cannot be underestimated. In the vast majority of cases, clients cannot consider their employability until their other basic needs are met. This takes time and means that employment outcomes are likely to be delayed.

Given the significant increase in employment outcomes in 2019, it is likely that this area of performance will continue to improve over the next funding period. Peer Circles has introduced a number of developments to help create more effective pathways into employment for clients. This includes a greater emphasis on ETE at an earlier stage with clients, as well as providing the wide range of holistic support that they need to tackle their complex issues.

In addition, SGT has recently created a dedicated employer engagement post which is able to provide some resource across a number of different projects (most recently, Routeways, a project that has developed effective approaches to tackle in-work poverty). This new resource and the learning being shared from the Routeways project in terms of understanding more about supporting people into better work is likely to be of significant benefit to Peer Circles clients.

To date, Peer Circles has focused on providing the proof required for job outcomes and lacks detailed data on the types of occupations and sectors that clients are moving into. Initial review of the data that is available suggests that construction, retail and hospitality are the most common routes for clients, with some anecdotal evidence that job retention in the latter two is more frequent.

Going forward, it would be helpful for the project to consider collecting this type of information (job, sector, type of contract, pay etc.) to provide a better picture of progression routes for clients and to enable more in depth analysis of any patterns with regard to job sustainability.

Skills development is vital

Clients have also accessed a range of training to help them move towards greater employability. Again, specific data on the type of training is not routinely collected and it would be useful to do this during the project extension phase so that further analysis of this element of support can be undertaken.

Digital skills needs is highlighted as an area that remains difficult to address, and there are interesting similarities with the 'in-work poor' cohort in this respect. Peer Circles does its best to help clients develop the digital skills that they need to enter and progress in the labour market, and to deal with benefits and everyday life. The difficulty is in helping people to develop not just digital skills but digital confidence, which is essential if they are to move towards greater economic and social independence and resilience. If people do not possess a laptop or tablet, they have no easy way of becoming familiar with digital systems and skills in the way that many of us do. Simply having a smart phone (and many do not even have one of these) does not lend itself to developing these skills.

A blurred line between unemployment and economic inactivity

Peer Circles has continued to make efforts to engage a greater proportion of people who are economically inactive and around half of the cohort fell into this category. There are a number of reasons why this target group is difficult to engage. They are traditionally much further from the labour market. Peer Circles is very clearly an ETE project and for those who are 'discouraged workers', the prospect of embarking on a project that aims to help people into work may feel very daunting.

Peer Circles staff are very approachable and engaging. Those economically inactive clients who have come to the project very quickly feel welcomed, supported and accepted. The work that is being continued to reach out to those who feel that they are unable to move into a job, particularly in making it clear that their other needs and concerns will be addressed as part of the process of helping them, is likely to enable the project to attract those who are far from the labour market.

In addition, since many women are likely to be classed as economically inactive rather than unemployed because of their caring responsibilities, the project's focus on engaging more women is likely to also have a positive impact on increasing the overall proportion of economically inactive people.

A final observation with regard to this issue is that the distinction between those who are classed as economically inactive and those who are regarded as unemployed (by virtue of their benefit status) is blurred and, in reality, is certainly not binary. If distance from, and barriers to, the labour market are taken as the reasons for prioritising engagement, Peer Circles clients are on a continuum. Some who are technically classed as unemployed may have as many complex and significant needs as someone who is classed as economically inactive. Anecdotally, some people claim 'fit for work' benefits because it takes longer and is more intrusive and sometimes distressing to undergo the 'not fit for work' assessment.

Whilst it is understood that for funders' purposes, the labels of unemployed and economically inactive are seen as useful proxies for distance from the labour market, in reality this is likely to be not as reliable as might be supposed.

Engaging women more effectively

Peer Circles has continued to try and find ways to attract more women. The project has been successful in achieving its target number for female engagement, but women still form a lower than anticipated proportion of the overall cohort. Those women who do engage with the project are very positive about the help that they receive. Peer Circles' specialist women's caseworker is highly skilled and *"really understands where you're coming from – she understands what it's like to be a woman and all the pressures and she helps you to find solutions."*

The challenges in engaging women in programmes such as Peer Circles are complex:

- Between 2017 and 2019, 117 clients engaging with the project had dependent children. The majority of these are mothers. These clients were evenly split between those living in jobless housing and those living in a single adult household. Being a mother, whether or not your children are currently living with you, results in much greater complexity of needs and issues. Taking the decision to engage in making significant life changes is likely to be much more challenging – maintaining the status quo, however negative that might be, may feel like the safest option – *"I'd been isolated at home with three kids in a one bedroomed flat for so long I'd lost all my confidence. I'd convinced myself I couldn't do anything – even read! I'd not even travelled about very much."* This issue is observed in other projects and requires persistence and lots of effort to overcome. This client is now successfully undertaking training with a view to moving into

employment – *“The project has really helped me with confidence, finance for travel and childcare and someone who listens and has helped me to sort myself out. They’ve helped me to find a bigger flat. It’s really helped me to get out a bad place mentally and everything else.”*

- Childcare provision and costs are a key issue. Whilst the project helps with this *“which is great because childcare costs are too high for anyone on benefits who wants to try and train and do something with their lives”*, once they are into employment it can be challenging to find employment that fits around childcare responsibilities – *“I would like to have a job and I need it to be in school hours. I don’t know how possible that is and I’m taking one step at a time. It’s already stressful enough doing training and I can’t think about those other problems just now.”*
- The specialist women’s caseworker provides an invaluable service but the nature of the project and client group means that she covers a large geographical area and much of her time is spent travelling to clients for one-to-one sessions. Carrying out further outreach to engage women clients would impact on the time that she is able to spend with those already on the project. The Peer Circles team has developed in recent months and includes new caseworkers who have particular expertise with women. This may help to alleviate the capacity issue, but may also require reduced caseloads to provide a sustainable solution.
- The referral sources for the project are likely to have an influence on gender balance. Whilst the highest proportion of clients now comes via self-referral, some other sources such as the probation service will inevitably have a male bias due to the nature of their client cohort. Peer Circles is now in the process of widening its outreach locations to include family/children’s centres and other places where women are likely to predominate.

SGT has a specialist women’s project, Footsteps, which targets women ex-offenders with complex needs. Peer Circles is able to provide a good progression route for women coming through Footsteps, once they are able to engage in a project that is mixed gender. Whilst there have been some referrals from the Footsteps project, this progression route could be developed further.

Peer Advisor model is a positive learning curve

As detailed in the interim report, the Peer Advisor model is central to the Peer Circles project concept because, in the words of one Peer Advisor *“We can reach the parts that others can’t reach because we have that lived experience.”* This element is delivering some highly positive impacts and there have been a number of developments and improvements in 2018/19. However, there is still significant learning and development taking place, as would be expected with such a ground breaking pilot.

What appears to emerge from the experience to date is that the model is providing an effective means for some clients to develop really good employability skills, and that are ultimately leading to paid work. 15 Peer Advisors have moved into paid employment, the majority of them in roles related to the training. This demonstrates the project’s ability to support people with very complex needs not just into a job, but into a career with prospects for progression.

The original idea was that ‘circles of support’ for clients could be built within the project to provide the networks that these individuals lack, with Peer Advisors playing a key role. The experience to date indicates that whilst Peer Advisors are providing very valuable and positive support for project clients, this model may be less feasible to achieve on the scale envisaged, largely because of the nature of the cohort and the staffing capacity of the project. This is explored in more detail in the following analysis.

Engaging in placements and achieving the full qualification is hard

Despite the significant and very positive increase in the number of clients training - 77 clients taking the IAG training course (exceeding the project target), only 25 have achieved the full Level 3 qualification – representing around 50% of the anticipated target and one third of those engaging on the programme. Completion of the full qualification requires the Peer to be in a placement where they provide client facing support and have observations of this carried out by the trainer/assessor. The key factors affecting this aspect of the project involve a combination of interlinked issues:

- Some of those selected for the training are not stable enough to be able to complete the placement element because of their own continuing needs and issues – *“sometimes I just want to go back to being a client – I can’t handle helping other people.”*
- The high level of need and vulnerability experienced by clients means that being a Peer Advisor on the project requires significant skill and resilience. *“The challenging parts of being a Peer is the triggering of mental health issues so it’s important to be clear about setting boundaries.”*
- It can feel awkward to be acting in a semi-professional capacity, having only recently been a client on the same project - *“It’s hard to suddenly act like a professional when you’ve been used to being a client. That’s a skill itself and needs developing over time with practice.”*
- Caseworkers are aware of the importance of ensuring that Peers are not allocated to clients whose needs they will find too challenging, or who they may know. This sometimes leads to Peers not having any clients to support.

Whilst the majority of Peers have undertaken placements with SGT, two Peers were placed in other settings and, initially in non-client facing roles. This has been helpful for them in developing their confidence, skills and employability. However, the drawback is that in order to achieve the full qualification Peers must be observed in client facing roles. That said, it may be useful to consider developing a range of placements to offer a longer lead into client facing work that allows Peers to build their confidence and skills.

Whilst some Peers may well be able to provide support for Peer Circles clients it may be that these are in the minority. A possible development could be to offer placements to Peer Advisors who have come from other SGT services and who have the necessary resilience, skills and ‘distance’ to be able to provide support consistently to Peer Circles clients and without negative impacts for themselves. These volunteers could work alongside Peer Advisors drawn from the Peer Circles cohort.

A number of the recommendations made at the interim evaluation stage have been acted upon to build and develop the model further, including:

- Providing access to monthly clinical supervision for Peer Advisors to provide them with the support that they need to maintain their resilience whilst supporting clients, as well as ensuring more regular supervision of Peers by caseworkers
- Improving the selection process to identify more effectively clients who have sufficient resilience and distance from their lived experience to be able to provide support without hindering their own progress
- Where possible, providing volunteering opportunities for prospective Peer Advisors ahead of them embarking on the training, to assess their suitability and readiness for the programme

- Signposting all Peer Advisors to mental health first aid via Rethink and London youth. It has not yet been possible to provide mental health training to all Peer Advisors, however, three project staff have received this from Crisis as part of the BBO partnership work.

These actions are in the process of being fully implemented and there remain some obstacles including the fact that the high caseloads of paid staff leaves little time to provide the level of support and management that Peer Advisors need if they are to make the most of the experience and offer the best levels of support for clients. Some arrangements have been put in place to provide management and supervision on a joint basis with the trainer/assessor but it is not clear how effective this is. A dedicated Peer co-ordinator role may be more effective. This should be considered in conjunction with the ongoing development of SGT's Peer Hub network.

It can also be difficult to 'reject' clients who wish to become Peer Advisors – their enthusiasm to train is a very positive step and they may find it difficult to understand why they are not suitable or ready for this challenge, and it can be a real setback. Staff will always be supportive and provide an alternative progression route but this may take time for the client to come to terms with. That said, it may be worth reviewing the selection process again and ensuring that caseworkers and the trainer/assessor prepare clients for possible rejection at the earliest opportunity. This may seem a negative approach, however it is preferable to raising unrealistic expectations amongst clients.

A 'technical' yet vital aspect of the process of becoming a Peer Advisor that has continued to present problems is receiving information back from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), which forms an important element of the risk assessment carried out for all staff and volunteers at St Giles. This seems to be taking a very long time and the reason for this is unclear. Whilst it is a detail, it is an absolute requirement and it can be very demotivating for all concerned if the delays are lengthy.

Peer Advisors build their confidence, skills and employability

Whilst challenges remain with the Peer Advisor element of the project, there are many positive benefits experienced by those who are taking part, including gaining self-confidence, skills and knowledge, getting experience of a range of volunteer roles, developing professional attributes and skills, feeling more prepared for the world of work and moving into good quality careers. In addition, it is clear that Peer Advisors derive enormous satisfaction from supporting those who *"are in the same boat as you were not long ago"*, as illustrated by the following feedback:

"I was involved in gangs and I have lived experience that makes it possible to build trust with people who are suffering from multiple and complex challenges. I feel that by doing the programme I've become more integrated. I have learnt a lot and met some fantastic people. I came on the project to get help with my housing, for help to review my life and get some qualifications and a job. I wanted to help, I worked hard, I changed my attitudes and now I have an advice job which is brilliant."

"I struggled a bit with the work cos if you don't go to school much you don't know how to say things in writing. The homework support made all the difference. I really struggled after my dad's death but I came back in to complete the course and the study skills helped me to finish. They really help and understand. I've got self confidence and empathy from doing this. I've developed friendships and support networking."

"The course...offers new ways of looking at people. It teaches you to be non-judgemental and meet

people you wouldn't normally meet."

"It has given me a career change and now I've done a temporary job as a Peer Advisor and have an interview for a permanent job next week – I am very pleased."

"I have developed patience and confidence and a range of transferable skills for things other than a job. So for instance I have joined a political party and got elected onto the party executive committee – I would never have got that before joining SGT."

"I got really good experience on the placement. I gained skills and worked in reception, the computer hub and cooking for the breakfast club. And the jobs fairs for ex-offenders are really good."

"The support from other Peers is amazing and we have good supervision at a time when we want it and they warn us if there's a tricky customer so we don't get too stressed out."

The lower than expected number of Peer Advisors able to provide support to clients means that fewer clients than planned have benefited from this support. That said, those who have experienced this help are very positive about it – *"the Peer has been really supportive and helpful to me"* and appreciate the fact that the Peers have been through similar experiences which gives them *"more of an understanding about how you feel and how hard it can be sometimes."*

Referral partners are enthusiastic about the model

External project partners were also very enthusiastic about the Peer Advisor model and the opportunity that it gives clients to use their lived experience positively:

"I think it's really good for the clients because they build their confidence and get a recognised qualification. They want to use their experiences to support others and this is a positive move for everyone. It would be good to understand a bit more about it – perhaps to go and visit to see them on placement." **Troubled Families, DWP**

"It's an excellent model. We have just had a real success story. One of my customers got a job after being a Peer Advisor. The project really gave her so much confidence she now says 'I know how I got here and I am ready to help other people'. It's really quite inspiring. As long as the Peers aren't working in areas where they would know people I don't see any problem with it. I think it's been thought through and there's a good process." **Housing provider**

"It's a great idea for them to be able to become Peer Advisors. It's very useful to them and to others. There are no issues with it from my point of view." **Prison Discharge team**

"I think it's a good idea and we need more of that. The client group responds really well to people who have been through the system. Obviously there are criteria around who can do it and that's important." **Probation Service**

This feedback underlines the importance of continuing to review and develop the Peer Advisor model in the context of Peer Circles so that the benefits both to clients and Peers can be delivered. In addition, the learning and developments from Peer Circles' experience are very valuable for the ongoing evolution of SGT's national Peer Hub network.

Continuing to maintain and build positive partnerships

The project partnership between SGT and Evolve has continued to develop and mature. The staff team in both organisations has grown and diversified which is bringing a range of further benefits to clients in terms of additional specialist support in such areas as sex working, domestic violence, LGBTQ, offending and complex high needs. The growth in the staff team has particularly benefited the provision in Evolve since there are now one full-time and two part-time posts which addresses the issue of the isolation of the former lone worker that was raised in the interim evaluation.

Both organisations have also continued to develop relationships with others to continue the work to widen referral routes and for the provision of a range of specialist services. As highlighted in the interim report, external project partners interviewed for this final evaluation continue to be very positive about SGT and Evolve delivery of Peer Circles:

“It’s a great project for our clients. They’re often chaotic and the project really helps them with the one-to-one support. It’s not just an ETE project, they have a huge knowledge of how to support people. The grants and training that they can help them access is great. They’re really good at communicating – we don’t just refer and not hear anything – we know what’s happening. The staff are consistent and passionate. They have a huge level of enthusiasm. The only drawback is the limited capacity – I wish they could take everyone we want to refer.” **Probation Service**

“The project is really good. The more options people have, the better their future. It offers opportunities, access to a range of services and gives vulnerable people someone to talk to who understands them. We have great communication, including three way meetings which we use to add support for the clients as they need it. I able to share information with Peer Circles staff too which is very helpful. It would be great if the project had more capacity. At the moment there are a lot of people waiting to go on it.” **Housing Provider**

“My clients are very happy with the project. They are ex-prisoners needing help with housing, training, support and activities to stop them going back into crime. Some need mental health support too. The project is really excellent with its responsiveness. Other places are really slow and not communicative but Peer Circles is excellent. There is nothing as good at responding or following through. The main thing is that we really need them to have more capacity and to have something particularly for the under 25s – there’s nothing for them.” **Prison Discharge team**

The sister BBO project delivered by Crisis has now finished, however, the partnership between Peer Circles and Crisis continues, as evidenced by the latter’s involvement in the December 2019 development session and the collaborative work on mental health training. This partnership is highly positive and is a great example of a sustainable outcome between the two projects that benefits both organisations and their work.

Conclusion

Since the interim evaluation, Peer Circles has made significant progress. The project team has worked hard to respond to the recommendations made in that report. This, along with the other developments and project evolution is demonstrating that despite the significant challenges faced, Peer Circles' unique combination of holistic support and imaginative approaches is able to help clients tackle multiple and severe deprivation and move towards stability, independence and better quality of life.

At its heart, Peer Circles is an ETE project. But it is an ETE project with a difference. It recognises the many and complex personal and social reasons why people don't progress in economic terms, and it finds solutions to tackle these issues. It is this combination of support and challenge that works.

Enabling people with SMD to make sustainable progress takes time. By December 2019 the results of many months of persistence and hard work on the part of clients and staff were really beginning to bear fruit in terms of progress and outcomes. If the project continues to learn from experience, adapt and develop as it has done over the first 3 years, positive impacts and outcomes should continue to increase.

Finally, whilst the Peer Advisor element of the project has proved to be a particular challenge to implement as originally envisaged, it remains a highly positive part of Peer Circles' offer. Further development, refinement and customisation should help to maximise its role in the project and to keep the positive deployment of lived experience at the heart of SGT's work.

Appendix

Peer Circles Project Review Session, December 2019

Outcome Notes

Peer Circles has delivered high quality support for people experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage (SMD), against a very challenging backdrop of reduced public services, changes in the employment market and an ever more problematic housing environment.

The project is performing very well, particularly when benchmarked against similar services. The majority of targets are being met. The session was intended to provide an opportunity to review the project and explore how it might be further developed in the new funding period starting in 2020.

What does success look like?

- Helping people move forward with their lives
- Helping people move into jobs
- Giving clients more opportunities to get help to address their mental health issues
- Reaching out to people who have been marginalised
- Being able to fund clients to do training and other activities that they would otherwise not be able to access
- The individual client stories – the range of success that is very different for each client
- Enabling clients to achieve a full Level 3 qualification and become a Peer Advisor
- Producing perfect paperwork that meets the requirements of funders

How does Peer Circles achieve success – what are the essential factors?

- Enthusiasm of staff and volunteers
- Combination of highly trained staff and the lived experience of volunteers (and some staff)
- Specialist housing advisor – essential to help clients get the security and stability of housing needed before they can think about work
- Good tracking systems – particularly with a project operating over 3 sites in different parts of London
- Good partnerships with other organisations (although more needed for mental health)

Moving forward

The following notes draw on discussions about what could be done differently or developed to build on the success of Peer Circles, arranged under four themes which address key challenges for the project.

How do we make the project more Peer led?

There is a recognition that the Peer Advisor element is now beginning to gather pace, but that there is still some way to go before Peer Circles has sufficient Peer involvement, including improving completion rates. Suggestions to address this include:

- A dedicated Peer Co-ordinator to manage the Peer Advisors through the process and when they are volunteering
- A 2 tier structure – volunteering before starting training so that the client can see if they want to do it and SGT can assess if they are suitable and ready for training, followed by training and volunteering to become a Peer Advisor. During this period an assessment can also be made to match caseworker and Peer – not necessarily the caseworker that puts them forward for training
- Provide incentives – Evolve provides re-purposed laptops when Peers have finished the taught course
- Draw on successful examples such as Evolve’s ability to move volunteers between their own health focused Peer programme and SGT’s Peer Advisor programme

How do we attract and support more women and economically inactive clients?

- Find out who currently refers these clients and focus on them to develop more referrals
- Work with DWP more closely, for example, Empowering Women (Evolve currently does this)
- Build in more time for caseworkers to travel to women in outreach locations
- Deliver in more locations that women use/are ‘women friendly’ eg: Children’s Centres, The Wing, Kidspace. Thamesreach and Mungos may also be able to offer this facility.
- Increase the advertising about Peer Circles covering childcare costs
- Further develop specialist caseworkers and Peer Advisors for women and for those with particularly complex needs
- Develop more case studies that show how these clients overcome barriers and succeed

How do we increase job related outcomes for clients?

- Establish a specialist employer facing role – a member of staff who can be the single point of contact for clients seeking training and work to avoid employers and training providers having multiple approaches from SGT. Andrew identified as potentially providing this.
- Develop and deliver imaginative weekly job-focused sessions for clients, including developing the digital skills needed. These should be called something other than jobsearch and new, engaging activities will need to be developed.
- Include motivational interviewing as a key element for all clients when they are ready
- Identify more pathways to work for clients, including volunteering opportunities to provide a stepping stone to paid work and the idea of ‘mini jobs’ which could be short term, part-time to again provide a staged move into more sustainable work
- Segment the economically inactive cohort to identify who is more likely to be able to move into employment, recognising that Peer Circles is an ETE project for those with complex needs.

How do we identify and address mental health needs more effectively?

- Explore successful models of supporting clients with significant mental health needs eg: Footsteps, Crisis, and the work that Evolve (Shona) has done to enable making direct referrals for mental health services
- Create a working culture which normalises acknowledging mental health needs to de-stigmatise – as part of the trauma informed approach already adopted by SGT

- Upskill Peers (and staff where needed) so that they are more able to identify mental health needs and provide support
- Consider creating a psychological wellbeing practitioner post to increase the accessibility of therapeutic support for clients (and Peers) – this is more than a counselling role and enables access to a wide range of therapies
- Consider the idea of a resilience worker (Crisis has one)
- Ensure that Peers have enough support and supervision to cope with the mental health needs of clients and their own

Other key points to drive up success were also raised, including:

- Identify what questions we want to answer about the project at the start and set up tracking information and data collection to enable these to be answered
- Ensure that paperwork storage and other needs for caseworkers delivering across different locations are fit for purpose