

# Peer Support Worker/ Experts by Experience

Framework for inspiring, recruiting,  
retaining and developing our mental health workforce

# Introduction



Cheshire and Merseyside sees value in a collaborative approach to transforming experiences and outcomes for people affected by mental illness and people who support them, including carers.



We are committed to having voluntary peer support roles and paid Peer Support Workers supporting people with mental illness in the community.



The existing good practice within the Cheshire and Merseyside voluntary, community and health trust sector has been brought together in this Framework and Guidance.



The purpose of this framework is to underpin a collaborative approach to inspiring, attracting and recruiting peer support workers; training, supporting and retaining our peer support workforce. We will do this by promoting positive practice by imparting knowledge and learning and supporting a consistent and compassionate approach across Cheshire and Merseyside

# Peer support in mental health

Peer support in mental health involves individuals with lived experience of mental health challenges supporting others facing similar difficulties. This support, offered through shared experiences and empathy, complements professional care and focuses on empowerment, self-management, and recovery.

Peer support workers, who have personal experience with mental health conditions, utilise their understanding to build relationships, offer encouragement, and help others navigate their own recovery journeys.

## Key aspects of peer support in mental health:

- **Shared Experience:** Peer support is built on the foundation of individuals with similar experiences connecting and supporting each other. This can include shared experiences of mental distress, recovery, or even shared identities.
- **Empowerment and Self-Management:** Peer support empowers individuals to take ownership of their health and wellbeing by providing knowledge, skills, and confidence to manage their conditions and address other issues like loneliness or low self-esteem.
- **Complementary to Professional Care:** Peer support is often integrated into mental health services, working alongside other healthcare professionals like nurses, social workers, and therapists.
- **Non-directive Approach:** Peer support workers often take a non-directive approach, working alongside individuals to identify their desired outcomes and support them in achieving those goals.
- **Safe and Understanding Environment:** Peer support provides a safe space where individuals can share their experiences, feel understood, and build a sense of belonging.

# Peer support in mental health

Peer support can take various forms, including one-on-one sessions, group meetings, or even informal support through shared activities.

## Examples of Peer Support can include:

- A person with a history of psychosis supporting another individual experiencing psychosis.
- A caregiver supporting other family members of people with mental health challenges.
- A peer support worker helping someone build confidence or set goals.
- A peer support group providing a space to share experiences and offer mutual support.

There are numerous benefits of peer support which include:

- **Increased** self-esteem and confidence
- **Improved** mental well-being
- **Reduced** social isolation
- **Enhanced** coping skills
- **Greater** self-awareness and understanding
- **Increased** hope and optimism for recovery
- **Improved** engagement with mental health services

The core role of a mental health professional is based on their professional expertise and this shapes their relationships.

However, the core role of a peer support worker is based on their lived experience of mental health challenges and this informs a different kind of relationship

# Values and principles

*“there is no one way  
to do peer support”*

This Cheshire and Merseyside Peer Support Framework is underpinned and built around a set of key principles.

These are:

- Peer support workers are treated as equal team members and respected for their skills and contributions.
- Peer support is not a formal treatment or intervention.
- It is flexible, focused on the person, and builds safe, trusting relationships.
- Peer support is based on sharing lived experiences of mental health and services.
- It values mutual support and giving back equally.
- Peer support respects each person's unique background and culture.
- It values personal experience as important knowledge alongside medical or psychological views.
- Peer support helps people use their own strengths and skills to live well.
- It understands and respects the communities people come from or choose to join.
- It works inclusively to help people reconnect with their communities, families, friends, and support networks.

# The peer support/ expert by experience role

- MH PSWs give support, companionship and encouragement to people experiencing mental health difficulties.
- A quality that makes them stand out from other staff is that MH PSWs draw directly on their own lived experiences of mental health difficulties or caring for someone else who is experiencing such difficulties.
- They do not replace other roles in mental health services; rather, their skill in using their own experience to work collaboratively with someone facing similar mental health difficulties, is a unique one.
- MH PSWs can offer emotional and practical support to people going through similar kinds of experiences. They can use their own lived experience to connect with people and help them, by:
  - giving them a sense of hope and wellbeing
  - supporting them to gain a sense of control over their lives
  - helping them engage with, and build connections and a sense of belonging to, their local communities
  - helping them gain satisfaction in different parts of their lives.
- The relationship between the MH PSW and the person they help is key. It is based on people learning together in a relationship that is mutual, trusting, safe, non-judgemental and respectful.
- MH PSWs work in public, private and VCSE organisations, in a range of mental health and nonmental health settings. They also work with people by meeting with them face to face, talking to them on the telephone, or via email/messaging and other Internet-based support.

# The peer support/ expert by experience role

- Mental health peer support workers (MH PSWs) have lived experience of mental health challenges themselves or have cared for someone who has. Both types of experience are based on the same key principles.
- Some MH PSWs have personal experience with specific mental health services, like forensic services, perinatal care, early psychosis intervention, or support for children and young people. They may also bring unique perspectives related to their ethnicity, faith, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, or experiences with homelessness, the criminal justice system, or substance misuse.
- Family or carer peer support is usually given by carers, family members, friends, or partners of people with mental health difficulties. These carer MH PSWs focus on helping and connecting with others who are going through similar caring roles.
- Peer Support Workers (PSWs) can do their role in different ways some are paid workers, while others volunteer their time. The PSW role can appear in different forms within services, adapting to the specific needs and settings. It needs flexibility in relation to the time commitments people can provide in the role. PSW's should be matched to individuals based on the closeness of their own experience

Every peer supporter has their own skills, interests, expertise and demographics which they bring to the peer support relationship.

# Peer Support Worker Competencies

- Within Cheshire and Merseyside our services work to the NHS England Competence Framework for Mental Health Peer Support Workers as the key reference point [The Competence Framework for Mental Health Peer Support Workers](#)
  - The Competence Framework for MH PSWs outlines the knowledge, skills and attitudes required of the role. It aims to be flexible and adaptable, steering away from over-professionalising a role which, at its heart, is about human connection and relationships.
  - It outlines core skills for people starting out as MH PSWs, and includes optional skills for people who wish to develop further within the role, and competences for organisations to support PSWs. It is relevant to mental health care services, team members working with MH PSWs, their managers and commissioners, as well as voluntary community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations that want to offer peer support.
- The goal of the MH PSW competencies is not to create a strict checklist or require every PSW to do the same things. Instead, the intention of a competency framework is to show the basic knowledge and skills needed to be a good MH PSW, plus some extra skills people can learn to support others better.
- The key is how to communicate these as a way of working as opposed to defining an expectation about what someone should do
- When identifying the competencies that are appropriate for PSWs it is important to distinguish what is unique to the role in addition to what we would expect from all other members of staff working in mental health.
- It is important that the framework is operationalised in practice and not simply seen as a reference document and therefore can be used for:
  - **Shaping Job/ role descriptions**
  - **Recruiting and selecting PSWs**
  - **Training MH PSWs**
  - **Supervision**
  - **Helping PSWs reflect and develop in their role**
- For volunteer peer support workers it is important not to over formalise the role with regards to competency frameworks and instead should be used to outline the essential skills, knowledge, values and behaviours needed for effective volunteering, and to ensure they are well-equipped for their roles and contribute meaningfully to the organisation's goals.
  - It is with this in mind that the Cheshire and Merseyside peer support volunteer abilities and qualities on the next page have been developed



# Abilities and qualities of volunteer PSWs



# Preparing the organisation

# Preparing for peer support workers in the workforce

- **The development of peer roles requires engagement and commitment from many different parts of the organisation, for example HR, management, workforce planning, occupational health, finance, commissioners, professional groups, communications, etc.**
  - It is also important to include people who use the services, their family and friends, and members from relevant local partner organisations
- **The fundamental questions to be considered are:**
  - ‘Why do we want to employ peers?’
  - ‘What differences do we hope they will make?’
- **To deliver on the organisation’s ambitions to develop and embed a peer support workforce requires commitment from the senior leadership/ executive team.**
  - This vision needs to be communicated to relevant departments and teams through a variety of methods including information workshops, staff briefings, newsletters, etc.

# Preparing teams for peer support workers

**The whole team must understand and own the process and it should form part of a broader, recovery-focused, transformation of services.**

- It is beneficial if the team is given an opportunity to work together, with the peer support workers and other mental health practitioners, from teams which have successfully integrated peer worker roles within their team (for example by setting a day aside). In doing so, consideration should be given to;
  - **Considering the nature and role of peer support and how it differs from other roles in the team**
  - **Meeting, and hearing the stories of, peer workers and mental health practitioners from other teams where they have been successfully introduced**
  - **Honestly discussing hopes, fears and concerns**
  - **Considering the different sorts of expertise within the team**
  - **Reviewing peer worker job descriptions and person specifications to ensure that they embody the core principles of peer support**
  - **Developing a sense of collective ownership by coming together to think about the relative roles and responsibilities of peer workers and other team members in their own particular context**
  - **Providing reassurance from**
- At the heart of these discussions should be an acknowledgement that all staff bring a different balance of contributions from three essential sets of skills and abilities:
  1. **Their personal experience of life outside the mental health arena (skills, interests, culture, values, education etc.)**
  2. **Their personal experience of trauma, distress and mental health difficulties**
  3. **Professional/mental health training and experience.**

Inspiring and attracting peer  
support workers

# Inspiring and Attracting

**A key activity that has been identified for Cheshire and Merseyside is the promotion of the role both internally and externally in order to inspire and attract individuals into the role of peer support worker**

- **Internally** there is a need to raise awareness of the role and its impact more widely within our organisations so that the role is appropriately and effectively embedded as a core element of our mental health workforce.
- **Externally** there is a need to raise awareness of the role, who can come into it and the benefit of being in the role so that we are inspiring, attracting and recruiting a wider cohort of people

**In order to promote the role organisations need to agree their “elevator pitch” based on the three C’s of *Clear, Concise, and Compelling*.**

- A **clear** pitch uses simple language without jargon.
- **Concise** means keeping it brief.
- A **compelling** pitch is interesting and relevant, encouraging further conversation.

**There is a need to think about how, where and to who we promote the role – this includes: the public; potential applicants and for teams within our organisations**

**There are various ways of both supporting and developing budding peer support workers whilst they await opportunities to train or work as peer workers. For example:**

- Attending various courses to help them consider steps back into work; using their own experience in work; recovery principles; problem solving skills; peer research skills; peer training courses.
- volunteering as a way into work or peer training when that becomes available.
- offering them supported internships in various departments within the organisation so that people who have used services can experience a structured, supervised work experience in a range of different areas

# Elevator pitches

Included on the next couple of pages are examples of elevator pitches and adverts aimed at attracting potential peer support workers

“We employ experts by experience as Peer Support Workers (the language that we use is peer mentors/peer researchers). Their role is to support and empower service users to achieve their identified goals, and to ensure that young peoples’ voices are represented in issues that affect them. We believe that peer support brings a valuable addition to the experience of service users, and we demonstrate the impact by using routine outcome measurements and showcasing the influence that young people have upon services, both locally, regionally and nationally”.

## ***For the public:***

- Have you ever looked at reviews before buying something online? Or said that someone didn’t understand something that was affecting you because they’d not experienced it? These are fundamentally what peer support in mental health is about.
- Peer supporters are people who’ve been through a similar challenge – they’ve been there, they understand some of the difficulties, and more importantly they know ways of getting through it.
- They care because they’ve been there.
- Speak with our peer supporters on <contact details>

## ***For potential applicants:***

- Do you know the difference between peer pressure and peer support? Peer pressure is where we feel we ought to do something to be like other people and peer support is where other people with similar experiences listen to us and support us to do what we want.
- Could you support other people to do the things they want to do? We’re looking for people who have experience of <for example - using our services> to support other people in a similar situation.

## ***For teams:***

- Therapy teaches you how to talk about your feelings to a therapist. Peer support helps you learn how to talk with yourself, your family and your friends.
- Peer support can offer something additional and different to your team. Other teams have been surprised at the difference peer supporters can make in just a few weeks. They’ve talked about creating a positive learning culture for themselves as well as the impact on people who use their services.

# Elevator pitches

Ever wondered if you could use your lived experience to help other parent/carers? Have you got experience of supporting a child for access mental health services?

## **This opportunity could be for you!**

- Alder Hey CAMHS are looking to recruit, train and develop a team of parent carer peer support workers across the Alder Hey Children and Young People's Mental Health Service.
- As a leading provider of Children and Young People's Mental Health Services Alder Hey is committed to developing lived experience roles and working in partnership with our parents and carers. These pioneering roles will help us achieve our goal to continue to have parent carer support lead by those with lived experience. The roles will also ensure parent care voice is at the heart of Service Development and recruiting the right people to work with our families.

## We are looking for someone who:

- Has lived experience of supporting a child who has experienced mental health difficulties
- Is passionate about helping others and building positive relationships
- Is empathic and can connect to other parents who might be struggling to cope
- Can communicate with other professionals, other parents and community groups.
- Is able to work on your own, prioritising your own workload AND link to member of a team.
- Has a desire and willingness to learn.
- Has demonstrated resilience in face of adversity

## This role may include

- Running parent/carers support groups
- Providing support and resources through social media
- One to one supportive conversations with other parent/carers
- Being the parent carer voice in Service Development
- Using own experience to help develop and deliver training
- Being actively involved in recruitment of new staff member.
- These roles will involve providing Services across Liverpool and Sefton.

- **Will I be paid?** Yes - these are paid roles matched at Agenda for Change Band 3. The Service is keen to support the right people to join the team and so there is flexibility over the hours available.



# Recruiting peer support workers

# Recruitment strategies

The intention behind employing peer supporters is that they bring something different to the workforce

- Peer support workers can be recruited through various channels, including online job boards like NHS Jobs, community organisations, and by partnering with local peer support groups.
- When designing the recruitment process, it is important to involve people with lived experience to ensure accessibility and tailor the process to the unique needs of peer support candidates.

Recruitment Strategies can include:

- **Online Job Boards:** Advertise positions on platforms like [NHS Jobs](#), which are commonly used for healthcare roles.
- **Community Organisations:** Partner with local voluntary and community sector (VCSE) organisations that work with individuals with lived experience.
- **Peer Support Groups:** Connect with established peer support groups and networks to identify potential candidates and promote opportunities.
- **Targeted Outreach:** Reach out to individuals who may not typically seek employment through traditional channels, such as those with experience in volunteering or community work.
- **Co-production:** Involve people with lived experience in the recruitment process itself, from developing application materials to participating in interviews.

It is important to be clear about the difference between volunteer and paid worker roles

# Recruitment – key considerations

Thinking differently about recruitment is important to ensure that the peer support workforce can contribute something unique.

- **Accessibility:** Design application processes and materials that are accessible to individuals with varying levels of experience and comfort with traditional job searching.
- **Lived Experience:** Recognise the value of lived experience in peer support roles and adapt recruitment strategies to acknowledge this expertise.
- **Soft Skills:** Focus on identifying key qualities like communication, empathy, and active listening, which are essential for peer support work.
- **Support for Candidates:** Provide support throughout the recruitment process, including assistance with application forms, interview preparation, and onboarding.
- **Culture of Support:** Foster a workplace culture that values peer support and provides ongoing support for peer support workers.
- **Values Based:** Attract and recruit on the basis that an individual's values and behaviours align with those of the organisation

# Recruitment – Advertising

## 1. Advertising

- If applicants are required to have completed peer worker training, then there will be an available pool of individuals to approach.
- If the post is open to people who are willing to undertake peer training but have not already done so, then there will be a need to consider wider advertising.
- Prospective peer workers who are not in active contact with specialist mental health services are unlikely to read professional journals and may not access newspapers so other options for local publicity may need to be considered (for example, direct communication with local user groups).
  - However, simply contacting local user groups may exclude many people who have experience of mental health problems, but have not chosen to join a local group.
- Processes of how and where to advertise need careful consideration and a relevant strategy developed accordingly.
- Whichever advertising strategy is adopted, local ‘orientation sessions’/ open days/ job markets can provide opportunities for people to talk and hear about peer support before committing to the process of application
- It is important to provide benefit advice for people or to signpost them to appropriate agencies (e.g. JobCentreplus, Citizens Advice)

# Recruitment – Job descriptions

## 2. Job description and person specification

- There is no one description which will fit the many settings and implementations of peer support work. The unique qualities that peer support bring to the workplace can be undermined by attempts at standardisation.
- The process of producing a job description and person specification provides an important opportunity for each team to understand what they need from a peer supporter. This process is part of establishing understanding and culture when introducing new roles and should not be underestimated as a valuable learning opportunity which will save time and resources in the longer term.
- Similarly, when existing peer support posts become vacant, it is essential to refresh the job description based on what the team requires from the post. Requirements change over time as the team recognises and responds to gaps as well as contributions. Longitudinal studies have shown that when peer supporters move on from a role, the new person in post needs to be supported to mould the role to their own expertise.
- In developing job descriptions and person specifications it is important to consider a number of different criteria, including:
  - reflecting the core principles of peer support
  - allow flexibility for the role to grow and develop
  - accommodate individual skills, interests and development
  - meet the organisational ambitions in relation to peer support
  - include the specific circumstances of the team/locality in which they are based
  - meet internal HR guidance
  - meet equality legislation with regard to specification and definition of ‘lived experience’ as a requirement for the post.
- A key question underlying the formulation of person specifications is what constitutes ‘lived experience’? (i.e. whether all peer workers will have accessed secondary services, or whether peer workers might have used primary care or experienced challenges but avoided using services). This is for local discretion, but it is essential to work with HR to ensure that all aspects of the formal paperwork comply with the relevant legislation, in particular equality laws.

# Recruitment – Applications

## 3. Application processes

- Candidates are increasingly using apps such as ChatGPT to complete forms. These apps may be an important reasonable adjustment for candidates, including people whose home language is not English, or people who are not confident about the writing style for a job application. However, the recruitment panel need to be made aware of the organisation's policy, especially if lived experience might need to be included on an application form.
- Speaking with applicants is likely to encourage people with a broader range of background, expertise and interests. Some organisations provide support for people to complete an application form. This can work well with Open Days or Job Markets.
- Because of the nature of the likely applicants, it is necessary to consider how best to support them in the recruitment process.
  - Some applicants may have been out of employment for some time and will lack the confidence and skills to apply.
  - Applications can be particularly challenging for people who have spent periods of time in hospital, homeless, or in prison.
- The process usually assumes familiarity with IT, an ability to explain interruptions in employment and housing, and to answer questions about criminal history. All of these can be very off-putting for some people and may constitute a real barrier to the very people who could be the most helpful peers – those with most in common with the average person using services.
- Support for prospective applicants can be provided either within the organisation, or delivered by a partner agency specialising in employment support to guide and support prospective applicants through the recruitment process, including navigating the benefit system, writing job descriptions, applying for post online and interview preparation

# Recruitment - Interview and appointment

## 4. Interview and selection

- Where possible contact should be made with candidates before interview to reiterate about adjustments, try and minimise interview anxiety and help people perform at their best.
- Consideration should be given to interview questions being given to candidates a minimum of 24 hours before the interview.
- Given the complex and sensitive nature of the role, applicants need to be interviewed to assess their:
  - communication skills,
  - their understanding of recovery, and
  - their ability to share constructively their own journey and what helps them to stay well.
- Make sure to see the individual and chat with them in the waiting room on the day of the interview to help them to feel relaxed
- Interviews can be conducted on an individual or group basis.
  - Group interview processes can support the values of peer support.
- A first interview stage of half a day can consist of:
  - A short presentation from team leads and existing peer supporters about peer support within the organisation
  - An activity in small groups
  - A short initial one-to-one conversation.
- These enable participants to decide if this is a role they want to pursue further and enables interviewers to offer alternative opportunities that may be more suitable.
- The interview should provide an opportunity to discuss about what would work for both the organisation and individual with the regards to the working patterns that are possible and the flexibility needed
- The interview panel must include a volunteer with lived experience & who has done interview training
- Provide support following interview – to address the yawning silence that follows the good news!!
- If unsuccessful all interviewees should be offered an appropriate opportunity, which may include specific learning in a college, volunteering opportunities, connections with other organisations.

# Recruitment - Checks and references

## 5. References and checks

### 5.1 References

- References should be sought in accordance with organisational policy
- In general the following two types of references will be sought but consideration should be given as to whether the individual has been able to engage in employment prior to applying for the role of peer support worker
- Employer References:
  - Candidates are generally asked to provide two references, one of which should be from a current or most recent employer.
  - References from previous employers can provide insights into the candidate's work performance, skills, and suitability for the role.
- Character References:
  - If a candidate has limited or no previous employment history, character references from individuals who can speak to their character and suitability may be accepted.

### 5.2 Checks

#### Enhanced DBS check

- by whom where a situation arises that an individual may have a criminal conviction (that may or may not be relate like any other new employee peer support workers will need to have a Disclosure and Barring service (DBS) check
- The organisation needs to be clear at the outset how decisions will be taken and d to a period of instability in their mental health). This should includes an assessment of the risk involved in employing the person .
- Disclosure and Barring service checks can be very stressful for peer applicants and they often need support to complete the DBS form. This requires a full five year address history, plus paperwork to confirm current identity and address. This can be a real challenge for some people with mental health problems who have spent time out of work, or who do not own a passport or have a bank account.
- Some people will automatically assume that any criminal record will exclude them from peer support work, this is not necessarily the case and it may be helpful to clarify this at interview.
- Several services employing peer workers have now developed new processes for assessing criminal history.
  - For example, an 'objective assessment framework' which ensures that a comprehensive range of factors are taken into account when assessing risk.
  - For example, a panel including a peer worker, an HR representative, a general manager and the volunteer services manager to assess DBS returns and make a decision regarding whether or not to offer employment.



# Recruitment – occupational health

- The support of occupational health colleagues is central to the success of peer worker programmes in order to ensure that applicants with a history of mental health problems are assessed in an appropriate and helpful manner.
- Peer support applicants need to be prepared for correspondence from occupational health and, hopefully, will find this helpful in examining the organisation's staff wellbeing plan.
- The support offered should enable the peer worker to identify the sort of adjustments that are necessary to enable them to work to their full potential.
  - 'Reasonable adjustments might include things like:
    - specifying work hours to take account of particular problems with early mornings, rush hour traffic, or side-effects of medication
    - offering support with aspects of the role that are particularly difficult due to the nature of their mental health challenges (for example, sealing envelopes may be difficult for people who feel compelled to check)
    - increasing feedback to people who tend to repeatedly worry over possible mistakes ensuring that they are thoroughly debriefed at the end of each shift.

# Matching

- Matching peers with posts
  - Where there is a choice of peer worker posts, peer support workers can be allocated according to their personal attributes, experiences and preferences.
  - It is worth thinking more broadly than simply matching people in terms of their mental health problems. For example, by placing a peer with a specific diagnosis on a unit that specialises in this particular set of difficulties, there is a danger of perpetuating a narrow diagnostic categorisation.
  - 
  - Of at least as much value is the placement of a peer in a team that has identified a gap in certain skills or interests that the peer can fill (for example, membership of a particular age or ethnic group).
  - Wherever possible, peer support workers should be employed in groups of at least two per team, with some overlapping working hours.
    - This will help prevent isolation, provide support and help create a greater impact on the team culture.
  - There are specific challenges if the peer is employed in a team that is currently providing their mental health support or has done so in the recent past.
    - However, if this is agreed, then arrangements need to be made for where the peer support worker will be treated if they become unwell and all their notes/records need to be made inaccessible to other team members.

# Training and retaining peer support workers

# Induction

- In terms of induction for new workers, it is helpful to allocate a staff mentor to each peer (possibly the team recovery champion) to organise this and to devise an induction plan.
  - They will be able to provide information, support, and to give informal tips about routines and informal procedures ('how we do things around here').
- It should be remembered that many peer workers who have not been employed for some years – and even those who have – can be daunted by the number of tasks involved in beginning to work in the NHS
- Induction activities should be provided in accordance with organisational processes, in the same way other members of staff would be supported, but remembering the principles of being proportionate, appropriate and flexible. Such activities could include:
  - Mandatory corporate welcome
  - Completion of e-learning modules
  - Organisational induction sessions/ activities
  - Completion of risk assessments
- During the induction period it is important to think about how to support peer support workers who may be working in a formal work setting and have not had experience of this before – support should be based on the culture of nurturing an individual to enable their development

# Training

- All peer support worker training should be a facilitative, experiential process which empowers individuals to learn from one another how to support recovery using an interactive format.
- Training should aim to build on an individuals' strengths, offering constructive feedback, celebrating success, valuing difference and opportunities for everyone to learn, whatever their language, literacy, experiences or beliefs.
- The core skills required for peer support are active listening and problem solving; the core knowledge and understanding required are clarity about how to facilitate recovery and about the role and relationships of the peer worker. Thus, courses should generally cover communication skills (particularly active listening); mutual problem solving/solution focused skills; wellness and personal recovery planning; managing challenging situations; valuing difference; code of conduct and ethical considerations; team working and managing personal information/telling your own story
- Training, to support personal and professional development, should be context specific, compassionate and sensitive
- All peer support workers should have a training needs profile that is tailored and individualized
- Peer support worker personal and professional development aspirations will be individual and should be based as a minimum on supporting the essential requirements of the role as well as promoting access to wider training opportunities that are available within/ though the organisation should an individual wish to access them and it is felt to be appropriate

# Supervision and support

- Whether it is delivered on a group or individual basis, supervision and support is vital for peer support worker – just as it is for other staff
- Ideally, it should be provided through a combination of ‘managerial’ supervision (from the team leader or a care coordinator) and ‘professional’ supervision (from a senior peer or through contact with a group of peer workers).
- It is likely that in the early weeks of employment, peer support workers, like any other new workers, will need reassurance, feedback and support to think things through, but that this will rapidly diminish over time.
- Individual and group supervision offer opportunities to model and practice the principles of mutuality: sharing strategies, challenges and successes, developing skills, knowledge and expertise in the group and creating confidence that difficulties are not unique and can be overcome. The value of bringing all peer workers together for group supervision and mutual support cannot be over-estimated.
  - Once together, peers become more confident about sharing their hopes, fears, their personal stories and challenges.
  - As a group they gain strength and solidarity, they can support each other effectively and solve problems together.
  - It is in this context that it is clear just how skilled, interesting and inspiring they are, how much they have in common, and how much diverse talent they bring as a group.
- Even when peers are working in separate parts of the service, it is helpful to provide opportunities for them to meet together from time to time so that they can continue to develop their identity and retain clarity about their distinctive features and unique roles.
- There are some aspects of peer working that need particular attention - these are specific to the role and do not lend themselves to clear rules or black and white solutions.
  - First, there is how to use personal experience. There is a stark difference between telling your own story in the classroom setting and using your experience whilst building a relationship with someone who you are supporting. Peer support workers often need additional support in the early days to clarify their own boundaries and develop a personal account or narrative that feels safe. This entails working out what they want to share, what they feel safe about sharing, and what they do not want to share however tempting it might be in the moment.
  - The second challenge for peers lies in their double role and identity as both a practitioner (staff) and a patient (service user). Peers may be accustomed to relating to mental health workers as the expert – or even the enemy – but not as a colleague with whom they can work as equals, in a relationship based on mutual respect. Similarly, they are more used to relating to service users as friends rather than peers, so it can be challenging for them to maintain the ‘professional’ boundaries that are appropriate in the workplace. Other staff can also find this difficult.
  - Too often the challenges reported by peer workers focus on the problem of gaining the respect of staff. In some instances, staff are reluctant to refer to peers, unclear about what peer workers offer, or lack confidence that peer workers can cope with people who might present complex challenges. Thorough preparation of the team can help engender clarity, ownership and pride, but peers should really only be placed in teams that are actively supporting recovery and are keen to integrate the peer support worker role to support this endeavour
- There needs to be sensitivity to the supervision model and importance should be placed on ensuring there is always support available and not solely confined to planned supervision sessions

# Annual reviews

- Annual reviews for peer support workers should focus on assessing their effectiveness, promoting their professional development, and ensuring they continue to meet the needs of the individuals they support. This involves evaluating their performance against established competencies, identifying areas for growth, and providing opportunities for further training and support.
- Key Areas for Annual Reviews can include :
  - **Performance Against Competencies:**
    - Review the peer support worker's performance against specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals and objectives related to their role. This includes assessing their ability to build rapport, facilitate support groups, provide emotional support, and connect individuals with resources.
  - **Impact on Individuals Supported:**
    - Gather feedback from the individuals receiving support to understand the impact of the peer support worker's interventions. This can be done through surveys, interviews, or by reviewing case notes and progress reports.
  - **Adherence to Ethical Guidelines and Protocols:**
    - Assess the peer support worker's understanding and adherence to ethical principles, confidentiality policies, and safety protocols.
  - **Professional Development:**
    - Identify areas where the peer support worker would benefit from further training or development opportunities. This could include specialized training in specific areas of peer support, leadership skills, or crisis intervention.
  - **Self-Reflection and Goal Setting:**
    - Encourage the peer support worker to engage in self-reflection on their practice and set goals for the coming year. This promotes a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth

# Maintaining wellbeing



All employees need support to remain well at work. Working with people who are experiencing disabling and distressing emotional problems can be upsetting and stressful; observing or helping in critical incidents can be particularly traumatising and distressing.



The impact of these experiences can be amplified for peer workers if they resonate with their own lived experiences. Their own anxiety might trigger recognisable symptoms, and this can lead to fear of impending relapse and prompt them to take time off sick.



It is important to remember that peer support workers who are employed in paid posts in statutory organisations work to the same policies, procedures and regulations as everyone else; this includes the sickness absence policy.



It is helpful for all staff to take their own wellbeing seriously and a wellbeing plan can support this process. By considering what they need to do to stay well, what sort of events make them stressed, anxious and potentially unwell, and how they can manage or minimise these situations, all staff can begin to develop their resilience, anticipate and manage stressful times and maintain their own wellbeing.



For peers, as with all staff, it is helpful for managers to work with them to optimise their wellbeing; to make adjustments wherever possible to allow them to work to their full potential, to find solutions to aspects of work that they are finding stressful, to encourage them to seek support when they need it rather than trying to manage alone



# Employment opportunities



**Given appropriate training, support, supervision and development opportunities, peer workers will be their own best advocates and become increasingly valued throughout services; posts will be created or converted, and numbers will grow.**



**There are various ways of increasing employment opportunities for peer workers. For example:**

- requiring all new services to include peer worker posts
- reviewing all vacancies to consider the possibility of creating a peer worker post (for example, replacing healthcare assistant post with a peer/healthcare assistant post – doing the same things in a different way)
- providing training for professionally qualified staff to use their personal experience of trauma/mental health problems in their work and thereby work as a professional/peer worker

# Career pathways

- It should always be remembered that all peer support workers will have come into the role with differing motivations and ambitions. Some will choose to progress in the role and go on to develop a career in other roles whereas some will choose to stay in the peer support role as they are passionate and committed to giving back
- However, all peers in employment need support and encouragement to pursue their own personal and professional development.
  - As they gain experience in-post they will become clear about the sort of training they want to help them become more effective as peer workers.
  - As they develop further, they may decide to apply for professional training or to gain more specialist qualifications in project management; training, research or therapy skills.
  - Opportunities to become specialist peer worker positions in peer supervision, peer management, peer training or peer research
  - Once peers are working as a team leader or a project manager, then their primary identity and role is likely to be developing beyond their lived experience, and whilst their personal experience of mental health problems will always have an influence on their work, it will not be their primary qualification.