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Integrating vocational and peer support: an exploration – VIP

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It's valuable and powerful to have peer workers in the team

Summary

Vocational services in Lambeth explored the integration of formal peer and vocational support with three aims in mind:

To increase the capacity of Vocation Matters and Carpet Cleaning Care.

To facilitate an improved vocational pathway for peer supporters.

To explore the process and impact of integrating vocational and peer support.

Our findings indicate that the collective benefits are multiple- for staff, peer supporters and service users. For the staff there was an increase in the capacity of the service offer. For peer supporters there were personal gains such as increases in confidence, wellbeing and satisfaction with the role. Skills acquired included I.T. competence, learning how to map out resources and learning how to work with people in a goal focused way. Employment seeking skills also increased, to the extent that one of the peer supporters has been offered a job. The service users involved all achieved a range of community inclusion outcomes and were very satisfied with the input from peers.

The challenges of integrating formal peer support were also multiple. These included not having enough paid time to undertake what was needed- without doing hours in a voluntary capacity. The scale of resources and infrastructure needed were significant- such as planning time, training, office space, payments, I.T. and many hours of staff support and supervision. However, our evidence indicates that the benefits outweigh the challenges. We go on to make eight recommendations about integrating peer support for other organisations based on our learning from this pilot.

Introduction

Within the literature and mental health policy there are continuous calls for care and support to be more personalised and person centred (Department of Health, 2012). For many years, local service users have also asked for support and opportunities that respond to the whole person and their potential to live the lives they want (Bertram & Linnett, 2003). The emphasis of our work has been to facilitate co-produced approaches and solutions that do just that- help people, find their own way forward, to achieve the goals they want. This evaluation stems from our latest innovation, the exploration of integrating formal peer and vocational support. Three projects (described below) decided to work co-operatively, after identifying a shared vision of facilitating community inclusion and well-being.

The projects

Vocation Matters

Vocation Matters is an award winning service user- managed project. The project has four paid staff that facilitate in-depth time unlimited vocational information and support, that helps service users achieve their own personal goals. Including paid employment, voluntary work, education and vocational qualifications.

Carpet Cleaning Care

Carpet Cleaning Care is a well-established vocational project, offering training and part-time paid work to service users. The project's main activity is a commercial carpet and upholstery service. The aim of the project is to help the workforce gain the necessary skills, confidence and references that are needed to obtain employment or other socially inclusive activities. Both Vocation Matters and Carpet Cleaning Care are integrated into South London and Maudsley NHS Trust in the Psychosis Clinical Academic Group in Lambeth.

Peer support project

This project offered access to peer supporters (individuals with their own lived experience of distress) at times when service users said they were finding life particularly difficult e.g. during an admission or leaving hospital. Peer supporters were trained and supported to facilitate accessible person-centered support over a 12 week period.

According to the Mental Health Foundation (2012) peer support may be defined as:

'The help and support that people with lived experience...are able to give to one another. It may be social, emotional or practical support (or all of these) but importantly this support is mutually offered and reciprocal (p1)'.

Reasons for undertaking the pilot

The projects shared an aspiration- to support the application (and scaling) of lived experience through an integrated peer support and vocational model. The projects also shared a similar value base: effective support needs to be person-centred, asset based, co-productive and grounded in what service users say works for them- within their own frame of reference.

For the vocational projects, integrating peer support could enable them to work with an increased number of people, and extend the offer of what the projects' could facilitate e.g. accompanying someone to register for a course, travelling with an individual to visit community groups and participating in a leisure activity. As well as increasing their practical offer to service users, the projects wanted to harness and explore the value and emotional impact of lived experience when working with people.

This pilot would enable peer supporters to have access to on-going vocational input, to help peers with their vocational progression. Peer supporters were asking for this opportunity.

Utilizing peer support was recognized as a means of improving mental health services by a number of other local stakeholders. Our Clinical Commissioning Group was leading a mental health transformation program and peer support had become a priority. This type of integration had not been piloted before.

The specific aims of the exploration were:

1. To increase the capacity of Vocation Matters and Carpet Cleaning Care by integrating peer support.
2. To facilitate an improved vocational pathway for peer supporters.
3. To explore the process and impact of integrating vocational and peer support.

Method

We set up a co-operative inquiry group to oversee this pilot (idea generation, implementation and evaluation). This consisted of staff and a peer from the peer and vocational projects, a vocational services manager and an experienced evaluator. The group met every four weeks- minutes were recorded and the evaluator drafted questions for semi structured interviews. An holistic range of qualitative and quantitative data was gathered- sources included:

1. Minutes of Planning Meetings
2. Semi structured interviews with the vocational staff at the start, mid-point and end
3. Semi structured interviews with the peer supporters at the start, mid-point and end
4. Wellbeing measures of the two peers at the start of the project, mid-point and end and mental health service use
5. Semi- structured interview with a service user who received peer support
6. Service user vocational outcome data
7. Peer supporter Vocational outcome data

Staff interviews

Focused on:

- The role of peer workers within the team and activity that has taken place
- The peer workers strengths and learning needs
- The challenges of the pilot and suggestions for service development

Peer Supporter interviews

- What interested them about working in Vocational Services
What skills they wanted to develop, and what they personally wanted to achieve by being involved
- Their experiences of working in the team and with service users
- Any challenges and concerns

The peers also agreed to complete the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale ((WEMWBS) a validated well- being measure.

Service User interview

- Their experience working with the peer
- Their insights about what qualities and skills the peer brought to the role
- Suggestions for improvement

All the interviews were transcribed, content analysed and categorized under the key emerging themes. The findings were validated by all the participants as an accurate record.

Peer support Recruitment

Two experienced and trained peers (one female one male) were recruited. They were both offered six months paid work for two hours per week with Vocational Services.

Findings

Minutes from the co-operative inquiry group

The following themes emerged:

An enthusiasm to develop a new service model

All the partner projects had well- established service models that were known and respected locally. They all operated in slightly different ways e.g. how long they offered a service for, referral methods, record keeping. There was a willingness from all parties to work together to co-produce a new way of working involving peer supporters, accepting that the new service may look different from the one that they had developed. One clear sign of their commitment was the agreement to split the expenses (primarily peer wages) equally between the projects.

Orientation of the planning group

There was a mutual feeling in the group that this was valuable work- grounded in peoples lived realities. The group worked well together and actions were agreed quickly. There was a shared open working style...This involved being flexible and accepting uncertainty in terms of what the outcomes would be.

The overall theme is that of exploration, flexibility and organic growth. We do not have all the answers at this point, but believe the shared values and commitment to the pilot will make it a success

Operational elements

The group talked about attempting to define peer support. It was agreed that it was difficult and not helpful to reduce it to a set of functions. Instead it was agreed that the peer support role needed to evolve organically, but at its heart were:

The development of mutually trusting and reciprocal relationships

Increased empathy and hope

People at various stages in their development can role model that getting a life and overcoming struggles is possible, having walked that path

The importance of effective support and supervision was raised and it was agreed the peer and vocational project managers would facilitate this regularly. An induction

and recruitment programme with a role description were all agreed. Peer supporters would be invited to join the team and would be matched carefully with a service user.

In addition, opportunities for learning included recording the work they did, learning about healthy boundaries, relationships and appropriate levels of responsibility, working within a team and feeding back on progress to other staff. The importance of facilitating vocational support with peer supporters was seen as crucial.

There is a real need for this because otherwise peer supporters can be left in a dead end. What do they do after they have facilitated peer support?

Staff Interviews

The following themes emerged:

An appreciation of the peer role

All staff embraced the idea of integrating people with lived experience into the teams. Ideologically there was a good fit with staff members' values, and they could also see the positive impact peers were making with service users.

Both the Carpet cleaning and Vocation Matters projects were operating at full capacity with waiting lists. Introducing new team members to increase the capacity of the service was seen as beneficial. The fact it was peers supporters being integrated was perceived as a valuable asset.

Having roles where there is 'peer' in the title, gives people hope and inspiration. It's valuable and powerful to have peer workers in the team

Vocation Matters is already a user run service, based on the principles of peer to peer work. We already feel we can show a lot of understanding and empathy, we are based on a human approach, not a clinical expert approach

The mutuality between peers and [service users] is really positive

For a busy service to have extra capacity, for someone to go out with people is helpful. To have someone as skilled as [the peer] is amazing

Peers' strengths and learning needs

All staff were highly complementary about the peers, and were able to identify a number of skills that they brought to the team. Their inter-personal skills were particularly valued.

His people skills are so strong; he would be able to work well with any of the work crew.

She has excellent people skills; she connects with people, is a good listener and is real

I know both people she has worked with have valued her input as a peer and it has made a difference to them

She 'gets people' is such a people person, everyone likes her.

They know a lot of the services already

In terms of areas for improvements, there was consensus that the peers needed more training and support on the administrative side of the role, and their I.T skills needed updating.

Challenges faced during the pilot

Staff reflected about any difficulties experienced during the pilot. Several challenges were identified.

The scope of the Peers work was restricted.

It was envisioned that peers would be fully integrated into the team, undertaking the same kind of work as the staff. What happened in the first half of the pilot was the peers focused on the face to face engagement, but did not get as much opportunity to take on responsibility in other areas e.g. note writing and liaising with vocational providers. This was because there was a budget for two hours per week.

The trouble with the two hours is we have had to choose – face to face or office work. Our instinct has been for face to face work. What would be better is to have the peer in for all day – and then they would have their own case load, and have responsibility for all aspects of supporting the person – research, relationship building, and practical work.

We have had to prioritise which bits of the job they do, and they have focused on the face to face work. This means they haven't done the other bits of work – the researching information, liaising with colleges, note writing.

Service users not attending appointments had a negative impact on the peer and team's workload.

It is not uncommon in Vocational Services for people to miss appointments. When this occurs for permanent staff there will be alternative work to undertake. However, as the peers were only working with one person at a time (the maximum they could see within the two hour time allocation) if that individual did not turn up there was insufficient work for them to do. Staff would try and identify alternative work, but that would take time.

A regular schedule of work for a 2 hours slot would be seeing one person, plus associated write up / research. When there are inevitable occurrences of people not turning up for appointments, it has a significant adverse impact on the peer, as the point of the shift has gone. It can feel like a waste of their time coming in, which can be demoralising.

If a [service user] does not turn up, alternate work has to be found on the spot, which increases my workload. That's not helping to a degree.

The hours reduced the peers' vocational development

Staff were concerned that by only working two hours per week, the aim of the pilot to increase peers' vocational progression was more difficult to achieve. There was reduced opportunity to learn new skills, meet with one of the team to discuss their own vocational plans or to build up sufficient experience for their CV. One staff member (who also had lived experience) reflected that the peers may doubt their own skills and resilience if they had not had the opportunity to test that they could work longer days.

It's difficult for peers to get work ready if only working 2 hours a week - e.g. there is little time to develop skills such as IT/ note writing that are essential for employability. Peers may not trust themselves that they can do a full or part time job.

In terms of applying for jobs, a 2 hour per week job on a CV / application form may raise doubts/ concerns for employers.

Concerns that the peers were not benefitting economically

Staff described the importance of peers being paid for their skills and time. They did not want to develop a work experience or unpaid training role as it did not fit with their values. However during the pilot there were times when peers worked longer than the two hours- voluntarily- in order to complete a piece of work e.g. supporting someone to enroll on a course. This made the staff feel uncomfortable.

Working for only 2 hours a day – the commuting to work can take almost the same amount of time as the shift. It's disproportionate. People are spending lots of time travelling- that isn't paid for.

Sometimes there has been work that I have mentioned needs doing, and I think it would be good for her to do it, but it would take her over her hours. X is more than keen to do this – and says she wants to, but it feels awkward for me knowing she's not going to get paid, and she is doing unpaid work that I could be doing.

Lack of office space impeded Integration

When peers were meeting service users there were rooms booked for them to meet in, and resources available e.g. Computers. They also could work in the team offices if there was space. However, if the peers worked on a day when all the other team members were in, there was insufficient desk space in the office. It was felt this reduced feelings of equality and integration.

It is hard from them to be completely integrated, there is no desks for the peers to work at if we are all in.

Sometimes she is in early and is waiting for me on the comfy chairs in our office, I can understand if she was feeling a bit 'oh I wonder what different work are they doing'

Suggestions for Future Development

The staff were asked what they would like to see happen after the pilot. All were enthusiastic about the project continuing to have peers, but wanted to see a change to the number of hours:

If resources allowed I would like to increase the time allocated to 6 hours per person - this would be more realistic in what they can do and would be more beneficial to their development

It would work much better if they were in for a day of week and had their own case load.

Peer Supporter Interviews

Reasons for getting involved

We explored why the peers were interested in undertaking this new role. Both were attracted by the opportunity to help others move forwards. Through their previous peer support work, both peers were aware of Beale House, and expressed an interest in working within its environment.

I already felt a bond with Beale House, and had a connection with a number of people and teams already. The opportunity to do a specific role here and to have more involvement with the teams was appealing.

I had already done some sign posting vocational work, but this took it to a new level, helping people with their personal goals.

The peers also identified reasons why the integration could be beneficial for them. There were specific skills they could develop by working in vocational teams that had not been accessible in previous roles e.g. reflective note writing and researching community options. During the initial interviews the peers outlined their plans and goals for their own vocational development, and what help they would like to receive from the vocational teams. From the outset they identified Beale House as their ideal workplace, but were also open to working in different organisations.

I'd like to develop my IT skills – I need to become more computer literate so that I can enter notes on the V drive and to take down information

I look forward to liaising more with other agencies and colleges but will need some guidance to help me with this

My aim is to get paid employment. Ideally here. But if I can't get a job here then I'd like paid employment in the wider mental health field

The value of lived experience

Both peers were clear that their lived experience was an asset to the projects. Sharing their own experiences of distress, service use and progression was valuable: it helped trusting relationships build quickly and also created an environment of hope where growth and change were achievable. They were also able to offer a useful signposting function as a result of their personal knowledge of local opportunities

I can see similarity between the situations people are in and what I have been through. I have experienced some of the same psychological abuse as others. This can make it easier to relate to people. I explain to people that it's ok to feel unsure, or stressed or worthless, its human. I try to help them understand, by explaining I've been there myself that everyone can feel overwhelmed, but you can get through it.

I can't fix things for people but I can try and help them see what they are experiencing has happened to others and problems can be overcome.

I have also helped P with his goal of becoming a peer supporter. When I first met him I knew instantly he had the right qualities to be a good peer supporter. I went with him to the recruitment session; it was very busy and crowded with lots of people. P told me if I hadn't been there he would have walked away. He was accepted onto the training (I put a recommendation in!) and he is really pleased.

The peers found meaning and satisfaction in the role

When reflecting on the work, the peers appreciated the emphasis on helping individuals achieve their vocational goals. They saw it as beneficial to the people they were working with, but also recognised the positive impact it had on their own well-being.

I really enjoy the work, having a focus and seeing people achieve

It is quite draining doing the other peer support – it can feel like I'm giving endlessly emotional support, especially as I have been working with some very vulnerable and unwell people. This feels more positive for me. It feels like there's more to achieve

Peers described how the work with vocational services was different to other work they had undertaken. In previous positions the peer role had focused almost exclusively on face to face engagement. In this new role, there were opportunities for research, note writing, and visiting relevant organisations. They saw this as an advantage for their vocational development.

It's been going well, I've been focusing more on the behind the scenes – back office information- how to research information for people, what websites to use. It's been interesting.

There's so much more to it than meeting people face to face

The Team Approach was important to the success of the pilot.

The peers described valuing the team based approach. They told us working in a team where challenges could be discussed, and solutions and strategies could be generated was useful in achieving outcomes, but also beneficial for their own well-being. One peer explained that their previous work was lone working that often left him feeling drained, and sometimes anxious about the level of responsibility he had to shoulder. Working as a peer in a team felt safer and more constructive.

I enjoy working in a team, with a team you get more support – you can get suggestions and feedback from one another

I appreciate getting the input from other members – we are one group with one shared goal

With other peer support – it's a lot of responsibility and you're carrying it by yourself

Feeling Valued

Over the course of the six months the peers gained a strong sense of feeling valued by the team. They were initially impressed by the warm welcome, followed by feeling part of a team. By the last interview they were describing feelings of equality with the permanent staff.

I feel like I'm treated as an equal here, that's not happened before.

They are all so supportive. You feel like an equal. On the wards it's a bit of a fight to get your views across, you don't get much information at handovers. Here there's a sense of equality.

There were a number of practical actions staff took that supported the peers to feel a part of the team.

I can't believe how quickly I got a slam e-mail address. It feels professional. Now when I go to collaborative meetings I feel on a more level field having the e-mail address. It feels good.

I still can't believe I was given a key. At Metropolitan the process it's very different - I have to sit in the waiting room with tenants who have come in with problems and wait for X to collect me. It feels wrong and not very professional.

Personal Vocational support and progression

Over the course of the pilot they had a number of vocational support sessions with staff from Vocation Matters with information and advice on how to identify and move forward with their goals e.g. recommending I.T courses, C.V. construction and job opportunities. The peers described these sessions as useful, although they still had some uncertainty about their future at the end of the pilot.

One peer was considering a freelance/ consultancy role and appreciated the opportunity to increase their networks. At the end of the pilot they felt confident with their plans, and after surveying the job market and exploring salaries for support workers, they were going to continue freelance work and were applying for other jobs.

My aim is to get paid employment.

I am building up confidence and experience.

I am building up a good level of freelance work, people are offering me work, I am just considering my options and working out what will be financially viable.

I am satisfied staying here and have enough work at the moment

The peers were able to identify a number of skills they had developed as a result of their work within vocational services which would help them in the future.

Yes, I do a lot of referrals to other vocational providers, so learning lots about talking to external organisations.

I never used to like talking on the telephone, I had a bit of a block about it, but as I have to do it a lot I've got used to it.

I'm learning a whole new set of skills. I get to use my counselling skills, whilst focusing on specific vocational work, using computers, visiting colleges.

Infrastructure within the base contributed to the integration

The peers described how the infrastructure of the base had positively contributed to their integration into the team e.g. the availability of meeting rooms which they found helpful to create an atmosphere conducive to open and frank conversations. Having facilities available to organise and leave the work behind was important. It helped create a sense of closure and strengthen boundaries which improved their mental health. They also commented that the atmosphere in the base felt different from other health services, more open and egalitarian, which in turn made them feel safe and confident.

There are physical things that help – I have access to a filing cabinet, so I can write a report – file it away – and shut the door, it helps me leave the work here and not think about it. My other work I am literally (and emotionally) carrying the work around with me in my bag all the time. In my flat I am surrounded by papers and notes from

two years of peer support work. I find my head is clearer now which I think will make a difference to the quality of the work.

The place is full of serenity and peacefulness I really like the relaxed informal style of working.

Having the base and its facilities is very useful. With (the old peer support project) I work mainly in the community, meeting people in cafes, in the park or libraries. It can be difficult to get privacy and sometimes the clients can feel uncomfortable. Here I can talk in private.

Challenges faced

Overall both peers were highly satisfied with their work with vocational services and the support they were receiving. However a few challenges were identified. The main concern was the time restraint of two hours. It restricted what they could do with individuals, and also their learning and integration with the projects. The peer supporters ended up doing more hours voluntarily. One peer was also concerned about the lack of desk space- preventing them feeling fully integrated. The peers also felt uncertain sometimes about their future.

Both vocational projects work with individuals who experienced significant trauma, distress and social exclusion. This proved challenging:

There is already an issue with the time I work on the project – 2 hours is not enough... Sometimes I can be in the middle of a meeting when the 2 hours is up, and I can't suddenly walk out. I accompanied someone to college for an ESOL course and that took a lot of time.

Two hours is nowhere enough time to get things done. The other staff do a lot of record keeping and notes from appointments, I feel like we're not doing the same and our input is lower.

Would be nice to have a desk space to work from but I'm not sure where it would go.

When I'm working with others it can feel like, they've got a plan, but where am I going? What's my direction?

People have a lot of issues, and it can be quite difficult to manage people's expectations.

Suggestions for Service Development

The peers were asked for their insights about what should happen after the pilot. They were both eager for the integration to continue. The focus on vocational peer support was important, both in terms of helping service users work towards an outcome and maintain progression. Their work with service users gave them an insight into the needs of individuals- they thought peer support should expand in the service and people should have ongoing support.

I think there should be more in-house peer support at vocational services – more of the generic, emotional support for all users here...not just to get vocational outcomes.

I can really see the benefit for offering an ongoing service, it means people can still get support even when achieved an outcome e.g. someone may be on a course but would still benefit from coming in to talk about feelings of inclusion/ study difficulties. This might help them stay on the course.

Well-being scores

The peers' scores from the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale ((WEMWBS) increased throughout the project.

Peer supporter 1 began the project with a well-being score below average, by the end their score indicated an average well being level. Peer supporter 2 began the project with an average well-being score, and after their involvement with the integration this had increased to above average.

Service user interview

We facilitated an interview with a service user who had been accessing peer support for over three months.

Peer support

The service user described meeting with the peer at Beale House over a number of sessions. The peer supporter was interested in hearing about his hopes and fears, and asked lots of questions without being intrusive. The service user said this was useful in building up an accurate picture of what he was looking for. He was interested in learning more about paid work in peer support, and he was encouraged to apply for some upcoming training.

The recruitment method included an open day. His anxiety meant it was difficult to consider going to an event with large groups of people. The peer supporter offered to attend with him which he gladly accepted. He explained

I'm so glad she was there as it was so busy, I get anxious in situations with lots of people. We sat next to each other and she would occasionally turn round to check I was OK. It was reassuring.

He was accepted onto the training course, and was subsequently selected for paid work.

Impressions of peer supporter

When reflecting on working with the peer supporter, this man identified a number of skills that she possessed that made the relationship helpful. These included her calm and respectful manner.

She came across as calm and open, she asked lots of questions but in a very peaceful way,

She was great; she made me feel so comfortable.

She's very good at what she does, very nice and helpful

The service user could not identify any challenges or concerns about working with the peer.

Service User Vocational Outcomes

Over the course of the pilot the peers worked with five service users. A range of vocational activity was undertaken, including

- Identifying personal assets and confidence building
- Considering and selecting courses or qualifications
- Visiting potential volunteer placements
- Attending recruitment sessions for paid work
- Registering and enrolling at Colleges

As a result of the input of the peers, the following outcomes were achieved:

Participant 1: Enrolled on 3 computer courses at a Resource Centre

Participant 2: Enrolled on an ESOL course at Morley College

Participant 3: training course and qualification in peer support, paid work as a peer supporter

Participant 4: Signposted to advice centre for housing advice

Participant 5: Supported to volunteer with local substance misuse charity

Peer supporter Vocational outcomes

At the end of the pilot one peer had begun to undertake job searches and has had a job offer. This was a new development for him. To help with this vocational progression, they accessed a range of support from the vocational projects including: interview practice and CV advice from a senior employment specialist, and emotional and practical support from a vocational advisor regarding their skills profile and direction. He has been offered a job.

The second peer had also seen improvements in their vocational pathway e.g. they had been offered opportunities in supervising people on an in-patient based peer support project. They stated they were in a stronger position to apply for work. However she took the decision to park her plans in the short term due to family circumstances.

Conclusion

We explored the integration of formal peer and vocational support into an existing user run and work training project in secondary care. The values of peer support chimed with these projects from the outset e.g. given the right validating conditions everyone has the potential to find their own forward to learn, change and grow.

Careful and skillful planning was crucial in making the integration work. Our co-operative inquiry group worked through a wide range of emotional, social and practical issues such as: developing an induction, recruitment and support programme. As well as this structure the group's passion and orientation shone through. There was a mutual agreement about what would be helpful. We resisted trying to define or reduce peer support to specific functions and adopted a flexible organic approach that allowed everyone to safely explore and learn co-productively- as we went along. No one was in charge or had overall control.

Peer supporters sharing their lived experiences of distress, service use and progress was a strong helpful factor- it had a positive impact on the peer supporters and service users. These unique insights were perceived as an asset and valuable- in turn this created an atmosphere of hope and possibility- where authentic empathy and validation led to learning, change, growth and an increase in wellbeing. Having walked in the same shoes as service users meant that a deep emotional resonance and an experiential credibility emerged- leading to the quick development of trusting relationships and the achievement of outcomes for service users.

The emphasis on identifying and facilitating the achievement of vocational goals with service users meant that the peer supporters had a degree of role clarity and a clear focus. The peer supporters personal experience of local opportunities- that worked for them- meant they could also signpost and recommend to service users community inclusion options that were effective and trustworthy.

This was different from other forms of face-to-face peer support they had undertaken (ward based, befriending type roles). They said it had a positive impact on their own wellbeing because of the satisfaction gained when service users achieved their

vocational goals. This new vocational role also provided the opportunity to learn beneficial new skills. These included: researching and visiting community organisations, reflective note writing and using I.T.

The team based approach to peer and vocational support generated a number of strengths. Responsibility and challenges were mutually and equally shared by the staff and peer supporters. It was clear that the insights from several perspectives were better than one- in terms of creating solutions to challenges and achieving outcomes. Peers mentioned: having the weight lifted off their shoulders, feeling safe and being an authentic part of the team. We avoided the power inequalities that can characterise traditional patient-staff inter-actions. Little things mattered a lot such as being given keys to the building and an email address.

The new dimension of this integration was that peer supporters had access to a range of employment specialists. This helped progression toward achieving their own vocational goals and they moved from feeling stuck to feeling a sense of direction and achieving outcomes. This is an important development because lots of peer support projects are springing up and there is a degree of uncertainty about what do people do next. Decently paid careers in formal peer support are still rare and are often low paid and temporary, so it is crucial to think about progression carefully.

A good infrastructure and facilities where peer supporters had access to private meeting spaces was valued significantly. The integration happened in a safe and calm environment. Other facilities which helped the work included desk space, computers and a filing cabinet. The peers mentioned that it can be difficult to undertake peer support in the community without access to a safe private space.

Several challenges arose during this pilot. During the first phase the peers didn't get the opportunity to undertake as many tasks as the staff, so learning skills in other areas was restricted. The primary issue was that the budget could only stretch to paying for two hours work each. This was never enough time to undertake face to face engagement with service users and take on other responsibilities. This challenge was not resolved during the pilot and the peers decided to do some additional hours voluntary, enabling them to learn new skills. This made the staff feel uncomfortable because it conflicted with their values- that people should be paid for the work they do. There was also a concern from staff about whether two hours' work a week would realistically prepare the peers for paid employment and how would that look- to an employer- on a C.V?

We explored whether the integration of peers would increase the capacity of the service to offer extra emotional and practical support. The evidence reveals that when you weigh up the proportion of investment time (induction and staff supporting peers) capacity does increase in relation to service users accessing peer support and achieving outcomes.

However, if the integration of formal peer support is done properly- so that it is effective- then it can be resource intensive. We had an average of six staff and service users who were involved in regular group meetings for months, payments to peer supporters was £1220 and formal and informal support and supervision sessions were consistent over the six months. We started small and integrated just

two peer supporters and found that peer support is not a cheap option. This raises a question about the scaling of formal peer support because there have been calls for this to happen. Can significant scaling of formal peer support be undertaken without a large scale shift in resources?

Based on our evidence, the following recommendations are offered to organisations working in peer support or vocational services, and to their funders.

Recommendations

1. Vocational Services should integrate peer supporters into their teams. We found a minimum of two worked best – both in terms of ensuring the peers do not feel isolated and being able to have a choice of peers for appropriate matching with service users.
2. There needs to be enough time. Peer supporters should be engaged for a minimum of six hours per week. An allocated budget to pay peers appropriate earnings is required.
3. For the peers to feel valued and fully integrated, effective infrastructure needs to be in place before, or as soon as the peers start e.g. E-mail addresses set up, peers given keys to the building. There needs to be dedicated office space for peer supporters to undertake the work, and access to computers to record what they are doing.
4. The work peers undertake needs to be wider than just face-to-face engagement. It should encompass all operational aspects of service provision. Peers will require access to training to fulfil these roles.
5. To ensure full integration and avoid tokenism, peers should be perceived and treated as equal members of the team – involved in all decision making regarding service user engagement, service development and service evaluation.
6. The peers and wider team need to ensure alternative work is available when/ if service users do not turn up for appointments.
7. Peer supporters benefit from emotional and practical support and supervision in order to adopt a goal focused approach. This can be organised through formal and informal methods, including team meetings and regular one to one sessions
8. To ensure the peer supporters own vocational needs are addressed-regular support sessions should be scheduled with a focus on the peer supporter's goals and what the services can do to facilitate change and growth. The skills learnt from peer support are transferable to a number of jobs and vocational specialists need to be aware of that.

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