PEER
VOLUNTEERS

Peers who volunteer

A guide on how to support people with lived experience

RUSSELL WEBSTER

REVOLVING DOORS AGENCY

Contents

Acknowledgements

Dedication

This guide is dedicated to the memory of Jahmaine Davis who was a member of the Co-Production Team but sadly passed away in the early stages of the project. His energy and commitment to help others inspired us all in our work.

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Who are peer volunteers?

This best practice guide is designed to ensure that organisations provide good quality support to peer volunteers. But who do we mean by the term “peer volunteers”? Most organisations (whether statutory, private or voluntary sector) in the criminal justice, drug and alcohol, homelessness and complex needs sectors involve current or former service users as volunteers who take on a range of different roles.

This volunteering typically involves providing support to peers who are using services in these sectors. This peer support role goes by several names with “peer mentor”, “peer supporter” or “recovery navigator” probably the most common ones.

So, the term peer volunteers applies to the very many people who have used services in these sectors and then decided to “give back” to others by working on a voluntary basis.

Purpose of the guide

There is a robust evidence base that many people who volunteer as peer mentors benefit from the experience of giving back, rebuilding their self-esteem and recognising that they have something to offer. However, there is also clear evidence that not all peer volunteers are provided with the support they deserve.

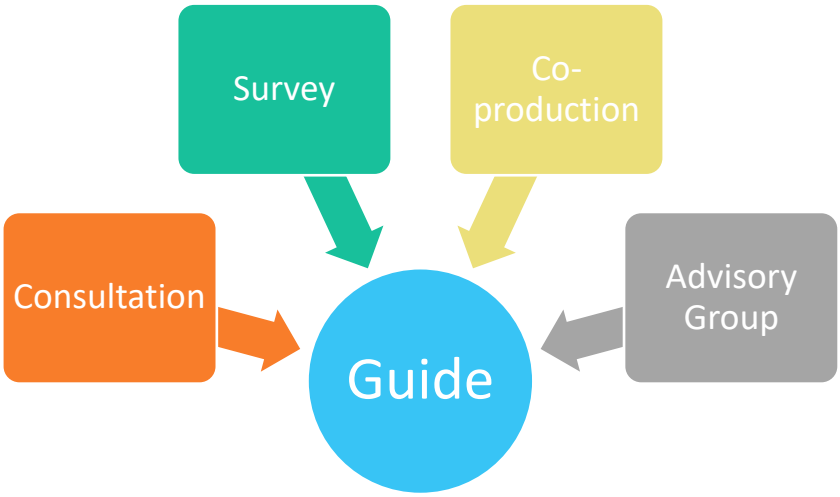
Whilst many peer volunteers are provided with the training and on-going support they need to succeed, including with opportunities to progress into paid employment, others receive little to no training and support, and often have little choice about what role they play as volunteers.

This document sets out best practice in supporting peer volunteers derived from and informed by the lived experience of more than 250 peer volunteers. It recognises that peer volunteers in different organisations will operate in different ways and will have different support needs.

Therefore, this is not a prescriptive “how to” guide, but rather a document which discusses the key topics from the peer volunteer perspective and offers a set of principles to guide organisations in developing the most appropriate support structures.

The Co-production process

This guide has been developed via a three-stage process. **Stage One** involved a wide range of consultation interviews with two main groups of people: provider organisations with a good reputation for supporting their peer volunteers and people with lived experience of peer volunteering. Via two focus groups, people from the lived experience network of Revolving Doors, identified the key topic areas for broader consultation and provided invaluable feedback on a prototype of the online survey.



Stage Two comprised an online survey promoted by 92 organisations and completed by 253 peer volunteers. People completing the survey shared their experience of the overall support they received as peer volunteers in addition to specific information about training, help developing skills at work, help finding employment, remuneration and control over the type and amount of voluntary work they undertook. You can download an analysis of the survey findings here.

Stage Three was the co-production process where Russell and nine individuals with lived experience jointly developed the contents for this guide.

The project also benefitted from an **Advisory Group** comprising eleven individuals representing the three main stakeholder groups of commissioners, provider organisations and peer volunteers.

Introduction

The importance and value of peer volunteers

Research shows that peer volunteering is highly valuable to all involved:

Peer volunteers benefit from opportunities to "give back", importantly they can rebuild their self-confidence and realise that they have something positive to contribute to society. Peer volunteers can also learn new skills and establish a constructive and positive lifestyle which can help with their own recovery journeys. Many people are able to convert their experience of peer volunteering into paid employment and extended careers within the broad social justice sector.

The people supported by peer volunteers are helped in their recovery by people who can share their own experiences as well as providing real-life examples of successful recovery. Peer volunteers can reduce feelings of isolation and increase feelings of self-worth and self-sufficiency, they can also build trust and confidence and, as a result, succeed in connecting the people they support to other services and opportunities.

Organisations can provide people who use services with the added dimension of peer support, as well as benefiting from the insights and different viewpoints of peer volunteers working alongside paid staff. They can also grow their workforce by employing peer volunteers who have received in-house training and are aware of their working culture and practices.

Many peer volunteers become involved in wider lived experience groups and movements, working together to bring about positive change in the social justice sector and beyond.

However, these positive outcomes can only be achieved if peer volunteers receive good quality and ongoing training and support, help with building and consolidating skills and information, advice and support on how to find work and build a career in the social justice sector (if that is what an individual peer volunteer wants). This guide

provides detailed advice on how organisations can achieve these outcomes based on the lived experience of over 250 peer volunteers.

How to use this guide

This guide has been designed to be easy to use. It is divided into chapters covering seven key topic areas which are core to ensuring that peer volunteers are properly supported. These are:

1. Recruitment
2. Training
3. Support
4. Help in developing work skills
5. Helping in becoming more employable
6. Financial support
7. Choice and control over volunteering

Each chapter highlights the key issues from the experiences of the 253 peer volunteers who completed the survey, split into positive and negative experiences. It also includes suggestions and insights from the co-production team.

We do not set out to recommend a definitive approach to every issue. This is because one size doesn't fit all – the roles of volunteers vary between organisations and organisational practice differs depending on the size of the organisation, its culture and sector etc..

Instead, we seek to highlight the key issues and bring them to life by sharing the lived experience of peers who have volunteered (both those who responded to the survey and members of co-production team). There are many examples of peer volunteers feeling unsupported or poorly treated, not because organisations set out to exploit them or neglect them, but inadvertently through work practices and policies which weren't thought through from a peer volunteer's point of view. Where we share real life "case studies", individuals' names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

We draw attention to people's lived experiences in their own words throughout the document in these blue boxes.

Our aim is to give organisations the opportunity to think about the way they work with peer volunteers from different perspectives so they can reflect honestly on their own systems and approaches.

Finally, each chapter contains links to a range of resources – studies, policies, training programmes, best practice guides, etc. – to enable readers to draw on examples of best practice.

We have produced this guide because many people like to download or print out best practice in a written format to be able to refer to when creating their own systems.

However, we have also built a dedicated website at: www.peervols.russellwebster.com. The website includes the same contents as this document but also several "bonus features":

- A series of short video interviews with peer volunteers explaining some of the key issues (which can be used as a training resource).
- Video interviews with providers and commissioners to share their viewpoints.
- A jobs board for organisations to advertise both volunteer and paid positions for people with lived experience. The board is fully searchable by sector and location.

The website will serve as an ongoing resource and will be updated over the coming years. If you have any suggestions or content you think would make a good addition, please email them to: peerideas@russellwebster.com

General Peer Mentoring/Lived Experience Resources

National Voices Peer Support Hub is an online bank of high quality, curated resources for people looking to measure, evaluate, sustain and grow different types of peer support programmes.

Gill Buck (2021) Peer mentoring in the criminal justice system. Clinks.

Clinks (2020) Managing volunteers: A guide for organisations working in the criminal justice system

Clinks (2016) Good practice in service user involvement from the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

Groundswell works with people with experience of homelessness, offering opportunities to contribute to society and create solutions to homelessness. You can find many examples of research conducted by people with lived experience on their website.

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for good practice in volunteer management for those organisations who want to accredit their practice.

Justice Involving Volunteers in Europe (2016) Building successful partnerships involving volunteers in the criminal justice system: a good practice guide

Chapter 1: Recruitment

There are two key issues that people with lived experience of volunteering as peers wanted us to include in the guide. The first is that many people told us they had been unaware of the opportunity to volunteer for some time and wished they had started their volunteering journeys earlier.

We recommend that services who recruit peer volunteers make people aware that there are likely to be volunteering opportunities soon after they start attending the service. While peer volunteering often happens later in people's recovery journeys, the knowledge that the opportunity will be there was valuable to many. Many people who have been involved in all-consuming lifestyles which have been unhelpful to them, miss this activity when they make a change and want to replace it with a positive routine where they spend time doing constructive activities alongside other people looking to change their lives for the better.

> *"Moving away from drugs & criminality left me with a huge void in my life. I found supporting others gave me a purpose again – and a much more worthwhile one."*

Many people with experience of being in prison said that they had been unaware of the peer volunteering opportunities available on release. This included several individuals who had been involved in a wide range of volunteering work while inside. In the "opportunities" section of the website, we host advertisements from organisations with roles open for people with lived experience, both paid and on a voluntary basis.

The second issue concerns the different attitudes of organisations who recruit and train volunteers. Clearly, to provide a positive volunteering experience with good quality training and support requires organisations to make a significant investment of time and money. It's important for organisations to think through the benefits and costs in advance of setting up a peer volunteering scheme.

Several people told us that they had been dissatisfied with the recruitment process to become a volunteer. This was mainly when peer volunteer roles were advertised, and an individual responded and applied and then heard nothing for several months. This thoughtlessness was often experienced as a further rejection by people who often had multiple experiences of being let down in their lives. Other peer volunteers reported similar experiences after they had been accepted on to a volunteering course but were waiting for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance for many months. Because they heard nothing from the organisation they applied to volunteer for, they were often unsure if the course was still going ahead and this knocked their confidence further. People told us they appreciated organisations who kept in touch with them about the recruitment process and generally shared the organisation's work and plans via newsletters etc. which were already going out to staff and volunteers.

> *"Some organisations complain about the turnover of volunteers and the time it takes to train them. Others are proud of how many volunteers go on to paid roles. Same issue, different attitude. I think I know which works best - for everyone."*

Recruitment Checklist

For people with lived experience

- [ ] If you are looking for opportunities to volunteer, you can look on our website where you can search by location or by the field you are interested in (criminal justice, drug and alcohol treatment etc.).
- [ ] If you'd like to volunteer or share your lived experience with a specific organisation, don't be shy about getting in touch direct – ask for the peer or volunteer co-ordinator.

For providers

- [ ] If your organisation is thinking of recruiting people with lived experience, please do your planning and ensure that you can invest in the right level of support to treat your volunteers with the same consideration you would give to paid staff.
- [ ] Advertise opportunities widely (including on our site)
- [ ] Discuss with a prospective volunteer the pros and cons of volunteering, in particular the timing of any commitment depending on what else is going on in an individual's life.
- [ ] If there are waiting lists or delays while waiting for DBS clearance, please keep in touch with prospective volunteers and start engaging them in the work of your organisation by sending them newsletters etc.

For commissioners

- [ ] If you are commissioning a service with peer volunteers, please ask for evidence on how providers intend to support their volunteers.

Recruitment Resources

Good practice guides:

National Voices Peer Support Hub is an online bank of high quality, curated resources for people looking to measure, evaluate, sustain and grow different types of peer support programmes.

Clinks (2020) Managing volunteers: A guide for organisations working in the criminal justice system (Chapter 2)

Clinks (2016) Good practice in service user involvement from the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for good practice in volunteer management for those organisations who want to accredit their practice.

Justice Involving Volunteers in Europe (2016) Building successful partnerships involving volunteers in the criminal justice system: a good practice guide

Disclosing criminal convictions

For people with lived experience needing advice on whether/how to disclose criminal convictions:

Nacro's Criminal Record Support Service provides criminal record advice to both individuals and we also work directly with employers

Official GOV-UK Disclosure checker is now live, it too helps you know when a conviction becomes "spent"

Unlock – resources and advice on disclosure and criminal records generally

Unlock's disclosure calculator helps you work out when a conviction becomes "spent"

Chapter 2: Training

Introduction

Training is a core element of any peer volunteer programme. People need training to understand and carry out their roles. In addition, a good quality training programme will make peer volunteers feel valued and help develop skills which will be critical not only to their volunteering but to their personal journeys of recovery.

Of course, the usual key principles of any effective training programme apply: training should be ongoing (rather than a one-off) and should use a variety of learning styles in recognition of the fact that people learn in different ways. Groups of peer volunteers are likely to include people who have had negative experiences of formal education. As a result, interactive teaching styles, rather than instructional ones are likely to be more effective and more appreciated.

The training experience can, of course, go beyond a formal training programme and pairing a peer volunteer with an experienced colleague is a common and much valued approach.

The co-production of peer volunteer training materials and their joint delivery with experienced peer volunteers are likely to make them more relevant and helpful.

We have not set out an ideal training programme because, of course, the role of peer volunteers varies considerably and the training needs to reflect this role.

Instead, we share a range of experiences of training (both positive and negative) and suggest a range of resources for further reading at the end of this section.

Experiences of training

The training experiences of the peer volunteers who took our survey varied considerably. While a sizeable majority (81%) described their training as "good" or "excellent", almost one in ten (9%) had received no training at all. This is particularly concerning given the potential safeguarding and emotional challenges that can result from undertaking these roles.

Positives

The most common positive experiences of volunteer training are listed below.

The one thing that people appreciated most was training that was tailored to their volunteering role. For many people their main role was to support peers by drawing on their own lived experience. People valued training which included discussion about this approach, particularly on whether, how and in what circumstances they might choose to share their own experiences – in short how to use their lived experience in their volunteering role.

People also appreciated training which was flexible and adjusted to suit their individual needs and which included opportunities for people to reflect on the training and develop new skills and approaches. Training which included space and support for personal development was particularly valued. In many cases, highly rated training took place over several weekly sessions which allowed for people to feel that they were building a body of knowledge and developing new skills.

> *"Peer mentoring gave me the opportunity to grow as an individual, learn new skills and later on the opportunity to be employed to work in probation."*

Peer volunteers particularly valued opportunities to do the same training programmes as paid staff. This was felt to be a clear indicator both of a high-quality training but also that their organisation valued them sufficiently to invest in them.

People also spoke about the importance of regular support and supervision (see next chapter) which allowed them to consolidate their learning from the training. Opportunities for ongoing training, and specific training courses relevant to their roles and responsibilities were also cited as important.

Many people start their journeys as peer volunteers with the dual motivation of giving something back and to build their experience and skills in the hope of finding paid employment in a helping role. For this reason, they particularly prized training which was accredited and led to qualifications and supported career progression.

Negatives

Some of the negative experiences people shared about the training were simply the opposites of the positive attributes outlined above, for example that training did not take place or was not tailored to their volunteering role.

A common complaint was that although training had often been of good quality overall, it sometimes reflected the organisation's agenda rather than the needs of new volunteers. In particular, these respondents felt that the training did not equip people on how best to use their lived experience in their volunteering as peer mentors or in other support roles.

> *"Most of the training covered the basics: first aid, safeguarding etc, but very little on the role and structure of being a peer mentor."*

Training for staff

We have discussed the importance of training directly addressing the role of being a peer volunteer, what that role entails in a specific organisation as well as its boundaries and issues to be aware of. A number of people said that training or other means of communicating to paid staff about the role of peer volunteers was also very important. Several people reported difficulties when they volunteered alongside staff who did not appear to understand their role. Involving people with lived experience

and peer volunteers in staff induction programmes was suggested as a helpful way of building a culture in which peer volunteers are (seen to be) valued.

Training Checklist

For people with lived experience

- [ ] Resist any pressure to start volunteering until you have been trained.
- [ ] If there are requirements to your volunteering which you don't feel you have the knowledge or skills to perform, talk to your volunteer co-ordinator and ask for training.
- [ ] Discuss your career goals and training needs with your volunteer co-ordinator on a regular basis (at least twice per year).

For providers

- [ ] Ensure your training is designed to match the role your peer volunteers will be undertaking.
- [ ] Training should include a focus on how best peer volunteers can use their lived experience and include exploration of the risks of sharing experiences (including re-traumatisation).
- [ ] Training which allows for space for reflection and support for personal development is particularly effective.
- [ ] Ongoing training, including training alongside paid staff, helps peer volunteers to feel valued and be more effective in their roles.
- [ ] Discuss career goals and associated training needs with individual volunteers regularly and plan jointly to meet these.
- [ ] Accredited training is valuable and appreciated and can be the starting point for peer volunteers who want to find paid work.
- [ ] Staff should also receive training or information about the roles of peer volunteers, and this should be included in induction programmes.

For commissioners

- [ ] If you are commissioning a service with peer volunteers, please ask for evidence on how providers intend to train their volunteers and assess the quality of training based on the key points listed above.

Training Resources

Good practice guides:

National Voices Peer Support Hub is an online bank of high quality, curated resources for people looking to measure, evaluate, sustain and grow different types of peer support programmes.

Skills Third Sector National Occupation Standards for Volunteer Managers

https://volmanagers.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/national-occupational-standardsfor-volunteer-managers-with-matrix.pdf

Clinks (2020) Managing volunteers: A guide for organisations working in the criminal justice system (Section 1.5)

Clinks (2016) Good practice in service user involvement from the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for good practice in volunteer management for those organisations who want to accredit their practice.

Justice Involving Volunteers in Europe (2016) Building successful partnerships involving volunteers in the criminal justice system: a good practice guide

Chapter 3: Support

Introduction

Support is perhaps the most important component of ensuring that peer volunteering is a positive and productive experience both for the peer volunteer themselves and the organisation for which they are volunteering.

Everyone needs support but people who have recent experience of drug and alcohol problems, homelessness or being involved in the criminal justice system are likely to need more support than most, particularly when they are just setting out on their recovery journeys. It is obvious these life experiences which are the reason that peer support is often so valued and effective.

Support can of course facilitate further positive progress for the peer volunteer and often prevent relapse into negative behaviours. The provision of support also confirms that a person is valued by the organisation and confers a feeling of belonging, both powerful protective factors in the process of recovery.

Experiences of support

The support experiences of the peer volunteers who took our survey varied. A majority (83%) described the support they received for their volunteering as “good” or “excellent”, while the other 17% rated it poor or minimal. However, even those with overall positive experiences, had felt let down at times.

Positives

The most common positive experiences of volunteer support are listed below.

The most highly valued approach was one in which the organisational culture or volunteering structures resulted in staff proactively reaching out to offer help rather than expecting peer volunteers to request it. Many people, particularly in the early weeks or months of volunteering, reported feeling anxious and unsure about whether they were doing a good job and said that offering support to others, although rewarding, also brought up powerful feelings relating to their own most difficult and painful experiences. When volunteer co-ordinators and staff made time to sit down with people and check out how they were faring and whether they had concerns about their volunteering, this made a big difference. In some organisations, peer volunteers were asked to identify a trusted professional as their key source of support.

> *"The support of the people around me has been outstanding. There is nothing I don't feel I could ask for help around and the encouragement is really making me feel valued."*

People spoke about how being treated as an equal and getting support from the wider staff team, where and when needed, made them feel valued and gave them a range of places to ask advice and support from, often preventing minor concerns from escalating into serious anxieties.

Where organisations had an individual personal development plan for all volunteers, this was greatly appreciated and made it easier for peer volunteers to gain confidence and skills and set goals for themselves.

Another key element of support was when a volunteer co-ordinator continuously discussed a peer volunteer's progress and asked their opinion around matching them with people who use services who were most likely to benefit from their support. People praised organisations where support for volunteers was integrated into the culture alongside an understanding that for most people recovery journeys take a zig-zag rather than straight line direction.

> *"I was supported in complex problems and needs that arose in my life. The team went further and beyond to make sure I was okay. They did not give up on me when things got difficult. They were there for me when I needed them most."*

Negative support experiences

Again, some of the negative experiences were the opposite of the positive ones above, particularly where support was just not available or was hard to access. In some cases, support had been good but was interrupted by the turnover of volunteer co-ordinators, or, in recent times, by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

A common complaint was that people received good support from their volunteer co-ordinator but were ignored or regarded as unimportant by other members of paid staff.

One issue where peer volunteers felt that support was often missing was when they were encouraged to tell their personal stories at organisational meetings, conferences or funding bids. Many peer volunteers said that while they were typically offered support directly after telling their story, organisations often failed to realise that talking about their difficult times could be a re-traumatising experience which often emerged several hours or days after the event itself (see the example below).

Peers who had experienced good quality support in this area talked of how their supervisor regularly checked in with them about their feelings and did not assume that because telling their story publicly had been a positive experience in the past, it was guaranteed to be so in the future.

Several peer volunteers said that because they had become used to sharing their stories in group therapy situations with other people in treatment, they had been unprepared as to how different that experience felt in a public setting. As one of our co-production team said, when you're talking about your struggles in life: *"You are in a way sharing a part of your own soul, you've bared something so close to you."*

Ryan's story

I had a half-hour session talking to 40 or 50 people, telling them my story. Then there was another session, and we broke for lunch. I went into the kitchen area to get a cup of tea and I started shaking. I was shaking so much I spilled hot water all over my hands. Fortunately, someone came in and saw me and sat me down and listened to me and helped me talk it through which left me feeling better. But I think that the people like me who want to share their story probably don't know that there will be an impact like that, or worse, afterwards. But the people who ask them to tell their story ought to have some idea that people will need some support either immediately afterwards or the next day or the next week and should make sure they contact that person the next day or a few days later. I think they have a duty of care and I've spoken to so many other peer volunteers who have had similar experiences.

Support Checklist

For people with lived experience

- [ ] If you are worried about any aspect of your volunteering, ask for support at the earliest opportunity.

- [ ] If you are asked to share your experiences, especially in a public setting, take time to ask yourself whether you definitely want to do this. It is okay to want to share on some occasions and to NOT want to on others.

For providers

- [ ] Offer support to peer volunteers on a proactive basis, having regular check-ins to discuss how volunteering is impacting on an individual's recovery journey.

- [ ] Having a formal development plan makes it easy for peer volunteers to gain confidence and skills and set goals for themselves – and become a more valuable volunteer at the same time.

- [ ] Encourage all staff who work alongside peer volunteers to offer informal support and encouragement.

- [ ] Discuss matching volunteers with people who use services most likely to benefit from their support.

- [ ] When peer volunteers share their life stories, they may experience strong negative feelings, include being re-traumatised. These feelings can emerge several days later and can be unpredictable. Organisations should always follow-up after these events to check in on an individual and offer the space for support.

For commissioners

- [ ] If you are commissioning a service with peer volunteers, please ask for evidence on how providers intend to support their volunteers and assess the quality of that support based on the key points listed above.

Support Resources

Good practice guides:

National Voices Peer Support Hub is an online bank of high quality, curated resources for people looking to measure, evaluate, sustain and grow different types of peer support programmes.

Clinks (2020) Managing volunteers: A guide for organisations working in the criminal justice system (Section 1.6)

Clinks (2016) Good practice in service user involvement from the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for good practice in volunteer management for those organisations who want to accredit their practice.

Justice Involving Volunteers in Europe (2016) Building successful partnerships involving volunteers in the criminal justice system: a good practice guide

On Road Media is a charity supporting people and media to create content that changes the world. They support and train people with lived experience to communicate safely and effectively.

Chapter 4: Developing work skills

Introduction

Generally peers who volunteer have plenty of life experience and knowledge about the common problems facing the people they are supporting. However, they often don't have a set of work skills relevant to this role. While an initial training course will help in this area, most people find they can only really develop skills when they try to apply them to the work they do (whether that work is paid or as a volunteer).

Where organisations are prepared to invest in supporting their peer volunteers to develop the key skills needed in their volunteering work, the benefits can be clearly seen. Peer volunteers who are learning new skills are better able to support the people they are working with. Learning new skills also boosts confidence and self-worth, consolidating recovery journeys. Finally, of course, new skills learnt are transferable and can be invaluable in helping peer volunteers who want to go on to paid employment.

> *"I'm indebted to people who were prepared to take time out to invest in me, to show me how to do things – that's worth more than any course."*

Experiences of help developing skills

The experiences of the peer volunteers who took our survey varied. A majority (83%) described the help they received with developing work skills as "good" or "excellent", while the other 17% rated it poor or minimal. However, even those with overall positive experiences, highlighted ways that things could be improved.

Positives

The most common positive experiences of volunteers being helped with developing their skills are listed below.

People told us that they particularly valued tailored support and advice for developing skills relevant to the role they were filling. Just like new paid staff, some volunteers were naturally good at key skills such as listening, while others needed feedback and support to practice and develop these skills.

One very common issue raised by many peer volunteers was concern about how to use their lived experience. People who were peer supporters knew there was an expectation that they would draw on their lived experience to help others, but were unsure as to how and when it was appropriate to disclose their own experiences.

> *"With help from my supervisor, I really learnt the value of lived experience. Having it is one thing, what you do with it is another."*

Some worried that they were over-sharing, while others were concerned they weren't sharing enough. While some people had good support from their peers and volunteer co-ordinators on finding the right level of self-disclosure for them as individuals, others were left to work it out on their own to the detriment of both themselves and the people they were supporting.

> *"I was very wary about disclosing personal issues, because I thought it would hurt my chances of getting a job with them."*

Lots of people told us that they really appreciated getting the opportunity to develop new skills via training or attending conferences. In addition to the obvious benefits of developing new skills, peer volunteers said that this investment in them really made them feel valued and a worthwhile member of the organisation. This was particularly true when mainstream training for paid staff was made available to volunteers.

> *"With Peer Mentoring you start to realise the skills you have - most of us who have been through the criminal justice system feel we are worthless."*

One-to-one mentoring from a member of staff was valued by many people. As trust within this mentoring relationship developed, many people were able to learn and further their personal development. Several people told us that they had little or no previous experience of support and encouragement of this kind, and many said that the skills they learnt were invaluable not just in their volunteering role but to enhance their continuing recovery journey.

> *"The co-ordinator didn't judge me, she was just so supportive, she made me feel valued. Making mistakes was seen as a learning opportunity."*

People also appreciated when staff took the time to ask what goals individuals had in terms of jobs and careers. This enabled people to work together to identify the key skills needed and for the peer volunteer and peer co-ordinator to jointly make a personal development plan. When training was accredited and when there were clear pathways to paid employment within the organisation for which they were volunteering, this was very much appreciated.

> *"I got great support from my line manager particularly in supporting me in decisions I have made about where I want to go in my role. Support and advice when I feel my knowledge is lacking has helped me grow in my role."*

Negatives

People who had not received help in this area highlighted two main issues. The first was a lack of investment in training or support with skill development after the initial training course. Some said that organisations responded to requests for additional training but only where peer volunteers themselves did the initial research and sought out relevant courses, usually on the recommendations of other volunteers.

> *"The initial training was useful, but did not go into enough detail. A lot of what I learnt was picked up through my own research or from other peer mentors."*

The second concern was that some individuals felt that as peer volunteers, they were not considered sufficiently valuable to have their skills developed. These people

expressed the view that the organisations for which they were volunteering were mainly interested in getting unpaid help in delivering a service. This compounded existing feelings of lack of self-worth. Fortunately, several of these individuals had more positive experiences at other organisations to which they moved their volunteering efforts.

Developing Work Skills Checklist

For people with lived experience

- [ ] If you feel you need training or more information to do your volunteering well, make sure you raise it with your volunteer co-ordinator.
- [ ] Let people know your career goals and ask them to remember you when relevant training courses are available.

For providers

- [ ] Treat new peer volunteers like new members of staff, identify their skills and areas in which they need training and support.
- [ ] Many peer volunteers are initially concerned about how to use their lived experience – creating a safe space to discuss this, particularly with the input of more experienced peer volunteers can be invaluable.
- [ ] Some peer volunteers may lack basic knowledge about IT (how to use a computer or use some software). Informal support can be very effective to help people get up to speed.
- [ ] The opportunity to participate in training and briefings alongside paid staff often makes peer volunteers feel valued by the organisation and extends the number of roles they may be able to fulfil.
- [ ] One-to-one mentoring from a member of staff is a very effective way of giving peer volunteers the confidence and a plan to develop their skills at work.

For commissioners

- [ ] If you are commissioning a service with peer volunteers, please ask for evidence on how providers intend to help their volunteers develop their skills and assess the quality of that support based on the key points listed above.

Developing Work Skills Resources

Good practice guides:

National Voices Peer Support Hub is an online bank of high quality, curated resources for people looking to measure, evaluate, sustain and grow different types of peer support programmes.

Clinks (2020) Managing volunteers: A guide for organisations working in the criminal justice system

Clinks (2016) Good practice in service user involvement from the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for good practice in volunteer management for those organisations who want to accredit their practice.

Justice Involving Volunteers in Europe (2016) Building successful partnerships involving volunteers in the criminal justice system: a good practice guide

Chapter 5: Help finding paid work

Introduction

Many people with lived experience who offer support to their peers on a voluntary basis develop skills and a passion for this work and are keen to progress to paid employment. While this is certainly not true for every peer volunteer, many people who shared their experiences with us wanted to convert their volunteering into a job. Indeed 56 people (more than one in five) who took our survey had already done so.

There is an expectation that organisations who recruit peer volunteers to help deliver their services provide those volunteers with advice, training, support and guidance to help them to find paid work if desired. In some cases, jobs will be available within the same organisation, in others, people can be helped to find jobs elsewhere.

Experiences of help in finding work

The experiences of the peer volunteers who took our survey varied. A majority (75%) described the help they received with developing work skills as “good” or “excellent”, while a sizeable minority (25%) rated it poor or minimal.

Positives

The most common positive experiences of being helped to find work are listed below.

By far the most important factor described to us was the encouragement from staff to pursue paid work. People really appreciated it when a volunteer co-ordinator or other member of staff showed real interest in them as an individual and was prepared to spend time ensuring that they got the chance to develop specific skills and qualifications. Many volunteers experienced this encouragement as a massive boost in their confidence and self-worth, which had often been adversely affected by their life experiences.

Another important factor was when people got the chance to talk about their work goals and then received career development advice tailored to their particular interests. While some people wanted to continue in face-to-face work, others found they had a talent for administration or fundraising. It was then possible for peer volunteers to have more choice over the work that they did so that it reflected their employment goals.

"I was allowed to make decisions about what kind of role I would like to do and given the help needed to move into those areas."

The chance to get good quality training was greatly appreciated as was help in developing interview and CV writing skills. A sizeable minority of people said they had no IT skills and found their lack of know-how on how to use a computer or send an email was a real block to them finding work. They valued it enormously when someone took the time to realise this and invested the time in showing them basic IT skills. Some people had never owned a computer and did not know how to log on or check that the battery was fully charged. In this situation, people did not need formal training, just someone who was prepared to lend a helping hand and make it clear they were always available to answer questions.

"We did lots of interview techniques and employability workshops. As well as working with them learning the job itself."

One thing mentioned by many peer volunteers as being particularly helpful was the opportunity to shadow staff members in their work. This helped in a number of different ways: it showed people what the job really entailed, gave them the chance to consider whether it was a job they would enjoy and the opportunity to learn from people demonstrating the skills needed in a real-world situation.

"The chance to work alongside professionals to gain experience and knowledge was brilliant."

Some peer volunteers reported a particularly positive experience, describing an organisational culture which placed increasing employability at the heart of the volunteering programme. This assumption (for those who wanted it) that volunteering would enable a progression into the world of work also raised people's expectations and helped them feel more confident about finding paid work.

> *"The whole system feels like it is geared towards gainful employment in the future.*

When an organisation invested fully in the belief that one of the main drivers behind a peer volunteer programme was to help people with lived experience find work and build careers, the results were outstanding as Sonia's story demonstrates.

Sonia's story

After I'd been a peer mentor for a couple of months, my self-confidence started coming back. My supervisor was consistently giving me positive feedback not just about my work but about the qualities she saw in me. She sat down with me and we talked about what sort of job I'd like to be doing and what skills I'd need to be able to do it. Over the next six months, I got the chance to go on lots of different training, often alongside paid staff. I loved doing the peer support but I was encouraged to try other things, co-running groups etc. which helped me develop new skills and boosted my confidence further.

They told me that a job was coming up and helped me practice my interviewing skills. I ended up being employed as a recovery support worker. I couldn't be happier.

Negatives

People who had not received help in this area were often frustrated, particularly after long periods (frequently years) of working unpaid. Particular complaints were where people were obstructed from applying for jobs because of having criminal convictions. These individuals pointed out that they had not been in trouble for several years and said that they thought organisations were guilty of double standards when they were happy to have an individual work for them on a voluntary basis but were not prepared even to consider them as an employee. We recommend that organisations think

through their commitment to providing peer volunteers with references when they decide to recruit people with lived experience as volunteers.

Help finding paid work Checklist

For people with lived experience

- [ ] Talk to your volunteer co-ordinator about your skills and interests and your career goals. Ask for them to support you in helping to match your volunteering experience to these goals and what further support the organisation can provide to help you reach these.
- [ ] Ask to be included on any regular communications about job vacancies, both within the organisation and with partners.

For providers

- [ ] Recognising peer volunteers' skills and encouraging them to think about their careers is the cornerstone of encouraging progression.
- [ ] A peer volunteering programme which is based on an expectation that many peers will progress to paid work is more likely to meet that aim.
- [ ] Organisations need to recognise that investing in volunteers' progression to work will result in some turnover of volunteers and see this as a positive outcome rather than area of concern.
- [ ] Offering peer volunteers a range of employment interventions such as interview skills training, CV writing and disclosure of criminal records strategies is a key element of a successful progression strategy.
- [ ] The opportunity to shadow staff in different roles to identify career goals can be invaluable.
- [ ] Ensure that job opportunities both within your own organisation and with partners are communicated to volunteers and that fair processes are in place for volunteers applying for these roles.
- [ ] Providing continuing support to a peer volunteer who has found work can help that person sustain their job and start building a career.
- [ ] Have a clear policy about providing references to your peer volunteers.

For commissioners

If you are commissioning a service with peer volunteers, please ask for evidence on how providers intend to help their volunteers convert their voluntary experience into paid employment and assess the quality of that support based on the key points listed above.

Help finding paid work Resources

Good practice guides:

National Voices Peer Support Hub is an online bank of high quality, curated resources for people looking to measure, evaluate, sustain and grow different types of peer support programmes.

Clinks (2020) Managing volunteers: A guide for organisations working in the criminal justice system

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Chapter 6: Financial help to support volunteering

Introduction

People were clear to us that their motivation for helping others was not about financial reward, talking instead of the importance to them of giving back and of feeling part of a team and valued again in life. Nevertheless, most peer volunteers were on benefits or very limited incomes and were not in the position to subsidise their voluntary work by paying for their own travel and other expenses.

The way in which an organisation went about reimbursing people for their expenses was a very concrete demonstration about how much it valued volunteers. The issue of financial help for volunteering was the area of our survey in which reports were very mixed, with the number of people reporting positive experiences only slightly larger than those who talked of negative ones.

Experiences of financial help to support volunteering

We asked our survey respondents whether the organisation they volunteered for provided financial help to support their volunteering. More than half of people (55%) were reimbursed for their travel costs and more than four out of ten (44%) received money for food and other expenses. However, almost one quarter (24%) people said they received no financial help at all towards the costs of their volunteering.

Peer volunteers highlighted three main things when it came to financial help with their volunteering.

Firstly, people wanted to get back their out-of-pocket expenses in a straightforward and prompt fashion. This was a bugbear for many people who had to deal with overly complicated, bureaucratic systems which took weeks to refund the money spent on fares etc.. Interestingly, the advent of new computerised or app-based systems was often cited as a backward step – being much more complex and less speedy than a simple payment out of petty cash.

> *"Paying travel invoices has been so slow that some peer mentors have had to turn down volunteering jobs because they didn't have the money for fares."*

The second issue applied to people who received some form of remuneration, often for sharing their lived experiences to help influence policy or practice via research or Lived Experience Forums. In these cases, it was important that the organisation recruiting people with lived experience took responsibility for ensuring that people were only paid according to their individual benefit rules on limits and disregarded earnings. It was also vital that the organisation was proactive in providing volunteers with clear written explanations of this volunteering role with the Jobcentre Plus and other benefits agencies.

> *"I worry how things will be when expenses, such as travel, lunches and other petty expenses will be going into our accounts instead being dealt with in cash. I worry about how it will look when presenting bank statements for means tested benefits reasons."*

Thirdly, it was important that organisations equipped peer volunteers with the tools to do their work including phones, laptops etc. as required by the individual's role.

Positives

Most organisations had efficient systems for reimbursing volunteers for their costs and some were sensitive to the restricted cash-flow of people surviving on benefits. Positive comments mainly related to co-ordinators being sensitive to people's needs, particularly if they were receiving benefits, and organisations willing to pay for a bus pass which service user volunteers were able to use for other journeys.

Peer volunteers simply wanted confidence in a simple, prompt financial system, as one person said: *"It just gives me peace of mind knowing that my costs will be covered."*

A small number of people responding to our survey shared experiences of organisations going much further in demonstrating how much they valued volunteers, for example by providing funding for laptops and training courses.

Negatives

Negative comments primarily focused on time-consuming and slow systems for reimbursing expenses for which volunteers had already paid. This was not just an inconvenience for many peer volunteers but left them short of money for necessities. The simple reality for most people early in their recovery journeys and often totally dependent on benefits was that they could not afford to subsidise their volunteering activities. Where organisations did not make it a priority to reimburse their volunteers promptly, it sent out a clear statement on how much those volunteers were – or were not – valued.

> *"I couldn't have done the volunteering or training without this financial support."*

Financial Help Checklist

For people with lived experience

- [ ] Get into the habit of getting **and keeping** receipts for any expenses you incur in your volunteering, **think** travel tickets**, lunch** etc.
- [ ] If your volunteering means you spend more on your phone or data costs, make sure to speak to your volunteer co-ordinator about this.

For providers

- [ ] Ensure that your system for reimbursing volunteers' expenses is prompt and easy to use. Look to refund travel and subsistence expenses on the same day the costs are incurred.
- [ ] Encourage all peer volunteers to record and submit their expenses.
- [ ] Where you are remunerating people with lived experience on a more substantial basis, be proactive in providing them with written explanations to ensure their benefits are not compromised. Take specialist advice when needed.
- [ ] If volunteers are expected to make extensive use of phones, computers etc. to fulfil their volunteering role, make sure these are provided.
- [ ] Consider providing travel passes rather than individual ticket costs when this makes financial sense for your organisation and the volunteer.

For commissioners

- [ ] If you are commissioning a service with peer volunteers, please ask for evidence on how providers intend to financially reimburse their volunteers and assess the quality of that **system** based on the key points listed above.

Financial Help Resources

Good practice guides:

National Voices Peer Support Hub is an online bank of high quality, curated resources for people looking to measure, evaluate, sustain and grow different types of peer support programmes.

Clinks (2020) Managing volunteers: A guide for organisations working in the criminal justice system

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Chapter 7: Control and choice

Overview

One of the key things which differentiates volunteering from paid work is that volunteers are able to decide how much they work and what tasks they undertake whilst employees are required to do anything reasonable that lies within their job description. However, when we asked peer volunteers about how much control and choice they had over their voluntary work, we got a very wide range of responses.

Some organisations were careful to ensure that peer volunteers had control over the amount and type of voluntary work they did and were often careful to ensure that this work matched individuals' recovery and other goals. However, other organisations were much less caring and, in some cases, merely used peer volunteers as unpaid staff to do whatever jobs they needed doing.

Are peer volunteers different?

Many volunteers spoke of how determined they were to put everything into their voluntary work, often as a way of starting to "give back" and atone for things they regretted doing in life. Many people talked of feeling shame about their involvement in, for instance, drugs or crime and were committed to be a "better person" going forwards. This often left people in a position where they were eager to take on as many responsibilities as possible to demonstrate to themselves and others that they had changed. They were also often driven by a need to make sure that the people they were supporting were not "let down".

> *"The need to please is a real thing. It's like a desperation to be valued and heard. It is a driving force for good but can also be exploited."*

Many people with lived experience also have experienced different types of trauma which can make it hard for them to say no. Many survey respondents talked about how they had taken on too many volunteering responsibilities early in their recovery journeys, leading them to feelings of being overwhelmed and sometimes even to relapses. They were keen to share their experiences to new peer volunteers and offer words of caution.

> *"Choose what you take on wisely, because we can burn out very quickly because of our backgrounds."*

Experience of choice and control over voluntary work

We asked our survey respondents about how much choice and control they had over the voluntary work they did. While most were happy with their control over the amount and type of voluntary work they did, more than one in six people (17%) did perform tasks which they did not want to do on occasion.

Positive experiences

People who were happy with the amount and type of voluntary work they did, praised organisations who were proactive about volunteers' wellbeing and had a clear structure for ensuring that they were happy about their volunteering. This often consisted of regular check-ins which gave peer volunteers the opportunity to talk about their volunteering, what they liked and disliked, and what they would like to do going forwards. People valued organisations who did not take them for granted and explicitly encouraged them to talk about things which were not going well. Some organisations imposed clear limits (such as a maximum number of people to mentor) to ensure that volunteers were protected from the risk of over-work.

> *"They keep reassuring me that is ok to tell them if I cannot do something or if I do not feel comfortable to do something. They are always making sure I am ok."*

People also valued organisations which offered an enhanced level of care for people in recovery. In these cases, volunteer supervisors were careful to check that the mentoring that people provided to others was not causing difficulties for their own recovery journeys in terms of triggering cravings or promoting feelings of repeat traumatisation. Many people talked about valuing a transparent and explicit support process which raised hopes and ambitions while ensuring that progress took place at a speed which suited the individual and could be altered to take account of life events.

"My mental Health problems make me un-reliable at times and less able to function - their awareness and acceptance of this has been very helpful."

Some organisations who mainly employ people with lived experience have put in place a range of Human Resource/support mechanisms specifically to deal with incidents of lapse or relapse relating to drug and/or alcohol use or mental health issues. These mechanisms were designed to reassure employees and volunteers that the organisation was committed to support them throughout their recovery journeys and were a concrete acknowledgement that for most people progress would be up and down. People were encouraged to seek help and support from the organisation as early as possible, rather than to try to manage on their own or hide problems.

Another key factor appreciated by many people was being offered an explicit choice over what work they would prefer to do, with this decision often linked to personal goals or ambitions either to do with recovery or career progression. In discussing their volunteering, people shared experiences of how important volunteering had been for them in terms of improving feelings of self-confidence and self-worth and feeling they had something to contribute to society. Many people talked about how feeling part of an organisation and being valued alongside paid staff made them feel content for the first time in many years. Peer volunteers often developed very strong feelings of loyalty and commitment towards the organisation they were volunteering for.

"I was volunteering on pre-release at a charity furniture shop and I was really impressed when they gave me the choice to work on the till or not."

Many of the volunteers involved in this project had become involved in sharing their lived experiences for a range of reasons (to help an organisation improve its service delivery, to inform a research project or shape a new policy) and in a variety of ways – on planning groups, recruitment panels, service development days or even giving evidence to MPs. This chance to share their lived experience fostered for many a strong desire to speak out about problems in the system for their peers and built a strong sense of identity and the value of their work.

"I felt too ashamed of who I was to put myself in the public eye, the work I do sharing my lived experience has allowed me to become proud of who I am and my voice is important."

Negative experiences

There were three main themes in the responses from people who had had negative experiences in terms of control over their voluntary work: Pressure to do more work from the organisation, internal pressure to do more work from the volunteer themselves and no choice over the nature of the voluntary work or an expectation of performing menial task.

People often spoke of being taken for granted after a period. For instance, one person who had been co-running a recovery group for 18 months expressed the desire to do something else to broaden their experience but was pressured into continuing to run the group (alongside a paid member of staff) because the organisation felt they couldn't run it without them.

Many peer volunteers spoke about their own responsibility in saying no to excessive tasks and requests, particularly in the early months of their recovery journeys while at the same time talking about how difficult they had found it to say no. Indeed, several people shared stories of volunteer supervisors or peers who had empowered them by encouraging them to say no, reassuring them that they would not be thought less of as a result. Stories of volunteer burnout and relapse were, unfortunately, commonplace.

"At an early stage in my recovery I could definitely have been supported more in getting a balance. At first, I just wasn't confident enough to say no."

One member of our co-production team urged organisations to view the peer volunteering role as much through the lens of personal development for the volunteer, as getting a job done or performing a function for the organisation.

The third issue that a substantial minority of people complained about was when they were not given any choice about the type of work they did as a volunteer. Some shared experiences of being expected to do menial tasks or fulfil mainstream administrative functions because of a shortage of paid staff. In these cases, people said they felt exploited.

> *"I do a lot of unnecessary bureaucratic work and sometimes I'm asked to run personal errands for staff. I feel like I'm being treated as a skivvy."*

Control and Choice Checklist

For people with lived experience

- [ ] It is natural to want to do as much as possible to give back when you start volunteering but try to take your time before agreeing to new duties. It is important to balance your own needs and recovery with your volunteering.
- [ ] Life changes for all of us, all the time. If you need to cut back on your volunteering for a time, because of other issues or concerns, have the confidence to do so.
- [ ] Remember that as a volunteer, you have choice over what sorts of work you do. Make sure you only do those things you are happy doing, and with the support your feel you need.

For providers

- [ ] Take responsibility as an organisation to safeguard your peer volunteers and limit the amount of volunteering they do, particularly in the early days of their recovery journeys.
- [ ] Check in regularly with peer volunteers to ensure that they have the right balance between volunteering and other activities in their lives.
- [ ] Encourage volunteers to express their areas of interest and suggest activities which appear to match their interests and skills.
- [ ] Remember that volunteers should not be used as a way of filling staff shortages, even in “emergency” situations.
- [ ] Remember that many peer volunteers will wish to move on from volunteering after a period – either to paid work or for other reasons. Try to facilitate these moves rather than retaining volunteers you have begun to rely on.

For commissioners

- [ ] If you are commissioning a service with peer volunteers, please ask for evidence on how providers guarantee that volunteers have control and choice over the voluntary work they do based on the key points listed above.

Control and Choice Resources

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Chapter 8: Conclusion

Summary

We hope that whether you are someone with lived experience or a provider or commissioner of services you have found this guide valuable. All the content is based on the lived experiences of more than 250 people who have had contact with the criminal justice, drug and/or alcohol use and/or homelessness systems and who have all kick-started their recovery journeys by volunteering to support others.

The influx of peer volunteers into thousands or organisations – statutory and voluntary sector – across the country is a positive development which has created a huge reservoir of (frequently un-recognised) skills available to the social justice sector.

When organisations invest the sort of time and resources recommended in this guide into the support and development of these volunteers, there are multiple gains for everyone involved. Organisations who do not just allocate tasks to volunteers but take the time to understand their skills and abilities and place individuals in the roles where they can have the biggest impact, will benefit immeasurably from this lived experience.

Peer volunteers benefit from opportunities to *"give back"*, in particular they can rebuild their self-confidence and realise that they have something positive to contribute to society. Peer volunteers can also learn new skills, and establish a constructive and positive lifestyle which can help with their own recovery journeys. Many people are able to convert their experience of peer volunteering into paid employment and extended careers within the broad social justice sector.

The people supported by peer volunteers are helped in their recovery by people who can share their own experiences as well as providing real-life examples of successful

recovery. Peer volunteers can reduce feelings of isolation and increase feelings of self-worth and self-sufficiency, they can also build trust and confidence and, as a result, succeed in connecting the people they support to other services and opportunities.

Organisations can provide people who use services with the added dimension of peer support, as well as benefiting from the insights and different viewpoints of peer volunteers working alongside paid staff. They can also grow their workforce by employing peer volunteers who have received in-house training and are aware of their working culture and practices.

Many peer volunteers become involved in wider lived experience groups and movements, working together to bring about positive change in the social justice sector and beyond.

Increasingly organisations who value lived experience – from their Boards of Trustees, through their senior management teams and including a large proportion of their front-line staff – are recognised as beacons of excellence in their fields.

Like all best practice guides, this document is based on the best information available to us at the time of writing. The companion website: www.peervols.russellwebster.com includes additional resources with video clips of people with lived experience, providers and commissioners sharing their views about peer volunteering. It is also regularly updated with the latest research, policy and practice around lived experience and peer volunteering. Many organisations also advertise their opportunities for people with lived experience (both paid and voluntary) on the site. We hope you find it useful.

If you'd like to provide your feedback on this guide or share any resources you think would be useful to include, please email us on: peerideas@russellwebster.com