

Transforming the culture of mental health services through peer support: learning from the project

Key findings

- The eight peer support workers supported 247 inpatient and community-based clients, meeting each one an average of 14 times. They built strong relationships with service users, who said they felt more supported and had a better quality of relationship with peer support workers than with other workers.
- Peer support workers contributed to a 14% reduction in inpatient stays among the clients they worked with, saving around £260,000. This may be linked to the successful completion of peer personal recovery plans with all clients.
- The peer support workers were able to influence team practices and had a positive impact on the organisation's focus on recovery.
- The role had a very positive impact on the peer support workers' own wellbeing, with many reporting that it had increased their self-esteem, made them feel more socially included and promoted their mental health recovery.

Successes

- **Changing perceptions:** The peer support workers overcame initial resistance from some professionals to develop positive and transformative relationships with staff, who became more accepting of mental health problems among co-workers, more hopeful and more willing to try new approaches. One peer support worker commented: 'I think what has surprised me is the fact that in this role you can influence things more than I thought you probably could.'
- **Organisational focus on recovery:** Self-assessments completed by the trust's executive team showed a positive shift towards a recovery-based culture, with improvements in 19 of 35 measures. There was an improvement in recovery focus in four out of the six teams involved in the project, with one team staying at the same level and one falling slightly. Peer support is now one of seven workstreams within the trust's recovery strategy, with a goal of having two peer support workers in every clinical team. One health professional said: 'I think the benefit of having a PSW in the team, it reminds you of why you're doing the job first and foremost. It reminds you people can get better, it almost provides you with some hope.'

- **Spreading learning:** The project contributed to the development of national guidance, accredited training and occupational standards for peer support workers in mental health services.

Challenges

- **Referral system:** It became clear early on that the standard referral system was not suited to the peer support service. Some clients did not want to engage with peer support because they had not been told what it was or asked if they wanted it. The peer support workers developed a new referral system which required clients to be told how this type of support works and agreeing to meet a peer support worker to find out more.
- **Understanding of the role:** The peer support workers sometimes felt frustrated by misunderstandings that other professionals had about their role, for example that they were just 'an extra pair of hands' or somewhere to send patients that they did not know what to do with.
- **Establishing the service:** Establishing the peer support role was challenging at times, with peer support workers having to overcome resistance to change within teams and anxieties that other roles could be threatened.

Advice to others

Peer support work is most successful in teams that are already familiar with recovery-based approaches, where there is strong leadership and commitment to a culture of recovery. Clinical teams need to be willing to accommodate the role and foster a supportive environment in which peer support workers can develop.

The project team says that the peer support worker role needs to be clearly communicated and understood, to make sure that peers receive suitable referrals and spend their time on suitable tasks.