GATHERING PEER VOICES EVENT 26/06/2024 - EMPLOYABILITY

Background

It had been two years since the last gathering of peer voices. We listened to the themes coming from discussions at the peer forum, peer support groups and Peer community of Practice (PCOP) steering group.

It was raised that there could be challenges in the workplace resulting from confusion from colleagues around peer roles and lack of understanding around how they were different from other support roles or clinical models. Peers told us it would be useful to discuss issues around employability in a neutral environment, away from management and their organisations.

With the Steering Group, it was decided we would offer two events, one for peers and one for managers. We would use the event for peers to gather their voices and views about the types of cultures they could thrive in and let them know about legislation to support their aims of celebrating their lived experience as an asset to their practice.

Introduction to the event:

- Introduction to the Peer Community of Practice.
- Into Work, a supported employment charity and employer of peer workers and volunteers, presented what was available to support peers in a work environment.

Round Table Discussions

We gathered around tables and offered peers an opportunity to feed back about areas related to the following questions based on themes frequently discussed within the Peer Community.

Round Table Discussion Findings

What are the distinctions and similarities between peer volunteer roles and peer work roles.

Distinctions
- One paid and the other unpaid
- Different boundaries and expectations; paid worker wears more 'hats' (professional, organisational) than volunteers. Employed role may feel more constrained by policies and procedures.
- Volunteering helps build up resilience.
- Different training opportunities for volunteers and paid staff
- Different commitment level: volunteers could have limited time/capacity, this can impact whether volunteers have time to do additional training and build skills.
- Paid workers have more admin duties and facilitate connections with other stakeholders more than volunteers.
- Volunteers can take breaks rather than being absent.
- Volunteers have more choice in working practices, time, responsibilities.
- Volunteers can choose between group work and one to one and have more flexibility in type of volunteering they chose.

Similarities
- Boundaries, safeguarding - all peer workers need to understand good boundaries.
- Receive support & supervision although frequency and things discussed can vary.
- How sessions are delivered and what is discussed one to one and in groups
- Passion for the role
- Skills and values that can instil hope and be delivered with empathy.
- Valued and supported with access to training and team building days.

What kind of organisational culture is essential for peers to flourish?

- Understanding from management about the value of peer work and lived experience; colleagues and other professionals taking time to understand the distinct purpose and benefits. This includes Managers taking time to build this understanding with other staff, organisations, and the general public for example.
- Encouragement and support to use our lived experience.
- Not being branded to work with client groups because of lived experience or any assumptions made about knowledge. Important to consider other demographics when allocating caseloads.
- Advocating for peer work and volunteers, more credibility for role and encouragement to refer to peer services.
- Variety of client work and opportunities to work with different groups and in different areas of organisation.
- Regular support and supervision and giving choice about how to give feedback to peers re the people they work with and organisationally when new staff and volunteers are taken on.
- In-work progression planning; Access to appropriate training for free or subsidised.
- Security in job roles – organisations working towards eliminating short-term funding and contracted work.
- Whole person and person-centred approach, openness, empathy, fostering good relationships, fact finding approaches. Adapting and making changes based on feedback and learning.
- Celebrating successes; encouragement and space to reflect on peer related events, training, learning.
- Fact finding approaches feeding into cross-organisational cultural support with more support to openly talk about MH in the workplace, directly addressing stigma.
- Encouragement to fill out an organisational Wellness Action Plan when joining the organisation.

- Competent & compassionate leadership; example, what means a lot is…. Checking in about how things that affected practice such as worries, MH challenges, shows they care.
- Accountability from managers.
- Being able to reach out easily with quick questions, especially when new.
- Reflective practice sessions with other staff members who weren't involved in delivering the service whether this be group work or one to one.
- Space for self-reflection and resilience
- Space and support for self-care
- Facing challenges in a safe and neutral space.
- Feeling included and if you don't feel this, being able to reach out for external support.
- Mental health days not depending on hours, should be dependent on role description.

In what ways can peers prioritise their own well-being?

- More opportunities for wellness spaces during work time, especially when lone working, collaboration events.

- Boundaries, knowing own limits, time to self-reflect, keeping self-safe, not taking on too much.
- Use annual leave allocation and encouragement to use this.
- Check-ins about own well-being and mental health, how you're really doing at work.
- More spaces to discuss peer practice and vent. Draw on other experiences.
- More choice about who is on caseload.

Workshop Feedback

Workshop 1

Scenario: A peer has been supporting a person for over 6 months and has built up a good relationship. The supported person shares information about childhood trauma that triggers the peer supporter

Question: What kinds of ways could the peer worker reach out for support to their supervisor?

- If not getting the right support or feeling listened to, take action; change supervisor, give feedback.
- Feel confident about reaching out for support from a colleague, supervisor or manager. Be prepared to cancel or let someone else offer support or suggestions.
- Work out who has the emotional capacity/space to talk, or do you need time to yourself to reflect, walk, journal?
- Think about how we ask for support and communicate what we need.
- Have systems in place i.e. if I phone twice, I need my manager now! Use these systems when needed.

Question: What ways could the peer care for themselves?

- Consider all areas of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, always put your needs first.
- Reach out to personal connections or anonymised support, friends, family or helplines.

- Using support & supervision to reflect & evaluate; what could have helped, what could have been different or gone better?
- Completing a Wellness Action Plan and keeping this under review and making changes if needed.
- Taking time for self-care, going to a safe & nurturing space.
- Taking a break, listening to music, grounding, mindfulness practices, journalling.
- Separating work and home life.
- Evaluate (reflect) where I am and what I can do in my capacity given what's happened.
- Last step if all else fails considering if you need time off sick or if you need to leave the role if it isn't right for you.

Question: Any other suggestions of other organisations or self-care that could offer support?

- Consider supported person, boundaries, communication; would it be better if they worked with someone else?
- Managers having an understanding sometimes peers just need to offload.
- Managers having an understanding of peer's personality and working preferences, offering training if needed.
- Having access to external/confidential support.
- Knowing the whole person and not necessarily having to disclose all the details.
- Organisations having a diverse mix of different types of managers and team leaders who are approachable and can remind peers about support available or can offer support.
- Managers being mindful of staff having a balance of what's needed in the role & what's needed on an operational level.

Scenario: A peer has not been able to work/volunteer for over 6 months because of experiencing high anxiety and depression. This condition has been disclosed to the organisation and their team leader has been regularly checking in with the peer. The peer would like to rejoin the organisation on a phased return basis.

What kinds of ways could the employer support a phased return?

- Keeping informed and given updates on caseload.
- Meeting focused on wellbeing.
- Reduced duties and proportionate workload, a few hours to start and staggered with slow increase.
- Structure agreed with peer and working with them to support a return to work not harassing them to return.
- Supporting peers to make more informed choices about their care. There is a blur between personal responsibility and work responsibility.

What kinds of adjustments could the peer suggest?

- Deciding how much information is shared and in what ways.
- Requesting shadowing a person in the team to regain confidence.
- Accessible days and hours for reflective peer spaces to link back in with colleagues.

Is there any other support the peer could reach out for do you think?

- Employee Assistance Programmes and access to therapy/mental health support
- Peer support and wellbeing spaces.
- Another team member involved in one to one/extra pair of hands to offer support.

General Feedback

What would you like to discuss with others in the peer community?

- Peer forum held at different times as timing barrier for some.
- More social and less structured gathering would be helpful for networking and to get to know others in peer roles; Employers more likely to allow peers time off during work hours if specific focus, could offer 1.5 hours learning and 1.5 hours socialising.

  - Could offer lunchtime gathering for peers at Southside Community Centre.
  - More spaces to discuss peer practice, draw on others experiences and vent.

- Events for people to learn more about peer working.
  - Using lived experience alongside therapeutic resources.
  - Boundaries

What would you like others to know about peer practice?

- Managers Session – may be research that was completed a few years ago that we can draw on.
- Acknowledgement that peer workers are capable of complex work, are professionals and for people to know how this is achieved.

Evaluation

Most peers enjoyed meeting other peers, listening to other views and ideas and getting the opportunity to gather round a table in a relaxed environment in small groups.

Other comments
"Helpful to know our discussions will be fed back to managers."
"Interesting to hear about Into Work"
"Very validating listening to others concerns and ideas."