

Our Voices Too

PEER SUPPORT INITIATIVES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE: TENSIONS, CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Research findings

BRIEFING PAPER FOUR

KEY FINDINGS:

- Young people affected by sexual violence may have complex needs and circumstances¹. It is therefore critical that those planning peer support initiatives have experience of working with this group and an understanding of the key issues young people may face. It is also advisable to seek out advice and support from individuals with more experience of facilitating peer support initiatives.
- Organisational processes and procedures can present barriers to the employment of peer supporters with lived experience and as such staff may need to adapt existing policies, or develop new ones².
- Organisations may be unclear about the role, and value of, peer supporters. Challenging the organisational culture, ensuring peer staff are paid on equitable terms and investing in peer supporters' development and training may help to illustrate the value of peer workers' unique insights and expertise.
- Finding the 'right' people to become peer supporters is critical and yet can be challenging.
- Determining 'readiness' in peer supporters is essential. Strategies to assess readiness include screening at interview; building in a period of shadowing and training for new peer supporters and; allowing individuals to gradually take on more responsibilities.
- There are a number of challenges that peer supporters may face once 'in the job'. This includes the potential for 'triggering'. Strategies identified to help reduce the risk of triggering include: helping peer supporters set boundaries over how they draw on and share their personal experiences and ensuring that they have a range of support in place.
- Setting boundaries can be challenging for peer supporters and yet is vital. Significant boundaries may relate to: understanding the role as one of supporter rather than professional counsellor; recognising the limits of what they can change for a young person; regularity of contact time and; balancing being a 'confidante' with safeguarding responsibilities.

- In helping peer supporters to maintain these boundaries it is important that: there are resources available within the supporting organisation, or outside, to provide different forms of support to the young people being supported; that there is clarity around how and when peer supporters can be contacted and; that there is transparency between all involved regarding information sharing and the limits of confidentiality.
- As in any staff team, tensions can arise. Having more than one peer supporter within an organisation or initiative may add an additional layer of support for peer supporters.

INTRODUCTION

This briefing is based on exploratory research into 'peer support' for young people who have experienced sexual violence³. For the purposes of this briefing, 'peer support' is defined as a formalised supportive relationship between individuals who have lived experience of sexual violence in common.

This briefing paper explores the perspectives of those designing peer support initiatives together with those in peer supporter roles for young people affected by sexual violence⁴. This paper focusses on one area of the findings – the risks, tensions and challenges associated with peer support interventions. It explores four different themes:

- The target group involved in peer support interventions;
- Organisational systems, processes and culture;
- Recruitment of peer supporters and;
- Challenges experienced by peer supporters when in the job.

For each theme tensions, challenges and potential strategies are outlined.

1 For the purposes of this paper sexual violence is defined as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (Jewkes, Sen and Garcia-Moreno, 2002). In this briefing the term 'sexual violence' is used to cover varied forms of sexual harm, abuse and exploitation. However, it is worth noting that the majority of the 12 organisations and initiatives represented in the study were working predominantly with young people affected by commercial sexual exploitation, non-commercial forms of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

2 In this paper the term 'peer supporter' is used as a broad term to refer to individuals with lived experience of sexual violence providing support to young people affected by the issue. The term 'peer supporter' includes individuals with lived experience mentoring young people, running workshops and groups and engaging in other supportive activities.

3 See Briefing Paper Two for more information on definitions.

4 There were a range of peer support models represented in this study. Respondents from seven of the 12 organisations and initiatives had experience of, and spoke specifically about, peer mentoring. Respondents from the other five organisations and initiatives represented spoke about other forms of peer support including group work, peer-led workshops and support groups, and providing emotional and practical support for young people going through the criminal justice system.

METHOD

Semi-structured individual or group interviews were set up online or face-to-face with a total of 25 key informants from 12 different organisations and initiatives in Europe and North America. Of the 25 respondents, seven of those had experience in the role of peer supporter working with young people (representing four different organisations and initiatives). Eighteen key informants had been involved in setting up group or peer support initiatives and supporting, supervising or managing peer supporters from a further eight organisations. All data was anonymised. Data was coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 11, and a thematic analysis was undertaken. The study received ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire's Institute for Applied Social Research⁵.



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RESEARCH FINDINGS

The target group

Challenge: Responding to the complex needs and circumstances of young people affected by sexual violence

Respondents in this study identified the strengths, benefits and value of peer support for young people affected by sexual violence (as explored in briefing paper three) however, there was recognition from respondents that peer support interventions could be 'risky' due to the needs and circumstances of young people involved. Fisher *et al.* (2018, p.2107) note that "social welfare clients are mainly identified as either capable of posing a risk, or vulnerable and therefore 'at risk', although victim-survivors [of sexual abuse] are often simultaneously identified as both". In this study both of these perspectives were voiced by respondents particularly in relation to victim-survivors of sexual exploitation. Respondents shared that young people who had experienced sexual violence could be 'too vulnerable' to be supported through peer initiatives but at the same time they could be perceived as presenting a range of risks which prevented them being trusted to engage with other young people.

One respondent spoke about the need to be cautious in setting up peer mentoring initiatives with young people affected by sexual exploitation⁶. She spoke about the dangers, particularly when organisations are new to working with this group of service-users:

"It's too sensitive, you know, I think, to just try to do something like this, and implement something like this, it could go so wrong for these girls if you're not doing it the right way, they're so vulnerable, these girls, and if you're not putting the right people in place to develop that, such a sensitive relationship with them, it could be very dangerous."

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

⁶ In discussing mentoring models, respondents used different terms to refer to a mentor with lived experience including 'peer mentor' and 'survivor mentor'. Some respondents preferred the term 'survivor mentor' believing that mentors were at a different stage in life compared to the young people they were supporting. In this paper the broad term 'peer mentor' is used to refer to an individual with lived experience mentoring a young person affected by sexual violence.

⁵ For more details on the method and respondents see Briefing Paper One.

In discussions with respondents about group work with young people who had experienced sexual exploitation and/or trafficking, concerns were shared about bringing young people together who posed a negative influence to each other:

"I'd start to get a bit anxious [when thinking about peer support among young people with lived experience]. Especially when it's to do with sexual stuff, I've also had young people in groups in past work where they are trying to get other young people involved in things... some people can be so much more vulnerable and some people can be quite manipulative."

(Respondent 2, Organisation B)

"Because of issues of recruitment... we do a lot of screening for safety, and I think that that's important, and everyone needs to understand if they are going to have that peer involvement, there has to be some screening."

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

However another respondent felt that as a way of countering that risk it was better to bring people together in a safe and structured way:

"I think people historically are always afraid, like what if youth start re-exploiting themselves or allowing this youth to be connected to another youth that whatever can happen. But the reality is it's a whole other world, exploitation. If they don't meet in our agencies or in our detention centres they will meet out in the streets, right. So the best thing for us to do is to be able to have those conversations in a safe environment with a safe adult so that we can be able to either correct a conversation, you know, if we see possibly grooming happening right in front of us... And like I said, exploitation is so far ahead of advocacy, so the thought that these youth or this population will not meet elsewhere, it's silly. They're going to meet so why not have them meet in our facilities?"

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

Given the inherent risks that respondents identified in bringing young people together with shared experiences, there was a sense that organisations setting up or facilitating peer support had to, in some ways, be comfortable in 'holding risk' in order to do something that was potentially more progressive. Respondents appeared to, on the whole, reflect on and weigh up the risks and benefits. The importance of reflecting on the potential benefits and strengths of this way of working was captured eloquently by one peer supporter respondent:

"A lot of the time there's a lot of focus on what can go wrong instead of what can go right and how powerful it is if you can have that in place and the value that you get from it... And there's so many amazing things that could come from that... I think they're just seeing young people as 'they're so

vulnerable they need to be protected'. Well yea in a way that's right but don't limit them as well, you want to support them to do things like this."

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

Strategy: Prioritising safeguarding

Throughout the interviews respondents identified a number of strategies to mitigate risk and ensure peer supporters, as well as young people being supported, were protected from potential harm or distress. An overarching principle was ensuring that safeguarding was the priority:

"We always check risk and need, are they safe to come? and if not what do we need to have to put in place, are we safe for them to come? and what are the issues."

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

Strategy: Having experience of working with this group of young people

A small number of respondents expressed that organisations with a history of supporting young people affected by sexual violence were best placed to develop and facilitate peer support initiatives. A number of respondents talked specifically about the unique and complex needs that young people, particularly those who have experienced sexual exploitation, may have. It was noted that it was therefore important that organisations had experience, resources, partnerships and networks to draw on to offer additional support to those supporting and receiving the support. Having this foundation was seen as helpful:

"I think a lot of people make the mistake of just getting a grant and wanting to just open and hit the ground running, and working with this population, it takes a lot of experience, and it takes a lot of work, and I think you need to know what you're doing and have the community partners available to provide them with what they need is the most important thing, before you start any work with them."

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

Strategy: Seeking advice and support from other organisations

Respondents talked about the challenges of setting up peer support initiatives in the context of limited evidence, experience and documentation. Respondents from two different organisations talked specifically about how beneficial it was to learn from others who had experience in developing these initiatives:

“Consultation, consultation, consultation, I think it’s really, really important, what we’ve learned is just having an organisation that has just focused on this, done this, has been around for years doing it, has policies and procedures, understand what the hiring process is like, and then getting that supervision from them, which is what we’re doing.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

For this organisation, having a ‘blueprint’ and the support from another organisation who had experience, meant they were able to adopt and adapt tools and processes – a resource which was seen as incredibly valuable.

Organisational systems, processes and culture

Challenge: Legal and educational barriers to employment

A number of specific challenges were identified which related to offering professional (paid) roles to peer supporters. Respondents identified a number of practical barriers to hiring and paying those with lived experience. These related to both systems and processes and organisational cultures affecting how individuals with lived experience were perceived and valued by the wider staff team.

Respondents from three organisations and initiatives talked specifically about how the educational backgrounds and/or criminal records of potential peer supporters could lead to barriers to their employment:

“[We have] a variety of requirements related to the individuals that it [the organisation] will approve to be contracted or to provide the people we serve in the community. Unfortunately and sort of, it’s not a surprise, individuals that have lived experiences with commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking often have had other experiences with the youth justice system or adult justice system and sometimes that can create some barriers to their ability to be approved.”

(Respondent 4, Initiative C)

“What we realise is that with survivors, many of them have not finished school because of their history.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

Strategy: Changing, or working around, systems and processes

Respondents who faced these barriers talked about how they had tried to work around these or were in the process of trying to change systems and processes. For example, one respondent talked about how her team had worked with and paid a legal group to help “iron out” small legal matters for some mentors with lived experiences:

“We worked with a local legal agency that sort of helped to clear up any of the things that were identified as, initially identified as a problem to having them be approved... sometimes it’s just really silly things like municipal tickets, parking tickets you know, but other things you know you have to just look into it a little bit further.”

(Respondent 4, Initiative C)

This respondent highlights the need to work with the existing system to see what could be done to address these barriers.

Challenge: Unclear role and unequal terms for 'peer' staff

In addition to the practical challenges, it also appeared from the interviews that some barriers were more to do with organisational culture and mind-set, particularly in regards to how individuals with lived experience were valued, acknowledged and recognised for the unique perspectives they were able to bring and their valuable skills and abilities to connect with the organisations' client group. As noted in briefing paper one, respondents were all at different stages of facilitating peer support initiatives. Some organisations were still exploring how to handle supporting young people to make transitions from service users to service providers. Others were grappling with the precise role of those with lived experience within their organisations:

"So she's like, I don't know, her [peer supporter] role is very unclear right now, she's somewhere between us [professionals] and the others [service users]."

(Respondent 7, Organisation E)

"I do think we need them [individuals with lived experience], but to figure out what exactly we need them for. So in the beginning we used peers to help develop the programme so what would they have liked when they were just exiting you know so they talked about trauma therapy, talking about someone who has been there, we developed our programme in consultation with survivors."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

One respondent talked about how she regularly witnessed organisations struggling to understand the role of individuals with lived experience. This respondent commented on the problematic focus on an individual's past experience that could limit both their professional identity and how they are valued by others:

"So what we find a lot of programmes around our country do that employ survivors is the survivor comes in and the primary thing they bring is their experience and their story, right. And most programmes leave it there. So that's what you've got. And so what we find is then that survivor is in a meeting or that survivor is doing the work and all they have to draw from is what they've been through and so, one, that's profoundly triggering and, two, it's very limiting to that survivor, if she's done a meeting with child welfare or the juvenile justice system or whatever, that's all she's bringing. And so she gets very much pigeon-holed into being, 'oh she's the survivor'. And we don't believe in that."

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

This respondent shared how, as an organisation, they ensure that staff with lived experience are trained and supported, just as other staff members are, to become experts in the field.

Fostering a sense of parity between staff with lived experience and other professionals within an organisation was also identified as a challenge. One respondent shared that from the outset in her organisation there was a problem between peer staff and other staff members:

"And that was from the beginning a tension, that they [the peer mentors] didn't feel like they were regular staff, but they weren't."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

This tension between staff with, or without, lived experience, has been identified in research in the mental health field. Researchers have highlighted that in order to address these barriers it often requires a substantial paradigm shift within the organisation (Firmin *et al.*, 2018), a point explored later in this briefing.

Strategy: Creating equitable wage structures

There was a spectrum identified in the study of how peer supporters were compensated for their time. Some were voluntary and their expenses were paid but their time was not. For others they were paid minimum wage and at the other end of the spectrum those with lived experience were paid more than equivalent colleagues without identified lived experience. Paying peer supporters 'well' was viewed as an important strategy to demonstrate how organisations valued those with lived experience. A number of respondents voiced concerns that often peer supporters were not adequately compensated for their time. Some expressed that if peer supporters were not able to survive on this income this may place them in a precarious circumstance. It was also noted that it was important that peer supporters could demonstrate to young people that it was possible to leave exploitative situations and be independent. Therefore a decent wage was seen as important on a number of levels.

A number of respondents shared details of how they advocated for these approaches with others in their organisations, and justified the value of having staff members with lived experience to ensure they were paid fairly:

"Administration was still in that, 'it depends on your education', and all of that, and then when we obviously started to see the role of the [peer] mentor, and everything that went into it, and how the girls responded, and how vital it is for the programme, anti-trafficking communities, everything that's out there as far as the need for equal pay, for the survivors and all of that, we all got together with Administration, myself, and we just talked about, 'they need to be paid just the same or more, because what they bring to the table is something that nobody else can bring, and no degree can bring to a table', so she [the peer supporter] has had a significant jump in her salary."

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

“And so our survivor mentors actually were paid at a higher rate than our specialised mentors [mentors without lived experience] because of the nature of their work because of what we’re asking them to do really and we wanted to make sure it was a liveable wage. So that I think is one really key piece.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“They’re paid the same as somebody coming in with a Masters as we believe that that experience is of the same value.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Strategy: Investing in peer supporters and carving a path for their progression within the organisation

There were divergent perspectives from respondents on how peer mentoring in particular should be approached. Some respondents felt that mentoring should be a stepping stone into other forms of employment, a way for individuals to get some work experience and move on to something else. Whereas others felt that there should be room for progression within organisations who are bringing in mentors so that these individuals could take on increasing and different responsibilities. This was linked to how organisations invested in peer supporters through provision of training, explored in full later in this briefing.

One respondent talked about how they recognised that for peer mentors there was a ‘burn out’ timeframe and that there needed to be opportunities for mentors to grow professionally and take on different responsibilities or learn new skills (Respondent 10, Organisation F). As such they prioritised providing mentors with training and had developed routes for progression for these individuals into more senior positions within the organisation, noting *“we promote from within”*. This respondent also shared how a significant majority of the staff team (including peer mentors) were supported to pursue higher education at the same time as working for the organisation.

Meanwhile others felt it could be problematic for peer mentors to envisage their role in the organisation as a long term career option:

“Our hope is that the opportunity for peer mentorship would give them an opportunity to examine, what do they want to do with their life, and we would hope that it wouldn’t be to continue always talking about their history but something else too right? And for them to become credentialised, but sometimes the peer mentors think that this is the beginning of their career, they’re going to be a peer mentor for the next ten years and they expect to be on a salary band that’s going to go up, like everybody else’s salary, like all the other staff.”

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

This respondent noted the importance of peer mentors recognising that, if they wanted to work in this field, and progress, that they may need to return to education and develop their skill sets. In addition the respondent highlighted the way in which such professional roles could potentially be limiting, overlooking individuals’ wider skill sets and interests:

“What really needs to be said is that it’s a window into a career and that there’s work that has to be done. Lived experience is not enough. You need to develop a skill set, you need to credentialise, because if you want to get a job that pays half decently, that’s what they’re going to look for. So all these kind of things I think need to be even in part of the training for the peer mentors – this is terrific and we want you to be the best that you can be, but we also want you to know that this is not all you can be.”

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

The final point raised here implies that there is value in individuals being supported to ‘move on’ from their experiences of sexual violence rather than it limiting or dominating their professional identity.

In the wider literature on peer support in the field of sexual violence there are mixed perspectives surrounding the need for educational or professional qualifications. In Deer and Baumgartner’s (2019) study, exploring the value of survivor leaders working in organisations to help women exit the sex trade, respondents felt that their experience of being in the sex trade was a credential in itself but that this was not often recognised or respected. Hotaling *et al.* (2004, p.9) in their paper describing a model of ‘peer counselling or peer education’ for individuals exiting the sex industry note that for peer counsellors it is important that they are provided with training and supported to get certification as *“certification validates the counsellor professionally, in her eyes as well as the clients”*.

Research respondents were clear that the peer supporters they worked with had different motivations and ambitions. Therefore there could not be a ‘one size fits all’ approach to their professional development or meeting future career goals. This meant that providing options and choices to enable individuals to develop and gain experience and qualifications, both within and outside the sector, was important.

Strategy: Shifting how the organisation views and values lived experience

The nature of the sample in this study meant that all respondents saw the value of engaging individuals with lived experience in their services or initiatives. However not all of the organisations represented were described as being able to demonstrate that value through actions such as offering a fair wage and opportunities for progression. Some respondents talked openly about how their organisation was going through a process of culture change. Some described how purposively changing the role and grade of their peer mentors helped demonstrate the value of these positions within the organisation:

“We’ve had to shift where the employees, the staff, the organisation, looks at [the peer mentor], and we’ve had to change that role to say, “Really what we’re doing right now is we’re trying to shift it to the survivor led programme”, which is why we gave [the peer mentor], we gave her that role of being, the supervisor manager role, so that she would be viewed in that manner of, she is a vital and very important piece of the programme, and the staff would all be able to shift the way of thinking.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

This example highlights how actions can speak louder than words. This echoes findings from research on ‘peer providers’ in the field of mental health which outlines how organisations often have policies about hiring peer providers but sometimes need additional support in regards to fostering a welcoming environment and integrating peer providers fully into staff teams (Chapman *et al.*, 2018).

Recruitment

A number of respondents noted that selecting appropriate individuals as peer supporters was critical to the success of a programme. Throughout the interviews there was a lot of discussion surrounding the process for recruitment, training and support for peer supporters. There were however also a number of challenges and barriers in place in regards to this aspect which varied depending on the model that was in place.

Challenge: Identifying peer supporters

Some organisations shared that they struggled to identify peer supporters who would be “ready” to take on this work – an issue discussed later in this briefing. Initially it appeared that when organisations were starting to embark on this way of working organisations relied heavily on staff who had already developed relationships with, or knew of, individuals with lived experience through previous work:

“So the consultant was already familiar with the two people we hired and kind of gave her own somewhat of an assessment of whether or not she felt they were ready based on her twenty years of experience doing this work.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“And she [the programme manager] also was very, very committed to the use of peer mentors and she had in her previous employment worked with some young women who she felt were far along in the journey that they could become peer mentors in the programme and that’s how we selected the peer mentors.”

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

Respondent five also talked about the struggles they had as an organisation to find another peer mentor when one left. From respondents there was a sense that staff members involved in the early recruitment of peer supporters knew personally, or knew of, individuals and this provided them with a certain degree of reassurance. Having a pre-existing relationship appeared to help some organisations begin to put in place these models of support. One respondent talked about how this was a natural way to start things off but that as you develop it requires the adoption of more formalised approaches:

“We have a much clearer protocol in place, as all things happen you start organically and then you realise that, okay, we can turn this into a model. And we have, we advertise for those positions the same way we advertise for any positions, you know, on online portals as well as word of mouth.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

In a number of interviews there were discussions about whether, and how former service users could become peer supporters in the organisation they had accessed. It appeared that voluntary roles were more likely to be undertaken by current or ex-service users from within an organisation. Other respondents talked about how they would like to be able to identify ex-service users to take on these roles at some point in the future:

“Yes, and what we’re trying to grow right now, that is part of the mentoring programme, is having some of the girls actually themselves doing the mentoring programme, obviously after showing signs that they’re in a much more stable place, assisting in actually running and co-facilitating groups with the mentors, and then eventually becoming mentors themselves.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

Although this was viewed as a potential route for some organisations, one respondent also highlighted the potential challenges or difficulties they felt could emerge from recruiting from their own service users:

“We never ‘close’ cases, we never call them cases, there are girls, there are boys and they’re part of our family. And what we find is, so that one young woman who’s now in her 30s, we had talked about hiring her earlier, maybe a decade ago, and the challenge was she was able to identify like, I want to work here and I want to be able to call [name of staff] when I need support... And so we’re still figuring that out. At what point could you become a mentor but still be able to have this be your home base and reach out for help when you need it.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

This respondent acknowledged an interesting tension in hiring ex-service users. For organisations who have an ethos of always being available to those who’ve used their services – even when they ‘age out’ of services or no longer require frequent support – hiring service users may blur boundaries and add a complexity to relationships with colleagues.

This was something mentioned by respondents from an organisation who were also struggling to support transitions of service users to the role of professional. This organisation had recently hired a service user to run workshops with young people but also had a history of hiring ex-service users within a social enterprise they ran. They commented on the challenges that can bring.

“This process when the girls are transferring from being a beneficiary to being an employee. It’s a really sensitive issue.”

(Respondent 8, Organisation E)

Learning from this respondent highlighted the importance of being open and clear about a peer supporter’s role and responsibilities and the value of ensuring different staff members were available to manage and support professional as opposed to personal issues.

In discussing what qualities, skills and attributes were important in a peer supporter, respondents voiced a range of qualities which included being: open minded, non-judgemental, good listeners and having an ability to engage. One respondent also talked about employing individuals who did not just tolerate or accept diversity but actively celebrated differences between individuals. Two respondents talked about wanting to work with peer supporters who were open to their organisations’ way of working and comfortable adopting their organisations’ approaches. For example, one respondent, in an organisation which took a harm reduction approach, noted the importance that mentors in their programme were comfortable with this way of working. As part of this approach they commented that it was important that staff were able to celebrate what may seem like small successes. A number of respondents also talked about avoiding individuals with a ‘saviour complex’, this is explored in a later part of this briefing.

Challenge: Determining readiness

Where respondents worked with service users, who were then supported to take on peer supporter roles for the organisation, there appeared to be a less rigorous screening process in place. If staff members did not know the applicants for peer supporter roles, there appeared to be more emphasis on the screening process at interview as an opportunity to see whether someone was ready and the right fit for such work.

A key theme relating to recruitment that was explored in the interviews was about how one can determine ‘readiness’. In this context ‘readiness’ means, given their experiences, when someone would be ready to take on the role of supporting others in a more formal way.

“It’s problematic, it is difficult [recruiting peer supporters] no one can inform the services as well as survivors, and some though are not as far along in recovery in whatever they were dealing with in addition to human trafficking [e.g. alcohol and substance misuse and early childhood trauma] that it is difficult to know what kinds of support. Which is hard is to choose someone who is far enough in their recovery from all the trauma they’ve experienced.”

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

Strategy: Screening at interview

Three key aspects were identified as helpful when screening potential peer supporters' 'readiness' for the role.

Support and stability

Several respondents talked about the concept of an individual's emotional 'stability'. As noted below, one respondent put a time frame on when, following an individual's experience of sexual violence, they were considered ready to take on a peer support role. Others talked about the need to also consider any other issues and problems in addition to sexual violence.

"They [peer mentors] need to have been in recovery from the commercial sex industry for five years as well as if addiction is part of their story for at least five years. And they need to, the other thing that is a criterion for us, is they need to have a self-care plan in place. So whether that's 'I go to church and I'm really connected to my pastor' or 'I use AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] or NA [Narcotics Anonymous] or I have a therapist or I run and do yoga'... When we interview someone and [name of staff member] asks them at that first initial screening, 'is there, what do you do to take care of yourself?', or 'what have you done to recover?', and if they say 'I haven't needed anything, I'm fine, I can do it on my own', we say 'we don't think you're ready to do this work.'"

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

"She has you know she is, she's done her work, she's really done her work [accessed support to help in her recovery]. I'm not saying that she doesn't struggle, as we all do, with things from time to time, but she's really done her work and, but that's the critical piece in selection."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

"I would say I would like to know how long have they not been involved in trafficking, what other concomitant problems they have, like drug addiction, and how have they dealt with it. How long have they been free of substance abuse and, you know, what kind of work did they do therapeutically to address the trauma, and you know, and many of them had experienced childhood trauma and did they do any work around that."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

Readiness to draw from own experiences and hear others' experiences

One of the tensions that appeared to arise in respondents responses was around expectations on peer supporters to 'tell one's own story' of sexual violence as part of the role. One of the benefits mentioned by respondents in service users having peer supporters was the fact that they had a shared understanding and shared lived experience. However, not all respondents felt it was necessary, or indeed helpful, for individuals in peer support roles to talk about the details of their own experiences with other young people. And some appeared to advise supporters to not share personal details about what happened to them. This is explored further later in this briefing. Although respondents varied in their views about how or if peer supporters should share their personal experiences, there was consensus that it was important to understand how comfortable individuals were in others knowing they had experienced sexual violence and listening to others' stories:

"And that was part of the interview like 'are you comfortable sharing your story?', because we get to the point where someone becomes part of this team and they're coming in saying 'I'm a survivor mentor' right which has the same inference and meaning behind it that people do have lived experience and that that is kind of we kind of explained if you're not ready for your face to be on a billboard saying you've had these experiences then what are the consequences for you. Like 'do you have a family who know about this? Who doesn't know about this?'"

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

"And listening to other peoples' stories and telling their own stories and how ready are they really to do that?"

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

As highlighted in the quote above, respondent three reflected on the importance of individuals being supported to make informed choices surrounding the consequences of taking on a role that would identify them as a survivor of sexual violence. Providing opportunities for them to consider the potential impact of this on them now and in the future.

Distance from experiences

Two respondents talked about the importance of individuals having 'distance' from their experiences. This appeared to be linked to having the ability to look back, reflect on and understand one's own experience clearly:

"I guess it's like the distance they have from the experience and how well they have worked through the issues that got them involved, that perpetuated it and helped them leave."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

"I'd want them to have some distance or perspective between their experiences and where they are now. Most of our women who come to us still haven't sufficiently recovered to be safe enough to support another woman formally. Now they do it informally and sometimes I have to step in and say 'we've got to deal with some of your stuff before you start taking on some of Jane's stuff' for example you know, 'let's work on you.'"

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

This second quote highlights that having an understanding of one's own experience, and perspective on this is not only helpful for the peer supporter but also essential in ensuring the person receiving support is being properly supported.

Strategy: Continued screening via training and shadowing

In addition to the interview process, another strategy for assessing an individual's 'readiness' for the role was noted to be staff observations. Several respondents described a period of time at the beginning of a peer supporter's employment where the staff team could observe the individual's skills and responses either through training, shadowing or both.

One organisation, who hired a group of specialist mentors to work with young people affected by sexual exploitation, including those with lived experience, shared how the training they developed provided a way of screening candidates:

"It's a very experiential based training, it's very unique. [name of trainer] has a lot of really great strategies on how to train mentors more hand in hand with role plays and assessing and you know really helping understand the individual's lived experiences. It's not lecture style there's a little bit of that but it's mostly you know 'this is a person who has been exploited how are you going to explain the programme to them? How are you going to have a conversation with them?' And it was always done in an observation based setting and so there were times when we would see people who seemed very judgemental or people who made assumptions about sexual identity or sexual preferences and so we were able to kind of weed people out that way."

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

Three respondents talked about the importance of shadowing and being shadowed:

"They are shadowed or shadow for a long stretch of time. For some people it can be three months, for other people who are further along in, either get it really quick or come in with a lot more experience, then they can do that for less. But they, our [staff role], will shadow them, they're not alone with a young person for a long time. And they also then shadow [more experienced mentors]."

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

On reflecting on candidates' 'readiness', respondents also talked about how they felt that it could be helpful for peer supporters to have a gradual introduction into the role or be able to take on different roles if they were not ready for working directly with young people:

"I guess the other way of doing it is, ok you have someone who is not perfectly ready, and you gradually introduce them to more responsibilities. But maybe at the beginning it's just a presentation and maybe a training, like I think it could be a graduated entry into full responsibilities."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

Respondents from two different organisations, who had not yet hired service users into peer supporter roles, talked about ways that they were "testing the waters" and providing opportunities to their service users to do other bits of work as a way to assess how they may progress on to become peer mentors.

Challenges in the job

Challenge: Triggering

Respondents from all of the organisations and initiatives spoke about the potential for engagement in such activities as being potentially triggering for the peer supporters involved⁷. A number of respondents recognised that an expectation on peer supporters to open up and share their own personal experience in particular could be triggering:

“But it is risky you know like it can be, I would think, although none of the mentors ever said that, I think it could be triggering talking about ones [own] stories.”

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

“We cannot guarantee that she will be ready and not get into some risk or retrigger the process of traumatic experience, those are things that can happen.”

(Respondent 6, Organisation E)

Strategy: Working with peer supporters to understand if, when and how to draw on personal experience

A number of respondents talked about the importance of ‘boundaries’ in peer support which is explored in more depth in the latter part of this paper. One significant boundary for potential peer supporters to consider was if, when and how to share, or draw on personal experiences when supporting others. In some cases it appeared that the individuals needed to determine those boundaries for themselves depending on their personalities and levels of comfort. However, it was also clear that those managing and supporting peer supporters had varied views about their expectations of individuals. Some respondents felt that peer supporters’ personal experiences were central to their role, others felt that peer supporters’ personal experiences were more peripheral. The quotes below illustrate these significantly different positions on this topic.

One respondent talked about how powerful it was when a mentor with lived experience told part of their story when they first met a young person:

“So what they do when they go to do the assessment [of the young person] is they first tell the young person part of their story as part of the assessment, and say, ‘listen, this is what I’ve been through, if any of this seems like something you’ve been through and you want to talk about it then you can, but it’s a voluntary service’. And almost all the young people will immediately open up.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Respondents described the different ways that peer supporters would use their experience when providing support to others. For example, there were descriptions of peer supporters who were very open and happy to share their experiences with young people and descriptions of others who did not openly lead with their experiences.

This point arose in discussions with one respondent regarding group work.

“One of the things that came out, especially at the end, because we didn’t ask the young people to talk about their particular experiences, and that was what some of the young people were really comfortable with, not having to talk about anything personal, but there were other young people who felt like they did want to be able to talk about those stories and kind of reclaim those stories.”

(Respondent 13, Organisation I)

As noted above, there was recognition that individuals respond differently to the opportunities to share their experiences. Echoing this point one peer supporter shared how she felt that it was down to choice and that choosing to not share personal experience did not mean that you were unable to support another person:

“I think that has to be emphasised as well. As a peer supporter you want to support other people, but you also don’t want to have to bring up things that you don’t feel comfortable or you don’t want to discuss. It just depends, if you want to and you’re comfortable to then you can, but there’s no pressure to do that. I think you’re still more than capable to support other people, you don’t necessary have to do it [share personal details]... You have to protect yourself.”

(Peer supporter respondent 20, Initiative L)

In other examples alternative approaches were outlined. Respondents described agreements put in place between the peer supporter and individual being supported that there would not be any discussions surrounding their personal experiences:

“At the time there was an agreement that neither me, the other girl [the other peer supporter], and who we were peer supporting – none of us would talk about what we actually experienced and went through... So we didn’t actually talk about anything that happened like the actual crime that was committed or anything but we talked about other things like when we were in court, they might ask about, ‘what did you wear?’ ‘is it weird seeing your face on the screen?’ things like that. Like ‘how did you cope with school? How did you deal with that?’ Kind of like things that might be overlooked by professionals I guess.”

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

⁷ The term triggering in this context refers to the potential for a peer supporter to experience emotional distress from hearing, seeing or thinking about something that relates to their memories of experiencing sexual violence.

Due to the purpose of the initiative described in the quote above, providing details about each other's experiences of sexual violence was deemed unnecessary given the focus on sharing experiences of being involved in the criminal justice system.

Meanwhile other respondents noted it was not always helpful for peer supporters to divulge too much and that it was important that the person being supported was not 'burdened' with others' stories:

"One of the things that I really, really reinforce in the training is they don't need your stuff as well as there's. And that's an issue that I've found is a problem in the past that our mentors want to tell the mentees all about their experiences. And I've said they know you're a survivor, but your experience is unique to you and sometimes they'll confuse the two, and feel that because they've survived and they've been a victim the mentee is also having the same thoughts, feelings and experiences. So we work really hard on that. It's a unique experience not to impose your views and your beliefs and your experiences on them. And also you don't and you shouldn't tell them everything about your experience as its only going to add to their feeling of pressure and it is all about them. And you can share little bits, if you feel comfortable in doing and we've already established its safe, but just to try and maintain that boundary."

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

Strategy: Providing support and promoting self-care

Although there were specific concerns around the potential of triggering for peer supporters, some respondents in the research noted that in many ways supporting those with lived experience was not necessarily any different than supporting staff members without these experiences. Respondents observed that any staff member may face difficulties or need more support than others:

"I think that selection may help reduce the burden, but it's very hard to know until you know who you've hired. And that's in any staff group, not just peer mentors, there are some staff that take up 80% of your time, we call it the 80/20 factor."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

This is an important point, recognising that individuals, whatever their history, may need different levels of support from employers and managers at different points in time. However, respondents also recognised that it was helpful to think carefully about specific strategies to support peer supporters. Organisations had different arrangements for this, which again in part depended on how professionalised the initiative was.

Some organisations had an individual whose sole responsibility was to manage and supervise peer supporters. One respondent noted that it was very helpful to have such a role in the team and that it was helpful if this individual had training or an understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder. This respondent also noted that it could be difficult for those with lived experience, who did not have professional work experience, to take direction and report to someone who did not have these same experiences.

"There are some challenges in supervising people with lived experiences as far as like respecting a chain of command if you don't have lived experience."

(Respondent 3, Initiative, C)

Another respondent from a different organisation spoke about how resource-intensive their organisation had found supporting peer mentors, noting:

"There's a need for a position that's created that really, there job is to support the peer mentors only"

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

Across the different models four distinct forms of support were identified by respondents as helpful. This included:

- Structured supervision with a more senior staff member who may have clinical training;
- Personal development and coaching sessions;
- On-going training as a supportive mechanism and;
- Supporting individuals to practice self-care.

Structured supervision

Most respondents talked about peer supporters having supervision with another more senior staff member on a regular basis:

"All of our staff by virtue of being employed in our programme received an hour, so 60 minutes, of individual supervision weekly where they would sit down directly with me and we would review all of the youth they were serving making sure their needs were met."

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

"So for our regular staff, our more experienced staff we have a minimum supervision requirement of once a month, for newer staff it could be every day, it could be once a week, and then it weans to once a month. For the peer mentors it was really once a week."

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

“I supervise the mentor right now, I’m a licensed therapist, so I’m with her in supervision as well, just to make sure that she continues to maintain herself in a healthy place, avoiding that when she’s triggered, counter-transference all of those types of things that could be really difficult, I think, for mentors, and I think that’s very important.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

Supervision appeared to be more structured when individuals were employed as staff members rather than when they were working on a voluntary basis. However, respondents who were involved in supporting volunteer peer supporters also spoke about the value of peer supporters regularly meeting with a staff member.

Personal coaching and development

Two respondents spoke about additional support that was offered to peer supporters in the form of personal coaching. These respondents recognised that it was helpful for peer supporters to have the opportunity to explore their own personal issues and development needs in addition to having formal supervision that focussed specifically on their caseloads:

“They also received specifically with [name of trainer] they received a two hour support group monthly. It was mandatory so they had to show up where they actually came and talked about what their needs were and the challenges with doing this kind of work. [Name of trainer] also did once a month, she did what we referred to as coaching which was more like personal development.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“They also get ongoing coaching and support from our [staff member] who is a survivor herself. The Clinical Director is not. And so [name of staff member] does a lot more like coaching in the moment of how to handle stuff... our Clinical Director is really gifted at helping people look at where their professional identity and their personal stuff can collide. And so at various times we will pay to have mentors go see her. Not just mentors, we have other people on another team have gone as well, for a few sessions to really look at ‘how am I doing?’ And ‘do I feel like I’m doing okay or do I feel like I need some other kinds of support.’”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Training

Respondents talked about the importance of providing training for peer supporters. Training was described as a safeguarding mechanism which supported the safety of both supporters and the young people receiving services.

The level of training appeared to depend on the role and nature of support being offered. Some respondents spoke about a very systematic approach to training. One respondent spoke about developing her initiative’s training based on more established mentor training programmes:

“So we used their [an international mentoring organisation’s] manual to set up how we did the programme and then we also used some other data that we received. I went to a national mentoring summit and I found there were programmes specifically focused on sexual exploitation and they also had some practices that we found to be helpful so we adapted them... And then for people with lived experience, we had an additional training just about managing you know sharing your story if that were to come up and how to deal with some of the triggers that might come up as a result of working with this population.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“So there’s the training is two parts. Part of it is didactic, they [peer mentors] attend all the trainings that we offer so understanding commercial sexual exploitation, we do an advanced clinical training, we do a training in our prevention curriculum that they get and we do a motivational interviewing training that they get, that we bring in. So they get all of that... we have some more advanced training on how to provide one-on-one recovery support.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

One respondent who had worked with young people as peer supporters, noted that training young people, as with any staff member, can help minimise risks and concerns but that this requires investment and resources.

“But when people actually take the time to give training to young people to the same degree that you would expect your staff to be trained, then there’s very little to fear. But it is about investing in the young people, and I think that is as important as anything else. The investment in the young people who are being given a role and a responsibility to make sure that they are confident and they have the right information, is a really important part of it.”

(Respondent 13, Organisation I)

Training was seen as a key part of this work on a number of levels. In regards to self-care, training was viewed as a mechanism to help individuals understand some of the issues they were facing, set boundaries and reduce burn out:

“We believe that part of reducing burn out and self-care is training. That the more you know the less it feels like ‘I’m crazy, the kids are crazy, this will never get better’, do you know what I mean? Like the more you can say like ‘oh, actually that feeling that kid was experiencing, that’s the post-traumatic stress disorder and that can get better and I felt it too’ and I think it helps a lot.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

“And then they also received a two hour monthly in service training sometimes two and half hours where they would get updated on topics they were struggling with to kind of help prepare them a little bit better.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

For some respondents training helped to both prepare peer supporters, and support them to understand some of the complex challenges they may be facing in the job.

Support and self-care outside of work

Respondents also talked about the expectation that peer supporters would ensure they had support in place outside of formal work support structures due to the intensity of the work:

“So I think that people just need to understand that survivor mentors need a lot of support and so they need support outside of what the programme can offer even though we had built in the support group, we had built in individual supervision and coaching, we also made sure that they had support outside of work, you know that they were going and seeing their own therapists that they had family and friends they were connecting with on a regular basis.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“Then in addition they can use up to one hour per week of paid work time to go to therapy. So we encourage people to be in individual therapy. If you’re not you can use that hour to go to an NA [Narcotics Anonymous] or an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] meeting or some other kind of group. You can’t, we haven’t quite evolved to say, like, “okay you can use your one hour to go to a yoga class kind of thing”, you’ve got to do that on your own time, but we didn’t want people who felt like “God, I could really use help talking to somebody but I don’t have the time, because when I leave work I have my kids or I’m taking care of my partner or my parents or whatever.” And so we wanted there to be no excuses.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Setting boundaries and limits within a peer support relationship

Respondents talked about ‘boundaries’ from a variety of perspectives. As noted above, one boundary related to sharing personal information. Respondents identified a further four key challenges that related to boundaries for peer supporters:

- Understanding the boundaries between offering support as opposed to providing professional counselling and therapy;
- Recognising the limited role a peer supporter can have in affecting change for the young people being supported;
- Setting boundaries around the regularity of contact and;
- Balancing the role of ‘confidante’ with safeguarding responsibilities.

Challenge: Understanding the boundaries of offering support

There was a recognition from two respondents that adopting the role as a peer supporter could be challenging for those who were not professionally trained to provide therapeutic support. This was pertinent when young people were experiencing high levels of trauma:

“I think one of the things they [mentors] shared with us, they weren’t therapists and they weren’t counsellors and so a lot of them, because they’re para-professionals, they didn’t have the expertise to be able to listen to some of the things that in a way that, they didn’t know what to do with all of the things they were hearing from young people. They were hearing sometimes graphic, or well described situations that sounded much like abuse or assault and some of them felt a little ill-equipped or unprepared on how to respond to some of those conversations.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“So these [mentors] are community volunteers, these are not experts, these are not people that are caseworkers, these are not people who regularly work with this demographic.”

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

It is worth noting that both of these respondents were working with mentors who included those with, and without lived experience, and therefore this was seen as a challenge for all those working in this role to support young people affected by sexual violence.

One peer supporter, supporting young people in a voluntary capacity, expressed an understanding that her job was not to 'counsel' while equally acknowledging that such a boundary could be a challenge when young people needed that additional support:

"Obviously we're not there to counsel people... But obviously we might have to refer you to someone else, or ask for advice from other people because we're not here to counsel, we're just here to support. We make that clear. And the difference between the two as well... So I guess working with people and still sort of knowing the boundaries but still being able to connect with people, that I think has been really, really important."

(Peer supporter respondent 20, Initiative L)

Strategy: Access to other forms of support for young people

As noted in the quote above, there were two ways identified to deal with this issue. One was around making it very clear to all involved where the limits of the relationship laid and secondly, ensuring that peer supporters know how and where to refer young people onto if additional support is required. A number of respondents spoke about the importance of organisations supporting this work being well connected to community resources and having others in the team who are tasked with ensuring that the needs of the young people are being met. This was seen as particularly important when working with young people affected by sexual exploitation who may be more likely to have complex needs. One respondent spoke about how her organisation hired two case managers to work with their peer mentors to coordinate resources and ensure young people's needs were met:

"It used to be in our model that the mentors were responsible for all of the case management, but what we found was for a lot of our young people, particularly those as they near 18 and beyond, they have super intensive case management needs. Like they need to find housing and a job and school and if you're a mentor and you're on the road all the time, it's really hard, you make that phone call and then somebody calls you back when you're in another visit and it's really hard."

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Respondents also recognised limits to the internal resources of their organisations, and subsequently there were times where they needed to refer on to meet a young person's needs:

"So, for example, if a mentor is paired with a youth that is LGBTQ, we would provide them with access to our LGBTQ partners, where they can go to those drop-in centres and be able to give further training or if they just need to talk to someone, we just have a lot of community partners in regards to that."

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

Peer supporters themselves noted the value of knowing what their responsibility was and the limits of this – recognising they did not have to take responsibility for all young people's needs:

"If young people felt like they needed further support [the name of the organisation] had somewhere to refer them to, like proper counselling maybe. It wasn't a counselling relationship that we had with them."

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

Challenge: Recognising the limited role of a peer supporter in affecting change

Relatedly, a number of respondents reflected on the challenge for peer supporters accepting they could not 'fix' everything for those they supported. One respondent, when asked what the main challenges were for peer supporters commented:

"100% it's the powerlessness, is the word that we use, that in accepting that, that it's a voluntary service, you're there to offer support, and if that young person isn't ready to take the support they're not ready to take it. They still have to make their own mistakes. And when the consequences are so terribly grave it's really, really hard."

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

This is something that of course could apply to all staff trying to engage and offer support to young people, however, one respondent felt that this was particularly challenging for those who had experienced similar difficulties:

"One of the things that we also worry about is just making sure that they're not feeling that they have to rescue a lot of the girls, and that they're able to maintain those boundaries, because obviously of what they've been through, many of them tend, at times, to feel that they want to obviously rescue the girls themselves, and going through that process with them, implementing those boundaries, and learning those boundaries is a major issue with children that have gone through this, and anyone in general that's had these kinds of experiences."

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

Another respondent talked about supervising a peer mentor who was trying to help a young person through a difficult time. She noted worrying about the individual knowing that she would not be able to solve the young person's problems:

"And that was a situation where I said, 'You're not going to be able to save this one you know that don't you?' [and she said] 'Yeah I know but I want to do my best.' She was very realistic and she did cope with it but it was hard and it wasn't ideal and I wouldn't want to go through that with a mentor [again]."

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

Supporting peer supporters to recognise the limits of their power to affect change in a young person was noted to be important – particularly in the context of sexual exploitation. However it was recognised that this could be challenging, frustrating or potentially upsetting for peer supporters who may have experienced comparable situations of abuse in the past.

Strategy: Screening at interview

Four respondents talked about how, during recruitment, they actively looked to avoid recruiting individuals who were driven by a desire to 'rescue' young people who were experiencing sexual exploitation – what some respondents described as a 'saviour complex'. These comments pointed to a recognition in respondents that some individuals will be drawn to, and motivated by, the idea that they can 'save' young people. However, there is a need to recognise that young people may not be at a place where they are ready for change and that change can be disruptive, complicated and takes time:

"And then we were avoiding at all costs someone with a saviour complex."

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

"So [what] we want to hear is 'I went through this terrible thing and I think I can use it to help somebody'. What we don't want to hear is 'I think I can rescue the girls', like, any of that kind of stuff that we know is going, it's not going to work for you. And it's going to set you up for failure."

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Challenge: Setting boundaries around the regularity of contact

An issue that emerged in this study related to contact between the peer supporter and the young people being supported. As one professional who facilitated groups with young people observed:

"If you've got a young person who literally hasn't got anybody else in the world, or that's how they feel, and you come and do this, they can start thinking that you are part of their life and you've got to really manage that quite carefully."

(Respondent 2, Organisation B)

One respondent who was supporting a mixed group of mentors (i.e. those with lived experience and those without) talked about the contact time being intense for mentors working with this client group.

"They also talked about the amount of hours that young people were calling them and needing them, it was a benefit to the young person [the mentee], but they often sometimes felt burnt out working that much with one person. So I think there were some general compassion fatigue happening with our mentors and the amount of time and being available 24/7."

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

As these quotes highlight, setting boundaries on contact time between peer supporters and those they support appeared to be important to consider and manage.

Strategy: Agreeing limits around contact

Some peer supporters who were doing this work voluntarily, whilst working or studying, appeared to set quite firm boundaries around contact to ensure that those being supported knew when they could get in contact:

"We had boundaries around that. Kind of like the relationship stays there and we wouldn't speak to them on Facebook or something. ... It was just in those peer support sessions that they would have contact. If say I got home and I got a message from a young person and they disclosed something but then obviously that might become an issue."

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

"When you tell someone some things in the first meeting it is better, you tell them how much time you have, for example, 'I'm the mentor, we can see each other once a week' ... when I was in the first days with the first cases it was not so easy to put the limits, and then I told my cases to call me anytime, I wanted to be helpful, but I understand that it does not work like that."

(Respondent 15, Organisation J)

This second quote from a respondent who had previously worked as a mentor for young people affected by trafficking – and was subsequently helping the organisation to set up a peer mentoring programme – observed the importance of being open and upfront with young people. Relatedly, one respondent talked about the importance of not making promises to young people that you could not keep.

Challenge: Balancing the role of ‘confidante’ with safeguarding responsibilities

Some respondents felt that it could be challenging for peer supporters to ‘break confidentiality’ if they felt that information needed to be shared. One respondent talked about how this was particularly difficult in a mentoring relationship due to the friendships that develop as part of that process:

“Because it’s blurred, it is about an element of friendship, it is about an element of non-judgemental acceptance, it’s about sharing time together... and to have that confidentiality disclaimer at the forefront of your head. You know if they tell you that their child is suffering at the hands of a new boyfriend there is no question that you have to bring it to me, and I’ll do the reporting. But actually you’ve got to give me that information as otherwise we are part of that harm. And I think our mentors find that really difficult to grasp... So that’s difficult to manage as well, safeguarding and I think that’s where some of our mentors really struggle to grass somebody up [share information or report to the authorities] or whatever because it means they’re keeping someone safe.”

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

Although the majority of respondents interviewed were clear around when peer supporters would be expected to break confidentiality and share information with other staff members, for others these boundaries appeared a little more blurred:

“Harm to the child, everything, we want to know everything. So if the youth is in a relationship, how is that relationship going because we understand the grooming process. So what may look like a relationship to a youth possibly wouldn’t look like a relationship to me. So the mentor shares everything. If it sounds weird, share it, if it sounds bad, share it, if it sounds great, share it, because we also want to know the good things too.”

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

The study suggested that common practice – to ensure peer supporters, specifically peer mentors, shared information with other staff – involved peer supporters documenting meetings with young people and discussing progress with colleagues. It is clearly critical that both peer supporters and the young people being supported, are clear about the limits of confidentiality and what and how information will be shared with others.

Strategy: Having conversations about the limits of confidentiality

Respondents who had experience of supporting young people directly spoke about how they handled situations if they felt information needed to be shared with case managers or other professionals. Here respondents talked about the importance of talking things through with the young person first and trying to help them understand why information should be passed on:

“I try to say, ‘Why do you think the case manager should not know, what would happen if the case manager knows this?’, ‘She won’t let me do it.’ ‘Does she have any reason to not let you do this?’

(Respondent 15, Organisation J)

“I think employees need to be more aware of the peer support programme so they know when girls come to talk to me first and then to them it’s only because I told them ‘go to them and tell them what you told me’ because sometimes girls don’t want to tell them something and it’s important and they need to know. I know what’s confidential and I would never use anything the girls told me. Because I had one experience when somebody broke my trust and told people something that wasn’t theirs to tell so for me it’s important every time to ask ‘do you want this known or not? Do you want to tell anybody else or just me?’ And if it’s something I need to tell [colleagues] I will tell them [the young people] first.”

(Peer supporter respondent 21, Organisation E)

Challenge: Relationships with other staff members

In addition to the emotional demands of the job, a number of respondents also talked about tensions that can arise between colleagues. Again this is not specific to peer supporters and any individual may encounter challenging relationships in the work place. However, in some cases respondents felt that the specific history and experiences of peer supporters may contribute to some of the tensions identified.

One respondent explained that some mentors with lived experience she had managed had not previously had professional jobs and subsequently needed to develop some basic skills to help them integrate into the work place:

“Understanding for a lot of them this is their first professional job. So they sometimes don’t know basic things within an organisation like what is appropriate language to use or how do you present yourself or how do you communicate your concerns. So there was a lot of professional growth and development and coaching that we had to do.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

The same respondent talked about challenges that could occur between those with lived experience and those without:

“Sometimes the mentors with lived experience were impatient towards the other mentors because they were still growing and still going through that role play piece and the observation you know. There were times when they felt like some of the mentors just didn’t get it. ‘This person doesn’t understand like if another adult would have talked to me that way that wouldn’t have been good. I wouldn’t work with them’. So I feel as though they had this deep experience. I don’t want to say there was a divide in our mentors [between those with or without lived experience], but I think there was definitely a noticeable different level of comfort.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

This same respondent also identified that it could be difficult for peer mentors (and other mentors) to have to challenge language and behaviours from other staff members that they felt was negative and inappropriate:

“I think it was hard at times for them to always be that ambassador on the child and family team at times. Having to have everyone understand and translate the young person’s experiences or perspectives or just doing some general information and trying to help other people on the team change their perspective of commercial sexual exploitation and what it means, what are respectful words and language to be using. While our care coordinators do receive training and [name of colleague] and I help facilitate that, a brief introduction to that, not all of our providers have that same level of expertise and experience and that was somewhat challenging for the mentors understanding. It seemed to them on a consistent basis they needed to be providing redirection, potentially to individuals who are considered to be higher level professionals on those teams, but still not trained or embracing sort of a different, whether that was harm reductionist approaches and not taking that into account, or maybe not embracing the language, accepting diverse like experiences, some of the things we were actually looking for when we were hiring mentors.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

Strategy: Having more than one peer supporter involved in the initiative

In reflecting on what is helpful with regards to supporting peer supporters to feel more integrated, respondents spoke about a shift in organisational culture. Three respondents identified that it could also be helpful to have more than one person with lived experience working in an organisation. A different respondent however spoke about her experience of working with two peer mentors who did not get on and would not work together. Not being the ‘only one’ may be helpful for some peer supporters offering them an additional layer of support. However, it is also important to not assume a natural alliance between peer mentors with similar lived experiences.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There were a number of limitations to this study which are important to acknowledge when reflecting on the findings. Firstly, in this study the majority of respondents were individuals who had set up or supported peer support initiatives within their organisations, only a limited number of peer supporters themselves were interviewed. Four of the seven peer supporter respondents had only received initial training and therefore were not able to comment on the challenges they faced ‘in the job’. In future studies it would be helpful to further explore challenges, tensions and strategies from the view point of peer supporters and those being supported (a perspective missing from this study). Secondly, a further limitation comes from the diversity of perspectives captured in this small sample which made it challenging to draw out concrete conclusions. Thirdly, as this study included some respondents who reflected on experiences of managing mentors supporting young people affected by sexual exploitation more generally (i.e. both mentors with and without lived experience), some reflections were non-specific to the role of ‘peers’. Such reflections related to the general challenges of individuals, who may not have professional qualifications and experience, supporting young people with complex needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper has highlighted a number of challenges for peer supporters providing support to young people affected by sexual violence, and those supporting and supervising them. The paper has also outlined a number of strategies identified by respondents to mitigate some of the difficulties and tensions. As organisations in this field continue to develop their programmes it is likely that peer support models will grow. In this context sharing such learning is important. In addition to reflection and sharing lessons learnt within the sector, it may also be helpful to explore learning from other fields.

Several challenges identified in this research study echo findings from studies exploring peer support in other sectors. For example, Chapman *et al.* (2018), writing about 'peer providers' in mental health services in the US note that despite the integration of peers within traditional mental health settings, there remain numerous challenges – many of which reflect those outlined above. They note that this includes peer supporters having poorly defined roles; receiving different levels of training; earning less than their non-peer counterparts; experiencing limited career progression compared to their colleagues without lived experience and; facing work place stigma. Other studies have highlighted similar challenges and reflected on tensions where peer staff feel that non-peer staff expect them to share personal details with service users (Gates *et al.*, 2010). As the scholarship on peer support in these other fields is further developed it may be possible to draw on wider lessons learnt to help develop peer support initiatives in the field of sexual violence.

For example, in relation to training for peer supporters, Klee *et al.* (2019) list a number of training modules that may be useful in any peer support initiative. This includes training on evidence-based practice, building communication skills, how to tell one's own story, wellness management, boundaries, confidentiality and ethics, diversity awareness, and how to adjust to a new work place. Studies have also highlighted how it may be helpful to offer training to non-peer staff members to create a workplace that is supportive and respectful of peer workers.

This current study highlighted the value of peer support for young people affected by sexual violence (see briefing paper three), in recognising this it is helpful to understand where risks and challenges may arise and reflect on steps that can be put in place to minimise these. This paper provides learning from those with experience of addressing these issues and provides a vital source of knowledge in a field of limited scholarship.

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