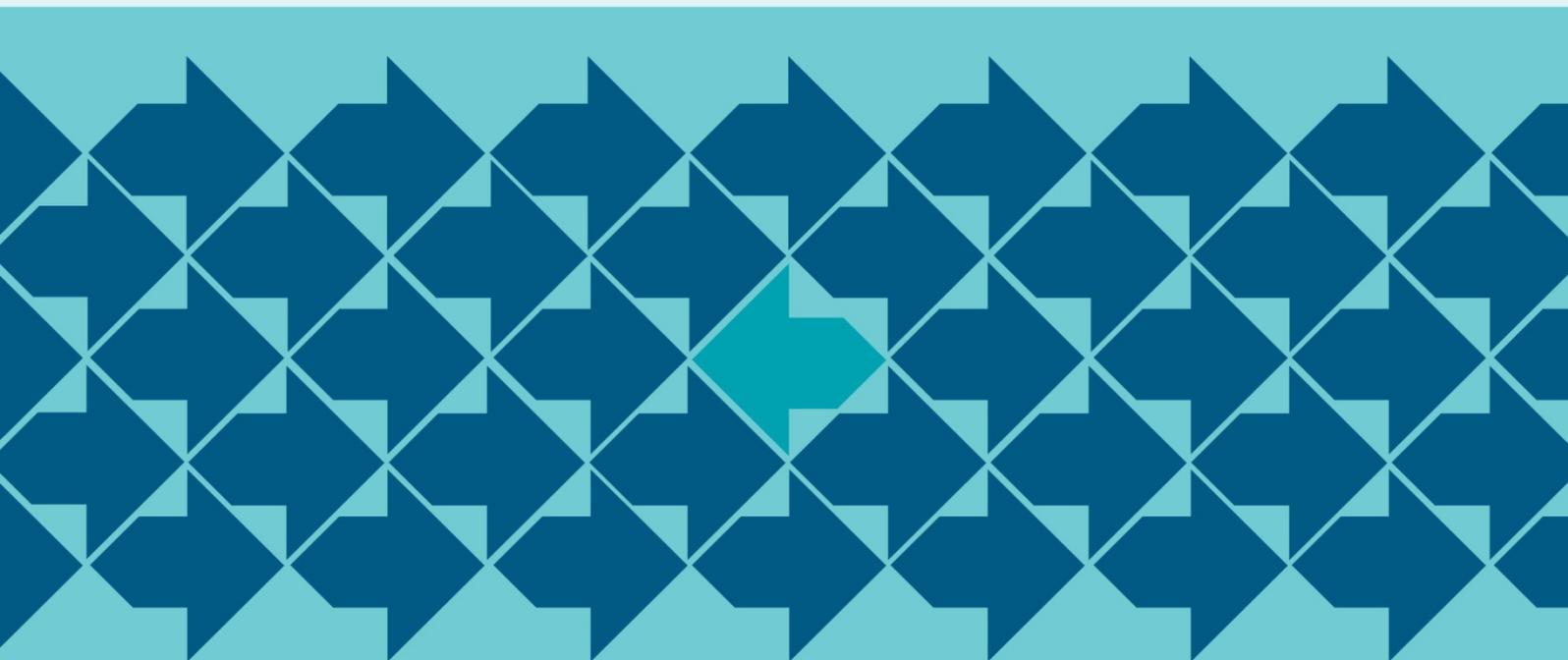


**Offender Peer  
Interventions:  
*What do we know?***

**Del Roy Fletcher  
and Elaine Batty**



# Offender Peer Interventions: What do we know?

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# Key messages

- the use of offenders in peer support roles is increasingly recommended by the UK Government as a key means of ensuring continuity of support for those released from prison; making mainstream services go further; and providing employment opportunities for those displaying an aptitude for such roles
- yet the evidence-base for this type of approach is meagre. Very little research has investigated the use of offenders in peer support roles and many of the relevant studies have been carried out by individuals keen to extol its virtues
- peer support is congruent with the dominant policy discourse which views crime and unemployment as manifestations of personal failure and poor social behaviour. Consequently, the deployment of peers underlines the importance of messages about personal responsibility and self-improvement
- the case for the approach rests on four key propositions. First, peers can be effective 'identity models' for offenders- people they can identify with and are living proof that turning away from crime is possible. Second, peer support is necessary because offenders view professional staff as authority figures and are more likely to listen to individuals that have 'walked in their shoes'. Third, it is cost-effective. Finally, the approach can build social capital and resilience within deprived communities
- previous research suggests that in the right circumstances peers may be better at engaging offenders; can act as 'identity models'; may be more effective at sharing information and knowledge; and can support managerial and front-line staff struggling with growing workloads
- however, it also indicates that the pool of individuals possessing the requisite experience, aptitude and skills may be small; high rates of peer turnover may compromise service delivery; the ambiguity of the role means that mentors are placed in a 'grey area' where they are neither service users nor professionals; and peer programmes require considerable maintenance and support
- the case study has exemplified some of the difficulties of integrating a non-traditional workforce. Peers have often lacked confidence and the necessary work-related 'soft' skills; some have found the transition to peer worker difficult and engaged in inappropriate behaviour. Moreover, the deployment of offenders can also reduce organisational flexibility because of the large amount of management support that is required.

# Introduction

## 1.1. Background

*“When someone leaves prison, I want them already to have a mentor in place to help them get their lives back together. ...Often it will be the former offender gone straight who is best placed to steer the young prisoner back onto the straight and narrow” (Justice Secretary Chris Grayling speech to the Centre for Social Justice, November 20<sup>th</sup> 2012).*

The deployment of offenders in peer mentoring roles is increasingly viewed by the UK Government as a key means of ensuring continuity of support for those released from prison, making mainstream services go further; and providing employment opportunities for those displaying an aptitude for such roles. The Justice Secretary in a November 20<sup>th</sup> 2012 speech has put mentoring at the centre of his emerging plans to improve rehabilitation. The joint Department for Work & Pensions and Ministry of Justice (2010) offender employment review has also recommended that prisoners should provide peer support to assist prison-based Employment and Benefit Advisers. Similarly, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2011) has suggested investing in offenders that display an aptitude for mentoring roles to improve the prison learning and skills system.

## 1.2. Aims and objectives of the research

Very little is currently known about the practice of using offenders as peer mentors. The present study seeks to begin to address this gap in our knowledge and has four key objectives:

- to develop the evidence-base regarding the practice of using offenders in peer mentoring roles
- to establish what works (and what does not)
- to identify the individual and wider benefits and how these can be maximised in future provision
- to develop principles of 'best practice'.

## 1.3. Research design

CRESR has taken a qualitative approach to conducting the research. Qualitative methods are best suited to providing an in-depth understanding of the views, experiences and behaviours of key stakeholders as required by this study. The research comprised three key components:

- a literature review to identify and synthesise international evidence
- an in-depth case study of the practicalities of using offenders in peer support roles
- an expert consultation with individuals drawn from the UK policy and practitioner community.

### *Literature review*

The study began with a literature review which focussed on U.K. and U.S. material published in English from the 1980s onwards. The search strategy comprised four main methods:

- review of academic databases
- search of criminal justice agency websites
- contact with an international network of experts
- 'snowballing' from generic mentoring reviews.

### *Case study research*

Case study research was selected because of its value in exploring context and process and its ability to develop in-depth and detailed understanding. It is a key method for understanding phenomenon in any degree of thoroughness. The case study explored a provider's experience of training and deploying offenders as peer mentors as part of an employment intervention. The research has involved a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews with staff responsible for recruiting, training and managing peer supporters.

### *Expert consultation*

The study has concluded by exploring the experiences and views of key policy leads in central government departments and providers of offender employment and training services. Expert opinion has been canvassed from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), Clinks, User Voice, Unlock, St Giles Trust, Princes Trust, Wise Group and individuals from several academic institutions.

## **1.4. Structure of the report**

The remainder of the report is organised in the following manner:

- **Chapter 2** considers definitions, the case made for peer interventions; and their growth.
- **Chapter 3** outlines the findings of previous research.
- **Chapter 4** articulates the key findings of the case study.
- **Chapter 5** presents the conclusions emerging from the study.

# Peer Interventions

## 2.1. Definitions and types of peer interventions

Preparing to leave for the Trojan war, Odysseus entrusted the care of his son to his loyal friend, Mentor. The word 'mentor' has come to mean a loyal, wise and trusted teacher or friend. Nevertheless, mentoring can be difficult to define. Activities can vary widely and be confused with the related concepts of coaching and counselling. It usually involves someone more experienced guiding, coaching or encouraging someone less experienced in the performance of a task or role. Tolan (2008) has identified four key characteristics of mentoring services:

1. interaction between two individuals over an extended period of time
2. the mentor possesses greater experience, knowledge or power than the mentee
3. the mentee is in a position to imitate and benefit from the knowledge, skill, ability or experience of the mentor
4. the absence of role inequality that typifies other helping situations and is marked by professional training, certification or pre-determined status differences.

Peer mentoring is even more difficult to define. Finnegan *et al* (2010) suggest that it may be conceptualised as comprising mentors of the same age and/or who have been in a similar situation and/or come from a similar background as their mentee. In other words peers 'speak the same language and have walked in the same shoes' as mentees. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2003) note that peers work with people that are the **same as them**. They might share the same age, sex, sexuality social class and/or subculture or have other similarities. A young person has defined peer education as '*working with people who are not in authority over us*' (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003). This is the definition used by the present study.

It is possible to distinguish two key **peer models** that are currently in operation. '**Peer support**' is a 'passive' intervention and is exemplified by the Prison Listening scheme. In contrast, '**peer mentoring**' is regarded as a more active role and encompasses advising and helping. The present study looks at both types of intervention.

## 2.2. The case made for peer interventions

The case for peer interventions is rarely articulated but appears to rest upon four key propositions:

1. peers can be effective '**identity models**' for offenders- people they can identify with and are living proof that turning away from crime is possible (Maruna, 2001). It is in this context that the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (2010) assert that: '*Ex-offenders who have successfully been rehabilitated often make the best mentors*'
2. the deployment of peers is necessary because offenders are likely to view professional staff as **authority figures** and may view advice as irrelevant since those giving it have no **first-hand experience** of the problems to be tackled (Devilley *et al*, 2005). Some organisations, e.g. User Voice, make a virtue of the fact that they are led and run by people who have experienced the same problems that criminal justice agencies are seeking to resolve
3. peer interventions are **cost effective**
4. mentoring builds on individual and community strengths and by bringing together volunteers with the disadvantaged helps to build **social capital** and **resilience** within deprived communities.

### 2.3. The purpose of peer interventions

The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) identify four main purposes of peer interventions:

- **targeted**: to find employment, stop re-offending or to help integrate individuals into the community
- **change behaviour**: to improve relationships, reduce anti-social behaviours etc.
- **expand opportunities**: to help develop personal skills, build confidence, improve attainment etc.
- **supportive**: to build trust and resilience, reduce social isolation etc.

In the UK key target groups for peer interventions have included:

- young people
- socially isolated individuals and those with mental health problems
- offenders and ex-offenders
- individuals with substance / addiction issues
- people with physical and learning disabilities.

### 2.4. The growth of peer interventions

The indications are that the number of mentoring projects has grown rapidly over the past decade. The MBF has mapped 3,000 UK mentoring and befriending projects, 70% of which are mentoring projects. This figure is said to be growing all the time. Approximately 60% of the projects responding to the MBF Funding 2011 survey had been established less than five years. The immaturity of the provider infrastructure is also reflected in the emphasis of the Foundation on championing a Approved Provider Standard.

It is not possible to say how many use offenders to provide peer support. Nevertheless, Box One identifies some of the growing range of peer interventions in English prisons.

### **Box One: Peer interventions in English prisons**

- The 'Toe to Toe Reading Plan' run by the Shannon Trust
- The 'Insiders' scheme provides basic information and reassurance to new arrivals
- Some prisons run 'Buddy' or 'Carer' schemes
- Prison Listeners
- Some prisons use prisoners to assist Employment and Benefit Advisers
- Some prisons use inmates to help individuals to complete forms for Community Care Grants
- St Giles Trust - Peer Advice Project
- Resettlement Champions
- Recovery Champions
- Some interventions deploy ex-offenders to support prisoners 'through the gate'
- Peer housing advice schemes
- Prisoner Information Desk (PID) workers.

# The Literature Review

## 3.1. Introduction

This chapter considers the findings of previous research that has considered peer interventions. The literature review has yielded very little relevant material so that the initial focus on employment interventions was widened to include other forms of support. This lacunae appears to be the result of two main factors. First, offender peer interventions are both innovative and a relatively recent development. Second, the small scale, ad hoc nature of much activity in this field means that few robust evaluations have been carried out. Furthermore, some of the relevant studies are of limited value because they have been undertaken by those seeking to extol the virtues of the approach.

The review discusses:

- the roles offenders undertake and the skills needed
- the strengths of the approach
- the weaknesses of the approach
- the benefits experienced by peer mentors.

## 3.2. Roles and skills

Offenders have undertaken three main roles:

1. **engaging 'hard to reach' groups**
2. as **positive role models**
3. and providing counselling and other **emotional support**.

Peer mentors need to possess and display a **positive attitude** and be **good listeners** as well as have the ability to **communicate their ideas and feelings** in a positive and **non-judgemental** way. They also need to **empathise** with their fellow peers (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003). Those that have already taken on helping roles are more likely to build positive relationships with mentees (see Clayton, 2009). Scott *et al* (2004) suggest that HIV education programmes in five Texas prisons functioned more effectively when peer educators exhibited **positive personality traits** and had the **respect** of other inmates.

Offenders require **training** for taking on peer support roles. This need will vary according to the nature of the roles undertaken. The St Giles Trust Peer Advice Project offers a NVQ Level 3 in Advice and Guidance to peers. 'Life Coaches' in the Routes Out of Prison project undertake SVQ Level 3 in Health and Social Care. The mentors working as part of the Prince's Trust 'Working One to One with Young Offenders' project received four days training which covered a range of subjects

including: boundaries, confidentiality, the impact of prison, the cycle of offending, emotional well-being and how to deliver inspirational talks.

### 3.3. The strengths of the approach

Previous research has identified five key strengths:

- peers are better at engaging offenders
- peers are more effective at sharing information and knowledge
- individuals can act as successful role models
- in custodial settings they can form pro-social communities that realise wider benefits
- peers can support managerial and front-line staff.

First, the 'peer' status of offenders may confer advantages in terms of **engaging particular groups**. Boyce *et al* (2009) found that peers considered it an advantage that they had experienced many of the problems faced by their 'clients' and were able to relate to the challenges faced by mentees. Consequently, offenders may be more likely to turn to peers for help rather than authority figures such as prison officers. *'A lot of people do find it easier to talk to another con rather than an officer....and I think me personally my own experiences, it's the white shirt and the tie, the key, the whistle, it's just that power thing'* (prisoner quoted by Foster, 2011: 30). Similarly, Cook *et al* (2008) found that well trained recovering inmates were more capable of establishing **credibility** and **demonstrating understanding** compared to hired treatment staff.

Second, peers may be more effective at sharing information and knowledge. Individuals are more likely to listen to and act on information if it is presented to them by someone they can **identify** with, respect and model behaviour from (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003). Furthermore, peers may communicate in a way that makes sense. They are also more effective at sharing information and knowledge because they understand the **context** in which their peers are best able to use that information (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003). Information provided in its proper context becomes **knowledge**.

Third, peers can act as **successful role models** (Huggins, 2010). They can provide inspiration for offenders that they too can turn their lives around (Hunter and Kirby, 2011). They are increasingly deployed by the providers of substance misuse interventions. The Californian Men's Colony in St Luis Obispo has, for example, a Therapeutic Community Programme for incarcerated individuals with substance use problems. The Therapeutic Community is composed of a mix of professional staff and peers with the primary agent of change being the norms and rules of the community. The aim is to create a social environment in which peers represent role models of successful personal change and serve as guides to the recovery process. The programme has demonstrated an ability to influence participation in post-release care. Cook *et al* (2008: 131) conclude that: *'using experienced and certified mentors from within the inmate population may provide inspiration for the reformatory process in the correctional substance abuse treatment system'*.

Fourth, an exploratory study drawing upon the narratives of forty nine female offenders participating in two HIV prison-based peer interventions in New York State found that they formed a **'peer community'** that secured wider benefits. The programmes provided peers with new inmate roles and enabled them to cultivate strong **supportive relationships** which meant that they were less likely to incur **disciplinary infractions** (Collica, 2010). The 'peer community' encouraged each

other to join other educational and vocational programmes and resulted in a **lower rate of recidivism** (Collica, 2010). However, a number of weaknesses with the study were acknowledged including selection bias i.e. only women in the same social networks were sampled and there was no comparison or control group.

Finally, some research has underlined the benefits that can accrue to **management** and **front-line staff**. Some have argued that peers allow **professional time to be deployed elsewhere**. A Senior Prison Manager quoted in Boyce *et al* (2009: 12) reported: *'They [peer advisors] were reducing the workload of the officers and they realised that suddenly they had a team of peers to refer them to, so you know, that sold it to the prison because it helped them meet their targets'*. Adair (2005) has also found that peers can **ease the pressure on professional staff** and provide **extended support**. Cook *et al* (2008) indicated that highly trained peers **reduced staff turnover**, by presumably reducing their workloads, and allowed the Therapeutic Community programme to provide continual support. A few studies also suggest that the deployment of peers is more **cost effective** than relying on paid staff (see Boyce *et al*, 2009). Hutchinson *et al* (2006:210) assert that: *'By increasing their trained peer personnel, an agency can increase the number of people served and their own cost-effectiveness due to the flexibility in scheduling and organisational commitment that is often inherent in the employment of peers'*.

### 3.4. The weaknesses of the approach

The literature highlights seven weaknesses:

- the pool of individuals possessing the requisite experience, aptitude and skills may be small
- high rates of peer turnover
- security breaches
- problems of competence and confidentiality
- difficulties maintaining appropriate boundaries
- underlying tensions with the peer role
- peers may require considerable support.

First, the **pool of offenders** with the necessary experience, aptitude and skills may be small. Young offenders may not be emotionally ready to mentor others and may lack the necessary attributes. Boyce *et al* (2009) found that the **selection criteria** employed by the St Giles Trust Peer Advice Project severely restricted the pool of suitable offenders. Pre-release peer advisors were, for example, required to obtain security clearance; submit to a voluntary drug test; have basic literacy skills; be on hold for up to nine months and be enthusiastic and committed. Life Coaches in the Routes Out Of Prison (ROOP) project in Scotland must be able to demonstrate at least 12 months personal stability before they will be considered for a position. This seems to have led to a more 'settled' staff group and growing 'professionalism' (Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland, 2011).

Second, programmes are often characterised by high rates of **peer turnover** which can undermine sustainability. This is a particular problem in custodial settings given the transient nature of the prison population. Scott *et al* (2004) found that programme continuity was hindered by high rates of peer attrition resulting from transfers, releases and disciplinary cases. Similarly, two of the three members that were originally trained to provide peer support were released soon after graduation from the Peer Support Team programme at the Nova Institution for Women in Canada

(Delveaux and Blanchette, 2000). More generally, the experience of undertaking peer support roles in the community might lead to new opportunities for employment or further study (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003).

Third and related to the last point, some peer mentors are dismissed because of **security breaches**. In custodial environments these transgressions have included **positive drug tests, unauthorised movement around the prison** and having **possession of mobile phones** (Boyce *et al.*, 2009). The Listening scheme is a peer support system developed by the HM Prison Service and the Samaritan's that trains prisoners to listen in confidence to those experiencing psychological and emotional distress to prevent self-harm or suicide. Nevertheless, a small number of Listeners are dismissed every year for passing drugs or mobile phones around prisons (Foster, 2011).

Fourth, some have highlighted problems regarding **peer competence** and **confidentiality**. Foster (2011) found that the emotional responsibility of listening to distressed prisoners and maintaining confidentiality in some of the most difficult situations can weigh heavily. In addition, it appears that the potential for abuse of trust means that some prisoners prefer to talk to staff members rather than peers (Delveaux and Blanchette, 2000). It is in this context that Devilly *et al* (2003) caution that undue reliance on peers may **compromise service quality**. Furthermore, mentoring **vulnerable prisoners**, synonymous with sex offenders, is a challenge because many peer mentors are unhappy about being trained alongside such individuals and prefer not to support them (Foster, 2011).

Fifth, the ambiguity of the role can mean that **boundaries** between user and provider are sometimes crossed. Peer mentors may develop friendships with clients that can make it difficult for them to separate support and friendship roles. *'Some staff share too much with their clients....they need to know how much to share to gain your clients trust'* (Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland, 2002: 102). The Transitional Discharge Scheme in Scotland had a client turning up at the peer support workers home in a state of crisis (cited by Woodhouse and Vincent, 2006). It is particularly important that they receive sufficient support to establish clear boundaries with clients and make appropriate referrals (Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland, 2011).

Boundaries between staff and peer mentors can also be an issue. Fisk *et al* (2000) have also highlighted the possibility that peer mentors could have previously received support from professionals that they were expected to work with. This was also raised as an issue with respect to their relationship with prison officers (cited by Woodhouse and Vincent, 2006).

Sixth, some studies have highlighted broader tensions with the **peer role**. The experience of the 'X-it' gang desistance programme designed by the Lambeth Youth and Play Service is instructive. The programme employed three peer-educators, young people from the target communities who **had previously a significant gang involvement**. One of the peer educators reported that: *'Some think I'm a hypocrite because they used to hear about me doing similar things, now I'm telling them to think about their actions'* (Pitts, 2006: 27). Another individual felt that: *'My involvement in community safety has meant that there has been an issue of trust among some of the youth that I work with. Because I have to work with police, some people think I'm an informer'* (Pitts, 2006: 27). This situation can undermine the peer to peer relationship and place mentors in a 'grey area' where they are neither **service users** nor **professionals** (Mowbray *et al*, 1998). Fisk *et al* (2000) have suggested that this **'transitional position'** can lead to feelings of **inadequacy** and **self-doubt**.

Finally, peer programmes are **complex to manage** and may require considerable **maintenance** and **support**. They need trained and **committed staff** and may be **labour** and **time intensive** (Walker and Avis, 1999). The evaluation of the 'Working One to One with Young Offenders' project found that supporting mentors was difficult because many were new to volunteering and the work environment and many had their own needs in re-building their lives (Hunter and Kirby, 2011). Similarly, the evaluation of the 'Routes Out of Prison' intervention found that peer support brought organisational challenges in providing the appropriate type and level of **supervision for a non-traditional workforce** (Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland, 2011). This is not surprising given the multiple and complex needs of the client group and their potential vulnerability. A Life Coach noted that working with clients can be like *'looking in a mirror'* (Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland, 2011: 7).

### 3.5. The benefits experienced by peer mentors

A key finding is that **peers mentors gain the most** from such programmes. Adair (2005) found that peers discover **skills** to help others, and gained a similar sense of **empowerment** and fulfilment to that formerly sought through criminal activities. Foster (2011) also suggests that peer support enhances the personal development of those who provide it. Key benefits include: increased **self-esteem** and **self-confidence**; **personal growth**; **greater empathy**; improved **communication skills** and the **respect** of prison staff. The mentors interviewed by Hunter and Kirby (2011) reported range of benefits including increased confidence, skills and work experience and a means to atone for past offending. They also suggested that by providing a routine of interesting activities it had also helped some mentors remain crime and drug free.

# The practicalities of deploying offenders in peer support roles

## 4.1. Introduction

This chapter articulates the key findings of the case study research. It begins by reflecting on what motivates some offenders to provide peer support before going on to consider the experiences and views of paid staff. The chapter considers the challenges that the provider has encountered integrating a non-traditional workforce before concluding with a discussion of some of the individual and wider benefits of the approach.

## 4.2. The case study

The case study intervention targeted prisoners in the last year of their sentence and ex-offenders in the community. It was delivered in both custodial environments and the community across the North of England. The delivery model had several key elements including: in-reach services into participating prisons; case management and individual action plans; a menu of courses to help meet identified needs and the deployment of peers to provide extra support to those in the community.

Peers provided a wide range of support including accompanying some individuals released on temporary license to project offices; helping individuals to complete application forms and individual action plans; and providing additional support to that provided by a paid case worker. They provided individual encouragement and moral support to clients throughout the lifetime of the intervention.

## 4.3. Peer motivations

Peer motivations are complex and often multi-faceted comprising both altruism and self-interest. In terms of the former, the desire to give something back to society was a key consideration. *'They want to salve their conscience and make amends'* (casework officer). In contrast, some seek to improve their employment prospects by acquiring new skills. The experience is seen as good preparation for careers in counselling and social work. Motivation can also take more prosaic forms. It was reported that some are merely lost for things to do and want to establish a daily routine.

However, it is apparent that some have less altruistic motives. An individual involved in the training of peer supporters in prisons highlighted the desire of some individuals to 'impress the system'. This can be a particular problem in custodial environments

where individuals volunteer for courses that are seen as an effective route to parole or Home Detention Curfew. A peer support trainer complained that: *'Groups were horrendous at times. Some did not want to be there or were just there to show willing'*.

#### 4.4. The experiences and views of paid staff

All interviewees acknowledged that peers can be effective **'identity models'** for offenders that can, in the right circumstances, reinforce the potential for change. A case worker pointed out that: *'To change behaviour they need to see that it is possible'*. However, this process needs to be closely managed because there are inherent dangers in allowing peers to re-engage with particular subcultures. The example was given of a peer whose contact with drug users in a previous intervention was felt to be instrumental in their relapse into heroin use. Consequently, the Wise Group and the Prince's Trust stipulate that individuals must be free from problem behaviour for at least two years before being considered for peer support roles.

Some thought it was necessary that those supporting offenders had **first-hand experience** of the problems to be tackled. *'The unique selling point of peer mentors is that they have lived it and breathed it'* (management staff). This was often deemed to confer particular advantages in terms of engaging 'difficult' individuals. A casework officer noted that some had hostile attitudes towards white-collar staff. *'They have the attitude that you've been to university and read a book so what do you know about it?'* The same individual reported that: *'Peer mentors are the way forward in lowering crime rates because they engage offenders better'*. The example was given of a peer who had been able to talk around an individual threatening to abscond from release on temporary license where other paid staff had failed.

Nevertheless, the majority of paid staff felt that it was not necessary to have experienced the problems faced by offenders in order to help them. *'I do not subscribe to the view that you need experience of drugs to help drug users'* (management staff). Moreover, some of the interviews revealed a degree of suspicion of peers and confusion as to their precise role in the intervention. Some paid staff reported that peer supporters used their background as a 'badge of honour'. *'You can be made to feel inferior if you've not had a drugs issue'* (Team Leader). These tensions between paid staff and peer supporters had been exacerbated by a context of job insecurity. *'Staff are concerned that they [peer mentors] will take their jobs'* (Team Leader).

It was felt that service commissioners often viewed the deployment of peers as a cheap option. However, a management interviewee felt that this was overplayed. *'It might be slightly cheaper but peer mentors need careful managing so boundaries are not crossed'*. It is salient to note that the provider has experienced significant difficulties committing the necessary staff resources to this important task. *'What quickly became apparent was that they [peer supporters] required far closer supervision than we had the capacity for'* (management staff). It is in this context that some highlighted the danger that peers could be viewed as a cheap, readily expendable peripheral workforce. *'We risk creating a third class of people'* (Team Leader). Interviewees raised the concern that peers could be asked to fulfil too many roles or duties outside their expertise. Developing a clear career development route for peers was felt to be an important safeguard.

#### 4.5. The challenges of integrating a non-traditional workforce

The case study exemplified the difficulties organisations can experience integrating non-traditional workforces. Box Two highlights some of the key challenges encountered in deploying peers. Interviewees acknowledged the potential for the exploitation of what was viewed as a low-cost resource in such economically straightened times. It was important that peers were not overburdened or asked to fulfil tasks beyond their expertise. Furthermore, the lukewarm views of some paid staff towards peer workers reflect deep-seated concerns that they may be part of a management strategy of staff replacement. On the other hand, interviewees highlighted the necessity of deploying peers in meaningful rather than tokenistic ways. It was deemed important that peers are fully engaged in the process.

The potential role of peers was often circumscribed by their lack of confidence and the necessary work-related 'soft' skills. Some struggled with accepting any degree of responsibility. Most could not use Information Technology and found simple clerical tasks such as completing and returning contact sheets challenging. Some individuals found that the transition to peer supporter was very difficult. *'It is a big jump from service user to regulated staff. They go from being able to come and go as they please and receiving lots of encouragement and support to then needing to stick to rigid times at work and adhere to particular behaviours'* (management staff). Peer supporters were often late into work and went home early. Some were reported to feel demotivated because they now received less praise and encouragement. Concerns were expressed about the whereabouts of some individuals. A casework officer acknowledged that: *'They are quite difficult to tame because they have not got the mind-set of a working person.'*

A further complication was that individuals were, by and large, unused to the etiquette of working in an office environment. Poor telephone manners were a frequent complaint, and inappropriate behaviour such as gossiping and spreading rumours. The latter had caused a degree of friction with paid members of staff. It was alleged that another peer brought soft drugs into the office and some ran up large mobile phone bills. *'This has been due to them using the phones for personal use in their free time ....and misusing them whilst at work'* (management staff). Consequently, the deployment of offenders can actually reduce organisational flexibility because of the large amount of management support required.

##### Box Two: Key challenges of deploying peers

- the difficulties encountered in ensuring that peers are not exploited or deployed in tokenistic ways
- paid staff resistance particularly where the role of peers is unclear or they are perceived to part of a strategy of staff replacement
- peers may lack confidence and the necessary work-related 'soft' skills
- some find the transition from service user to peer very difficult
- problems arising from inappropriate behaviour
- a reduction in organisational flexibility due to the significant degree of management support that may be required.

## 4.6. The individual and wider benefits

Box Three outlines some of the key individual and wider benefits of offender peer interventions. The approach has real potential in terms of helping peers back into **employment** and **mainstream society**. *'For individual peer mentors it can be hugely beneficial'* (management staff). Peers had improved their curriculum vitae, attended various courses and been helped to apply for paid posts. Although none had yet found paid employment it was pointed out that many use the experience to pursue careers in social work or gain paid employment in the community and voluntary sector. Moreover, the process can improve **self-confidence** and give individuals a more **positive outlook**. The case worker identified another benefit: *'Mentoring allows them to live down the offender label'*.

Despite the strenuous efforts of the research team it has not been possible to interview peer supporters to ascertain their views. Nevertheless, an internal review provides an insight into some of their views. Those interviewed were reported to have found the role 'meaningful' in terms of the support they were able to provide to service users and their personal rehabilitation. In addition, peers felt that they shared a similar background to service users and that this was instrumental in engaging individuals. A peer is reported to have said: *'because we knew what it was like for them they didn't see it as an authoritative relationship. They were more willing to work with us, and we could get more sorted for them.'*

The provider can also derive a number of organisational benefits from the approach. First, peers can become **ambassadors** to other potential service users and companies. *'It brings organisations an inclusive look to their business'* (management staff). However, another interviewee cautioned: *'Is it about ticking boxes or helping the individual?'* Interviewees acknowledged that peers could be used in tokenistic ways without being fully engaged in the process. Second, the deployment of peers exemplifies the **values** and **culture** of an organisation. *'We give offenders a chance. It shows we practice what we preach'* (management staff). Third, peers are able to highlight real issues on the ground and so help improve **service delivery**. *'They help to shape a service by giving an insight into working with offenders'*. Finally, they can help paid staff cope with growing **caseloads**.

### Box Three: Key benefits of the approach

- increased confidence, self-esteem and self-worth
- provides a pathway back into mainstream employment and society
- peers can feel more empowered and responsible
- the deployment of peers may signal the values and culture of an organisation
- peers can become ambassadors to other service users
- the deployment of peers may help paid staff to use their time more effectively
- peers can improve service delivery by identifying 'real' issues on the ground.

# Conclusions

## 5.1. Introduction

This final chapter presents the key conclusions emerging from the research. It begins by discussing the factors behind the growing policy interest in deploying offenders in peer support roles before going on to consider some of the key barriers to its wider adoption. The report concludes with a discussion of the emerging principles of 'good practice'.

## 5.2. The growing interest in peer interventions

Peer interventions are a manifestation of the growing idea that ex-offenders themselves should become a resource in the resettlement and rehabilitation process. This is congruent with the dominant policy discourse which views crime and unemployment as manifestations of personal failure. Consequently, the deployment of peers underlines the importance of messages about personal social responsibility and self-improvement. The impetus for the growing policy interest in peer support appears to come from three key sources:

- the high cost of re-offending by former prisoners, which has been estimated at £13 billion per annum by the National Audit Office (2010), has intensified the search for new and innovative ways of tackling offending behaviour. Kenneth Clarke's speech at the Dinner for the Judges at the Mansion House maintained that: 'the public are not made safer if we tolerate the continual growth of a sub-class of rootless prisoners who keep coming steadily back to the courts and prison gates' (Ministry of Justice, 2010: 3)
- public spending cuts mean that the emphasis is on 'doing more with less'. The Ministry of Justice budget will, for example, fall by 23% over the next four years. It is in this context that peer support is seen as a means of making scarce resources go further
- there is a realisation in policy circles that many offenders do not engage particularly well with statutory services. At the same time there has been a growing lobby comprised of organisations like User Voice, the Prince's Trust and the St Giles Trust that has highlighted the potential benefits of the approach.

### 5.3. Key barriers

The expert consultation identified six key barriers to realising the full benefits of the approach:

- a lack of robust evidence
- insufficient funding
- inadequate monitoring of those deploying the approach
- the wariness of key actors in the criminal justice system
- employer concerns about recruiting ex-offenders
- the media in exaggerating the risks.

First, there is a lack of robust evidence about the effectiveness of deploying peers. An expert recalled: *'I was having a conversation with a person in NOMS [about peer support] and they said: Where's the evidence?'* The literature does not clearly show an added benefit of using mentors in supporting offenders or peer support workers in supporting other groups. Interventions are relatively new, small-scale and consequently few robust evaluations have been undertaken. Nevertheless, this is a key drawback given the emphasis placed on evidence-based policy making. A 'payment-by-results' model is now being trialled in several British prisons and there are growing calls for practitioners to demonstrate an impact on reducing re-offending. Fully capturing the contribution that peer interventions make can be difficult. Some of those consulted called for the funding of a large-scale pilot that can be appropriately evaluated.

Second and related to the last point, policy makers were alleged to be merely paying lip service to the approach without providing the necessary resources. *'There is not enough funding of the approach at the minute'* (practitioner). Consequently, many of those consulted felt that more resources should be made available to organisations to enable them recruit and train peers to the necessary standard. *'They [the government] need to put their money where their mouth is'* (expert). It was pointed out that: *'It is the right approach but it needs professional training and support. This costs money'*.

Third, there was some disquiet about the unregulated way in which organisations were establishing peer support interventions. A particular concern was that small organisations would not have the resources to provide peers with the necessary degree of professional training and support. In these circumstances the danger is that peer supporters would be exploited as a cheap resource and could be put at personal risk. An expert cautioned that: *'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'*.

Fourth, Prison Governors and Probation Officers are wary of deploying peers. The former are often reluctant to allow ex-offenders back into prison to provide peer support. The Probation Service was a particularly tough nut to crack because of concerns about risk. *'The level of risk aversion in probation is incredible'* (expert). This reluctance to engage with peer supporters is compounded by anxieties about de-professionalisation and job insecurity. Moreover, the contracting out of probation activities to the private sector was deemed unhelpful because private companies are often just as risk-averse. An expert noted that: *'You know you are in trouble when they start asking about your public liability insurance'*.

Fifth, many employers are unwilling to recruit peer supporters to paid positions following their training. A practitioner noted that they had some peers that had

worked seven years for them but were still unable to find a job elsewhere. *'We value the role that they [peer supporters] play for us but we want them to move on and not become dependent upon us'*. Consequently, peer interventions run the risk of setting offenders up to fail. The primary reason was employer concerns about the level of risk posed by recruiting ex-offenders and the potential for attracting adverse publicity. This may frustrate the intentions of policy makers in using the approach to improve the employment opportunities for those displaying an aptitude for peer support roles.

Finally, and related to the last point, the media was highlighted as a key barrier. It was acknowledged that there was some increased risk attached to employing offenders in peer support roles but the media often played an obstructive role by exaggerating the risks and sensationalising any resulting problems. This served to deter many organisations from committing to the approach or employing ex-offenders because of sensitivity to the danger of courting bad publicity.

#### 5.4. Good Practice

There are real problems identifying 'good practice' for an approach that is new and where the evidence-base is so meagre. Nevertheless, the available literature does provide a few useful pointers. Furthermore, the study team have used the expert consultation and the key findings emerging from the Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium held in May 2012 to supplement this material.

An unequivocal message is that effective recruitment, training and support processes are an essential pre-requisite for successful peer interventions. Box Four highlights some of the key principles of good practice highlighted by the delegates at the PiPS Expert Symposium. However, long training programmes can also be demotivating, particularly if there is no guarantee of a job at the end. Fisk *et al* (2000) also suggest a programme of **training for professional staff** to help secure their commitment to the peer approach.

#### Box Four: Good practice in relation to recruitment, training and support processes

- recruitment and selection processes should enable a diverse representation of peer mentors
- training programmes should be tailored to the particular context of the prison
- training will reflect the specific aims of the peer intervention but should also cover the core training needs of peer workers (e.g. listening skills, empathy, understanding the boundaries etc.)
- offenders should be awarded recognised qualifications to support their entry into the mainstream labour market
- formal mechanisms should be put in place to support peer workers. These may include regular support sessions **for peer workers** with a member of staff responsible for the intervention as a whole; opportunities for immediate de-briefing where offenders share distressing information; and scheduled times where peers can share their experiences.

Source: South, J. *et al* 'Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium'. Leeds Metropolitan University, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2012.

Training should reflect the specific aims of the peer intervention. However, peer workers will also need core skills. It is salient to note that training topics have often included:

- communication skills
- boundaries between professional practice and private life
- client confidentiality
- conflict resolution
- health and safety
- motivational interviewing
- working with drug and alcohol users
- mental health first aid.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2003) has identified some of the **key principles of good practice** with regard to using peer strategies in drug abuse prevention with young people. Box five summarises some of the factors that may be most relevant to the present study.

#### **Box Five: Key Principles of Good Practice**

**Provide accurate information.** Offenders often feel that authority figures are trying to manipulate them by providing propaganda. Consequently, a good approach is to allow peers to present a factual and balanced view of the particular issue under consideration e.g. drugs use, the jobs market etc.

**Provide peers with an environment that facilitates learning.** People learn best when they can imitate others who are good at what they are trying to learn and talk about their shared experience afterwards to make sense of it all.

**Ensure the professionalism of paid staff.** The success of any programme is dependent on the people who are delivering it. The sponsor agency should maintain staff numbers; ensure that the relationship between paid staff and peers is consistent; and ensure that staff are provided with consistent support and encouragement.

**Programmes should be peer led.** It is important to involve peers in more than just token ways. Consideration should, for example, be given to involving them in the design and re-design of programmes, involving them in running programmes and taking part in monitoring and evaluation activities.

**Make adequate investment available by the sponsoring agency.** This commitment must extend to committing adequate resources so that the programme does not fail and being willing to let peers make mistakes and learn from them.

**Garner support in the wider community.** Measures should be taken to help gain community support for peer initiatives. It may be necessary to undertake regular public education about an agency's peer initiative and establish a network of support.

**Give participants enough time to achieve their goals.** All good programmes take time to develop their full potential. Expecting major outcomes after the first six months can be unrealistic and set the programme up for failure.

**Programmes should be located in appropriate spaces.** The ability to ensure privacy for private conversations is a particularly important issue to consider when choosing where to base a programme.

**Ensure professional support for peer workers.** It is important that those responsible for running programmes debrief every peer mentor as part of the programme. This should always be carried out by an experienced and trained worker.

**Programmes must have clear and realistic goals.** This may allow providers to evidence performance more easily as the indicators of a successful programme are easier to identify and measure.

**Facilitate long-term planning.** The more partnerships and supporters a programme can gain, the greater its opportunities for attracting visibility and funding.

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2003). Peer to Peer. Using peer strategies in drug abuse prevention. New York: United Nations.

## 5.5. Final remarks

Peer interventions have a significant role to play in engaging and providing additional support to offenders. However, it is important that providers proceed with care. The evidence-base is poor and much of the recent clamour for their adoption stems from the misguided notion that such approaches are a ready-way of making scarce resources go further. Using offenders to provide peer support brings unique challenges which necessitate the implementation of effective recruitment, training and support processes. This is not cheap. The concern is that many small providers may not be up to this vital task.

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