Peer Research in Housing and Homelessness

A Guidebook for Organisations, Researchers and Funders

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging
homelessness.
Changing lives.

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FOCUS Ireland

government supporting communities

About Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland is a non-profit organisation that provides services for people who are homeless and people at risk of homelessness in Ireland. It was founded by Sister Stanislaus Kennedy in 1985 and is one of the largest housing and homelessness organisations in Ireland. Since 2015, Focus Ireland has employed researchers with lived experience of homelessness to work on specific research projects.

About The Housing Agency

The Housing Agency is a government body with a vision of supporting an integrated housing system, meeting the nation's housing needs and promoting sustainable communities. It does this by providing housing insights and data that inform policy making; by working to deliver housing solutions and implement programmes in Government housing policy; and by equipping itself and stakeholders with the capacity to meet challenges in the housing system.

www.housingagency.ie

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

About this Guidebook

This guidebook was produced by a team of professional researchers and peer researchers at Focus Ireland. We began writing this guidebook in early 2020, just before the onset of COVID-19. The ongoing pandemic and the difficulties caused by public health guidelines had a significant impact on production of this guidebook, so that it took a lot longer to produce than originally planned.

The aim of the guidebook is to impart the learnings gained from Focus Ireland's peer research programme. This has been active since 2014 and has included a European seminar on peer research, which was held in Dublin in 2019. This guidebook focuses on the experience of participatory peer research methodology in housing and homelessness. It highlights the value and practical considerations of undertaking such research. It is written for organisations, researchers and funders who have an interest in peer research. It is a useful guide for anyone who is considering a research project that would use the skills and experience of peer researchers, but who might be unsure of the value of this methodology and the practical things to be considered.

Section 1 of the guidebook explains peer research and suggests who it might be for.

Section 2 gives an overview of the peer research projects in Focus Ireland since 2014, including a European seminar held in Dublin in 2019 on the topics of peer research and understanding homelessness. This seminar was attended by over 60 delegates with varying experience of peer research.

Sections 3 and 4 take the experience of Focus Ireland over the last seven years and merge this with the inputs and analysis from the 2019 seminar. This enables us to outline the value of peer research and the practical issues to be considered so that the research is done efficiently and responsibly.

We hope that this guidebook is useful and inspires you to implement a peer research methodology.

What is Peer Research?

Peer research is a methodology. It is research designed and conducted by people with direct experience of the issue being studied. Peer research is usually done in collaboration with professional researchers and organisations committed to bringing that experience to the fore.

Traditional research methodologies are done by professional researchers alone. These traditional approaches are now being scrutinised, since they often fail to include the perspectives of the people who are the subject of the research. Peer research has emerged as a response to this issue.

Peer research is developed from the traditions of 'participatory', 'action' and 'empowerment' research.[1] It adopts a 'bottom up' approach. The individuals who are going to be directly affected by the research now play an active role in the research process – they are involved in the co-construction of knowledge. Peer research takes the view that it is *peers* who are the 'experts' within their field of experience, and can empower peer researchers to understand and challenge the structures that cause marginalisation.

Peer researchers can carry out just one aspect of the project or they can be involved in all aspects. They can frame research questions and research design. They can develop research tools. They can collect and analyse data, and communicate research findings. Peer researchers often work with professional or academic researchers in an advisory role, or as volunteers or paid employees tasked with carrying out specific roles on research projects.

Peer research can also be referred to as 'service user involvement', particularly when organisations ask the users of a service to co-produce a service evaluation.

Who is Peer Research for?

Peer research can be applied by organisations, researchers or funders. It can be transformative and can shift the research process from top-down 'expertise' to the empowerment of authentic lived experience. It is a way of doing research that is inclusive and fair, and it provides opportunities for continuous learning and growth for everyone involved. Engaging with peer research or 'service user involvement' can help organisations to tackle issues of accessibility and diversity. Peer research projects enable people from marginalised backgrounds to contribute in a meaningful way.

Peer research can be useful for overcoming common challenges with conducting research. In the end, peer research often helps us to understand more about social problems so that we can tackle them. The lived experience of peer researchers offers different insights and perspectives on the social issues being researched. The benefits of peer research are discussed in more detail in **Section 3.**

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1 Hearne, R., and Murphy, M. (2019), *Participatory Action Research: A Human Rights and Capability Approach: A PAHRCA HANDBOOK for NGOs and Vulnerable Groups. Part 2: The Theory*. RE-InVEST Project and Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute.

Peer Research in Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland was founded by Sister Stanislaus Kennedy following her research into the lives of homeless women in Dublin. This experience convinced her of the importance of involving people who are (or have been) homeless in the development of the services for them. In 2014 Focus Ireland established a programme of peer research. Focus Ireland currently employs a small team of peer researchers to work on specific parts of its research programme.

This section of the guidebook provides an outline of Focus Ireland's customer involvement policy and its peer research work, along with an overview of the seminar on peer research and understanding homelessness hosted by Focus Ireland in November 2019.

Customer Involvement

The first Focus Ireland research project to adopt a peer-research methodology was *Making a Home in Ireland*.[2] Here, Dr Jane Pillinger worked with a team of Lithuanian, Nigerian, Indian and Chinese peer researchers to interview 40 migrants living in Blanchardstown in Dublin. The report was published in partnership with the Immigrant Council of Ireland in 2009. However, there was no strategy to embed the methodology in the organisation at that time.

Peer research began in earnest in Focus Ireland following publication of our revised *Customer Involvement Practice Guidelines* in 2013. The document sets out several recommendations from Focus Ireland customers on how to organise good customer involvement. Customers welcomed the opportunity to be involved, and felt it was a two-way responsibility. Focus Ireland staff have a responsibility to offer real opportunities for involvement; and Focus Ireland customers have a responsibility to take up these opportunities. Table 1 outlines these customer recommendations.

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2 Pillinger, J. (2009), *Making A Home in Ireland: Housing Experiences of Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian Migrants in Blanchardstown*. Dublin: Focus Ireland.
Available at: https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/research/

Table 1: Focus Ireland customers' recommendations on customer involvement

Checklist for involvement
✔ Build a relationship with customers, and don't expect too much too soon.
✔ Check if the customer is at a place in their lives where they can be involved.
✔ Be clear about the activity, opportunity or event. Asking customers to be 'involved' is too vague. What exactly are they involved in?
✔ Recognise that there are power differences. A customer may feel they should do something to 'give back' to the organisation, but it is not mandatory to be involved.
✔ Is it the right activity or opportunity for the customer or the group?
✔ Get the right information for customers and give it to them in a way that is meaningful to them (face-to-face meetings, notice boards, etc.).
✔ Incentivise involvement.
✔ Recognise that real involvement requires an ongoing investment.
✔ Be prepared for all situations.
✔ Customers should set an example for other customers by listening and sharing their opinion in a way that makes change happen.
✔ Customers should check what's happening: look at the notice board, talk to staff, read the customer newsletter, etc.
✔ Make information and decision-making open. Nothing should be behind closed doors.
✔ Act on feedback. It is frustrating to be asked for your input if nothing actually changes.

The checklist informed a set of guidelines (see Table 2) to support customer involvement that is appropriate, relevant, and beneficial to customers in a range of Focus Ireland activities. Customers were enabled to:

› Act as customer representatives and in customer forums
› Attend meetings of tenants' associations and residents' associations
› Provide customer-focused information in key working and case management
› Gather customer views (e.g. in time-framed work groups)
› Review policy and procedures, and take and address customer complaints
› Work in Focus Ireland advocacy, research and communications.

Table 2: Focus Ireland Guidance on Supporting Customer Involvement (Summary)

Make involvement clear	› Tell customers about the opportunity for involvement, and the expected benefits for the customer and the organisation. › Have clear aims and objectives for involvement. These are relevant to the customer's needs (short-term and long-term).
Provide equal opportunity	› Customers are not obliged to be involved, neither should they be discriminated against, or their effective involvement prevented. › Provide information in different formats and languages to raise awareness. › Engage customers who might not get involved otherwise. Follow-up action is one way to do this. › Link the customer's involvement to their skills and experience. › Involvement should build on the customer's strengths and interests, and allow them the space to develop new interests.

Recognise involvement	› Ensure real outcomes by acknowledging and acting on involvement:
	  › Provide support and resources (e.g. mentoring and supervision).
	  › Provide prompt feedback to customers about the effects of their involvement.
	  › There is a time limit in which responses to customer queries should be provided.
	  › If customer recommendations are not acted on, give the reasons for this.
	  › Make customer involvement visible in internal and external communications.

Evaluate involvement	› Customers and staff should evaluate the process and its resulting changes, and apply those learnings. › Include customers in auditing any future involvement opportunities. › Customers and staff should work together to develop an involvement action plan.

Research Programme

Following the strides made with the customer involvement recommendations and guidelines, the Focus Ireland research team began to involve three customers who had a history of volunteering within the organisation. These customers became peer researchers on a range of research, monitoring and evaluation activities. The peer researchers were employed on Focus Ireland's Staff Relief Panel and were paid for their work, including all training undertaken.

In addition to their work as Focus Ireland employees, in 2014 the peer research team was approached by Dr Mary Murphy in Maynooth University to take an active role as researchers in the Irish aspect of a European research programme named RE-InVEST.[3] This project examined the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on human rights. The peer researchers were trained to facilitate focus groups with customers of Focus Ireland housing support services, and to undertake qualitative interviews with parents residing in emergency accommodation. In 2019 the peer researchers gave a presentation at the final RE-InVEST conference in Leuven on their experiences of working on the project.

The first activity directly related to Focus Ireland's own work was in 2014 with the Focus Ireland Customer Charter. The charter contained a set of organisational values and rights. It was developed with the team of peer researchers, who visited and spoke with groups of customers around the country to get their views on what the charter should include. Following this project, in 2016 the peer researchers were provided training to conduct telephone surveys with customers to collect the data for Focus Ireland's Customer Satisfaction Survey. The peer researchers also assisted with data input and analysis on this project.

Seeking to further incorporate the skills of the team of peer researchers and provide opportunities for work experience, Focus Ireland actively involved the peer research team in the design and delivery of its KPI Monitoring and Evaluation Programme 2017–2020. This programme related to seven Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) identified in relation to the Focus Ireland Strategic Plan for 2017–2020. Across the period of the programme, the team of peer researchers worked across three phases.

In the first phase, the peer research team assisted with the research design and data collection related to a telephone survey to determine the proportion of customers remaining in secure homes six months after disengagement with services, and to assess levels of satisfaction with the services.[4] Following this project, the team presented on their reflections on the collaborative process of peer research in monitoring and evaluation at a FEANTSA[5] research conference in Budapest, Hungary.

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3 Further details available at: https://www.re-invest.eu/
4 Hoey, D., and Sheridan, S., with Haughan, P., Richardson, E., and Twomey, K. (2018), *Are You Still OK?*
   Dublin: Focus Ireland. Available at: https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/research/
5 FEANTSA is the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless.
   It hosts an annual research conference.

The second phase of the KPI monitoring and evaluation programme was conducted in 2019. It investigated the views of long-term Focus Ireland tenants on the physical quality of their homes, on their neighbourhood, on the level of support provided, and on their engagement in work/training and their local community. The peer researchers helped design the survey, conducted the telephone surveys, and contributed to the analysis, drafting and publication of the report.[6]

The third and final phase of the programme was a Customer Satisfaction Survey, which began in late 2020. As with the previous phase, the peer researchers were involved in every stage of the research – from survey design, to data collection and analysis, and drafting of the report.[7] They also led on the design and drafting of an accessible, 'Plain English' summary version of the report, which was aimed at staff and customers.[8]

Shortly after the Customer Satisfaction Survey, the peer researchers began a research project in partnership with the HSE (Health Service Executive), Trinity College Dublin and Volunteer Ireland. This project explored the support needs of people with experience of homelessness to volunteer.[9] The peer research team helped to design and pilot the interview schedule. They also assisted with recruitment of participants, and they conducted interviews.

There are additional peer research projects planned for 2022–23, including the biannual Customer Satisfaction Survey and a study exploring the attitudes and needs of older Focus Ireland housing tenants. Both projects will use telephone surveys conducted by the peer researchers to collect data.

Table 3: Overview of Focus Ireland peer researchers' work experience

2014	› Involved in developing the Focus Ireland Customer Charter › Researchers on the Irish aspect of the European RE-InVEST project
2016	› Researchers on the Focus Ireland Customer Satisfaction Survey project

2017–2021	› Researchers on Focus Ireland's KPI Monitoring and Evaluation Programme, including evaluations on:
	  › Levels of tenancy sustainment
	  › Satisfaction levels of customers in long-term housing
	  › Customer satisfaction of supports and services received

2021–2022	› Researchers on a study exploring volunteering support for people with experience of homelessness – in partnership with the HSE, TCD and Volunteer Ireland
2022–2023	› Customer Satisfaction Survey › Researchers on a study exploring the attitudes and needs of older customers in Focus Ireland housing

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6 Internal report, not publicly available.

7 Curran, H., and Hoey, D., with Richardson, E., and Twomey, K. (2021), Focus Ireland Customer Satisfaction Survey 2020/21. Available at: https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/evaluations/

8 Focus Ireland Customer Satisfaction Survey 2020/21 Summary Report. Available at: https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/evaluations/

9 This research is due to be completed in mid-2022.

European Seminar: Peer Research and Understanding Homelessness

To advance knowledge and best practice in peer research in relation to housing and homelessness, Focus Ireland proposed to host a European seminar, in partnership with The Housing Agency. The seminar explored how to use peer research to understand homelessness, and how to develop a guidebook on conducting peer research in the areas of housing and homelessness.

The European seminar organised by Focus Ireland was held on 20 November 2019. The day-long event provided an opportunity to learn about innovative research conducted by organisations working to end homelessness, in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe.[10] The seminar also considered the value of peer research, the challenges involved, and how to respond to those challenges. The seminar aimed to:

› Share knowledge and innovation in peer research
› Engage with the challenges and opportunities peer research can bring
› Provide a cross-country platform for peer researchers to discuss practice and learning
› Enable collaboration between professional and peer researchers
› Inform the development of a guidebook.

The seminar was attended by over 60 delegates from the NGO, government and academia sectors. A portion of delegates were experienced with peer research; however, most were not – they wanted to learn about the methodology and gain practical advice on how to do it. Central to the output of the seminar was the World Café methodology. This methodology is designed to connect multiple ideas and perspectives on a topic by engaging in several rounds of small group work. It is a really useful methodology for exploring a particular topic from multiple perspectives, and ensuring that everyone can make their contribution. It is also helpful in facilitating contributors to make new connections.

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10 See Appendix for list of speakers and organisations.

Table 4: How the World Café methodology supports thinking and practice

Context	❭ Explore how contextual factors (e.g. social, economic, political and cultural factors) influence a topic or goal – and how factors influence one another.
Connections	❭ Encourage participants to make new connections. ❭ Strengthen relationships and build trust among participants.
Patterns	❭ Break old thought patterns; catalyse new ideas and thinking. ❭ Identify areas of common interest, concern or excitement. ❭ Determine where the energy is in the system and where there are gaps or blockages. ❭ Understand how policies, structures and social/cultural norms are changing. ❭ Understand the relationships between outputs/outcomes and external factors.
Perspectives	❭ Explore a topic or issue from multiple and diverse perspectives. ❭ Ensure equal footing among participant voices. ❭ Understand partners' and other stakeholders' perspectives on the topic or goal (e.g. why it matters). ❭ Understand beneficiary experiences of the topic. ❭ Identify partners' and stakeholders' learning priorities.

The seminar used the World Café methodology to explore two key questions:

1 *What are the dilemmas/opportunities for you in respect of doing peer research?*

2 *What do we know/not know about peer research, and what do we need to do?*

Small group discussions were used to explore an aspect of a topic, with a host at each table taking notes on the conversation. Participants moved to a new table to discuss a different question at the end of their (time-limited) discussion, while the host remained in place to share insights from the previous conversation with a new group. The method enabled participants to explore the topic in depth and to develop meaningful insights, which were recorded on a flipchart for each discussion table. Delegates put responses on sticky notes – and when the small group conversations were finished, the host of each table shared key insights with the larger group. These outputs were collected and later analysed and categorised by the team of peer researchers, with the support of a professional researcher.

The remainder of this guidebook uses the outputs and analysis from the seminar, along with the experiences of Focus Ireland professional and peer researchers, to set out the value of peer research and the practical issues to consider so that peer research is done effectively and responsibly.

The Value of Peer Research

There are many advantages to adopting a peer-research approach. In this section, the value of peer research will be discussed in terms of its benefits as a research methodology, and its benefits for the organisations and individuals involved.

Peer Research as a Methodology

As previously discussed, peer research is a methodology – a way of approaching and doing research. Peer research can be a powerful and insightful methodology to co-produce and co-construct knowledge that challenges dominant ways of thinking. It is a grounded and authentic bottom-up (rather than top-down) approach. It empowers people, typically from marginalised backgrounds, to use their voices and participate in processes that lead to change in organisations or wider society.

Peer research has several advantages as a methodology. Peer researchers bring extensive 'insider knowledge' to a research project and about the research participants. They understand the community being researched, the concerns in that community, the language of that community, and how to engage that community. Involving peer researchers at the research design stage can help to decide what questions will be addressed, which provides context for the research framework. Crucially, peer researchers help to avoid any blind spots that professional researchers from outside the community might have.

The recruitment of participants is one of the most challenging aspects of doing research. The 'insider knowledge' of peer researchers helps to locate potential participants. Once identified, potential participants may feel more comfortable with an approach from a relatable peer than a professional or 'academic' researcher. The shared lived experience of peers can help to build trust and can encourage and empower individuals to participate in research. Any ideas of power imbalances between researchers and participants are minimised.

Peer researchers can improve the quality of data. They can be involved in the design of research instruments (e.g. drafting an interview schedule or designing a survey). Peer researchers can check and review instruments for meaning and language, ensuring that any instruments are accessible and appropriate for the target group. The shared experiences of peers can also enhance data collection because of the sensitivities and communication techniques peer researchers bring to the research. Their understanding and empathy can yield richer research data (e.g. during interviews or surveys with participants). Peers are likely to relate well to one another. If peer researchers (rather than professional researchers) conduct interviews, this can result in better research data, since it may be easier to have judgement-free conversations.

The safeguarding of research participants, particularly those who may be deemed vulnerable, is a key ethical consideration for any research project. The experiences of peer researchers can make them better able to identify research participants who are particularly vulnerable. Peer researchers can respond appropriately and swiftly to link participants with any supports they might need.

When peer researchers are present, findings can be translated from the jargon of academic research outputs into more accessible, 'Plain English' reports and presentations that can reach a wider and more diverse audience. This may be a useful approach for a research project that seeks to engage multiple audiences. For example, one version of a report can be published for an academic audience, and a separate version of that same report can be published in a simplified and accessible format. This can lead to greater impact for the research findings.

Table 5: Summary of the benefits of peer research as a methodology

Research design	› Peer researchers bring 'insider knowledge' of the community being researched. › Peer researchers can provide context to shape the research design and identify blind spots.
Recruitment	› Peer researchers can help to locate and identify potential research participants. › Peer researchers can build trust, and can engage and empower individuals to participate in research.
Quality of data	› Peer researchers can help to design and pilot research instruments to check for meaning, language and appropriateness. › Peer researchers have shared experiences that provide an equal power dynamic between researcher and participant. This can enhance data collection and yield richer data (e.g. qualitative interviews).
Safeguarding	› Peer researchers have lived experiences that enable them to identify research participants in need of support.
Communication	› Peer researchers can help translate academic jargon to accessible, 'Plain English' outputs for a wider audience.

The Benefits of Peer Research for Individuals and Organisations

Beyond its value as a methodology, adopting a peer-research approach can also provide benefits for individuals and organisations who support it. Peer researchers can benefit immensely from the investment of time and resources in their training and support. They learn how research is conducted. They can gain qualifications and other transferable skills for the workplace. They may also experience improved self-confidence and life opportunities. Active involvement in research projects and the legacy of those projects can provide a renewed sense of purpose. This can improve mental health and bring about positive changes such as a return to employment. The financial situation of peer researchers will also improve, if they are paid or compensated for their work.

A peer research approach promotes continuous learning for all involved – not just the peer researchers who have less research experience. Professional researchers also gain when they work alongside peer researchers. Professional researchers are challenged to think and work in different ways and with new structures that support being inclusive. It can be a transformative and very rewarding process.

For organisations, the new skills and experiences peer researchers gain can be used in areas and departments other than research. Peer researchers learn how to analyse, communicate and work within a team. They gain valuable knowledge on research methodology and wider institutional issues. The new skills that professional researchers learn as part of the co-production process can benefit organisations for future projects that are peer-led or involve people with lived experience (e.g. service user involvement strategies and programmes).

Supporting peer research projects can also build diversity in the workplace by providing a pathway into employment for service users from diverse backgrounds.

Table 6: Summary of the benefits of peer research for individuals and organisations

Peer researchers	› New skills and capacity-building › Improved self-confidence, mental health, and life opportunities – including reintegration to the workforce
Professional researchers	› New skills and capacity-building › Development through new methods and structures › Transformative and rewarding process
Organisations	› Increased skills and competencies of peer researchers are translatable to other areas (not just research) › Increased skills and competencies of professional researchers in co-production and participatory methods › Greater diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Practical Issues in Peer Research

This section outlines some practical issues for organisations and individuals doing peer research. As before, this section uses the experiences of Focus Ireland professional and peer researchers, along with the outputs and analysis from the seminar on peer research. As noted, the seminar was attended by delegates with and without experience of doing peer research.

Ethics and Safeguarding

Prior to undertaking a peer-research methodology, some ethical issues need to be considered. These ethical issues may need to be revisited when the project is underway.

Firstly, when recruiting suitable peer researchers, it is important to consider their relationships with potential research participants. By definition, peer researchers are very close to the issues concerned and sometimes with the community being researched. While this can greatly benefit the research project, it can create risks for the peer researchers if they are too close to participants. This poses strong ethical and methodological concerns. For example, in the case of the Focus Ireland research into customer satisfaction, surveys with customers who might have been known to the peer researchers were identified and scheduled to be carried out by professional researchers.

Following recruitment, peer researchers should be fully informed of the risks of doing research and should give informed consent to the roles they will play. In addition to the risks associated with knowing the research subjects and their community, there may be a risk of vicarious trauma for peer researchers. Many peer researchers will have lived experience of the topic being researched – some of this experience might be very recent. The potential trauma may not be obvious in the actual topic of the research: it may be an issue that is related, or something that just comes up incidentally.

When doing a research interview, a peer researcher may feel vulnerable because of the sharing of experiences. They may feel a sense of helplessness on hearing the stories of research participants. In addition to these trauma-informed considerations, it must be remembered that the everyday demands of doing the work can be hard on peer

researchers. The work demands commitment, travel and possibly an emotional burden. This can be hard on peer researchers as they reconcile new demands and responsibilities with their own lives.

With these risks in mind, good preparation and ongoing support from colleagues are crucial. Professionals should make time for regular check-ins, debriefs, support plans, and emotional support with peer researchers. For example, in one Focus Ireland project, a staff member scheduled time in their day to make phone calls to check in with a peer researcher before and after an interview. In another project, regular one-to-one meetings were scheduled to check in with peer researchers to hear how they were finding the work. Of course, while ongoing support is paramount, professionals should be aware to maintain boundaries and strike a balance between support and dependency.

Another ethical consideration is an exit strategy for peer researchers. This is discussed in more detail below.

Planning, Replanning and Flexibility

Adopting a peer research methodology usually means the project will take longer to complete and will need additional management time and resources. If this is not recognised at the start and factored into planning and budgets, it can result in pressures later – and can even result in a successful project being seen as failing.

Peer research takes time and emotional energy from all involved. This needs to be acknowledged from the beginning. In many projects, the peer researchers may not be recruited when the project is initially being planned. Therefore, a recognition of the time and energy that will be required is something that needs to be returned to repeatedly during the project, as new people (peer researchers and other participants) come on board.

As soon as the peer researchers have been recruited, and before a project formally starts, it is advised to build connections and trust between peer researchers and professional researchers through opportunities to meet and get to know one another. There could be several arranged meetings or information sessions to prepare people for the upcoming project and introduce them to their colleagues. It is useful at these initial meetings to set out expectations and ground rules for the team, and to cover relevant policies or procedures.

Depending on the project, peer researchers may need training. It will not always be possible to anticipate all training needs prior to recruiting the peer researchers, and new needs may emerge as the project develops. Peer researchers must be given the time they need to complete appropriate research training modules, at the level required to meet the capacities of participants.

In addition, the supervision of peer researchers frequently differs from the supervision required by a professional researcher. Therefore, supervision often requires considerable thought and planning.

One key practical issue is scheduling. Peer researchers and professional researchers often have different schedules and time commitments. Expecting the peer researchers to just fit in to the routine of professional researchers is unlikely to lead to success. It

will take effort to ensure that everyone is fully briefed and has time to understand their tasks and their role. It is important that peer researchers have the support structures in place to do the work and manage any emotional burden. For example, if peer researchers are involved in conducting qualitative interviews, it is important to ensure a professional researcher is available for support before and after the interview for a debrief.

An important part of any peer research project is the planning and preparation involved in providing a safe space where people can learn and grow in a structured way. The space should allow everyone to engage in open, honest dialogue and mutual learning. For example, this space could take the form of regular reflective practice[11] whereby research colleagues take the opportunity to reflect on what worked and what didn't in the project to date. This part of peer research can be challenging but it is very valuable and will ultimately benefit any peer research project.

The circumstances in the lives of peer researchers and professional researchers can often differ. Sometimes this can inhibit the full participation of peer researchers in a project at certain stages. Peer researchers who are involved in their first project are being asked to absorb knowledge, work practices and skills that took professional researchers many years of living and training to acquire. Professional researchers need to exercise patience and understanding, and plan for gaps or absences in participation.

As peer researchers gain experience and confidence, their capacity to engage in planning the project will also develop, and relationships within the team need to adapt to recognise this and to ensure the benefits from this increased capacity are fed back into the project.

Doing peer research means planning for the unexpected, and learning to be flexible. The project plan should include space for contingencies on budget, time and training.

Training and Capacity-Building

Training for peer researchers is important and should be viewed as an opportunity to invest in continued capacity-building. Training can include research design, interviewing, data analysis, coding, drafting a report, and presentation skills. Training not only prepares peer researchers for their work, but is an incentive to participate. It provides a tangible personal achievement that peer researchers can build on. Training should be at the right level, be aware of disabilities, and should avoid intimidating participants with jargon and academic language.

The professional who provides the training needs to have the appropriate skills. This may involve taking some time to complete an additional course (e.g. in teaching and learning), if the professional does not already have experience in facilitating training. It would be a good idea to engage with or establish a network of other professional researchers working with a peer-research methodology.

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11 For further details on Reflective Practice, see Cartwright, T. (2011), 'Developing Your Intuition: A Guide to Reflective Practice' (Vol. 108). John Wiley & Sons. See also: Finlay, L. (2008), 'Reflecting on "Reflective Practice"', Practice-based Professional Learning Paper 52, The Open University.

Participation and Managing Expectations

As noted earlier, there is a spectrum of peer researcher involvement in a project – from engaging with a single task, to full participation from design to publication. A key issue for organisations and professional researchers to consider is the level to which peer researchers participate in the research process. Different peer researchers have different abilities. Some may not be capable of contributing to certain stages of the research process, while they may be able to make a major contribution in other areas. For example, a peer researcher may not be comfortable conducting one-to-one interviews, but they may be very interested in designing the interview schedule and data analysis. Professionals need to assess the skills and interests of peer researchers, and be flexible and adaptable when it comes to roles and input.

Managing expectations is an important part of the trust relationship between professional researchers and peer researchers. It is helpful to make the roles and responsibilities clear. From the outset, peer researchers need to be clear on the duration of the project, the frequency of work, and the potential challenges and delays that could impact their hours. Ideally, when a project comes to an end, peer researchers would be given further opportunities for progression. Not all organisations can provide this, and it is important to be honest about the realistic prospects of future opportunities.

Equal Treatment and Recognition

Professional researchers and peer researchers commit to an equal relationship when working together on research projects. They co-produce and co-own the work. Equal recognition is vital in avoiding tokenism. Every opportunity should be made to recognise the contribution of peer researchers (e.g. in communication materials or activities). Peer researchers should be encouraged and supported to participate in communicating and publishing the research in meetings, seminars or public events.

The work of peer researchers should be valued, and they should never be out of pocket for participating in research projects. Organisations working with peer researchers may not be able to offer the security of employment that all of us aspire to. However, peer researchers should be paid an hourly rate for the work they do. Any costs incurred during projects (e.g. travel costs) need to be covered.

The payment for any work should be mindful of the impact on an individual's benefits and entitlements, and this should be discussed beforehand. It can be wise to seek advice from an experienced welfare rights organisation to help design payment systems that maximise income and do not undermine long-term welfare claims.

The Role of the Professional

There are several skills and qualities required for professionals to work with peer researchers. This work requires self-awareness, sensitivity, and the capacity to work with people from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. It requires a willingness to foster open communication and be challenged – conflict is often part of the process, and difficult conversations should not be avoided.

Professionals in this environment need to be flexible and adaptable. Peer researchers may not always complete their research tasks, or may not always be able to reach a standard of work that professional researchers are used to. Equally, it is important not to approach the relationship with expectations that are too low. As with any other work, peer researchers will get more from the project if they strive to achieve the best that they can. Therefore, processes need to be developed and managed carefully, in a supportive and collaborative manner, according to clear prior agreements (or contracts) which specify standards.

Above all, professionals need to be consistent and committed. Their roles are crucial in the professional and personal development of peer researchers and wider goals of reducing stigma and exclusion in research and society. The professional researcher needs the support of a broader network of professionals doing similar work. The professional researcher should also have a clear supervisory and support structure within the organisation, where they can discuss challenges they are facing and access any further training or support they need.

Long-term Development Opportunities

The long-term development of the peer researcher should be one concern of the project. This might mean that the peer researcher participates in further projects within your organisation (or another organisation) or it might involve further training related to research. Of course, the skills and confidence that a peer researcher develops from working on a project may take them on a different path, which is not related to research at all. If your organisation has a HR department, it can be useful to link the peer researchers into that department so they can discuss their options and opportunities.

When a project is coming to an end, professionals need to be mindful of other opportunities or projects for the peer researchers. Professionals typically move from one project to another in secure employment. This is not the case for peer researchers. Therefore, an important part of the work is to identify opportunities for development and progression for peer researchers. Progression might also include other areas of employment, not necessarily in research. Opportunities and progression should be based on the interests of the peer researchers.

Table 7: Summary of the practical considerations of peer research

Ethics and safeguarding	› Recruitment of peer researchers needs to consider their proximity to research participants. › Transparency and consent are vital. › Professionals need to schedule time for debriefs, support plans, and emotional support. › Post-project opportunities should be built into project plans. › Maintain professional boundaries and a balance between support and dependency.
Planning, Replanning and Flexibility	› Make time for early-stage team bonding and building before the project starts. › Planning and facilitating training requires significant time and effort. › Robust support structures are crucial. › Professionals should prepare for gaps and absences in participation.
Training and capacity-building	› Approach training as an investment in people and their growth. › Approach training as an incentive for participation. › Ensure training is accessible and flexible. › Ensure the trainer has the right skills.
Participation and managing expectations	› Work with peer researchers to agree roles and levels of participation. › Provide complete clarity in terms of project timeline, work demands and compensation.
Equal treatment and recognition	› Projects must be based on an equal relationship between professional and peer researchers. › Equal treatment and recognition are key in avoiding tokenism. › The work of peer researchers must be valued and compensated.
Role of the professional	› Professionals should be comfortable with conflict and difficult conversations. › Being flexible and adaptable are key traits for success. › Professionals must maintain a consistent and committed attitude.
Long-term development	› The long-term development of the peer researcher is a key concern › Peer researchers can be supported to work on new research projects. › Peer researchers may discuss different development paths with the organisation's HR department › Opportunities and progression should be based on the interests of the peer researcher.

Appendix

European Seminar: Peer Research and Understanding Homelessness

The keynote address was given by Dr Mary Murphy of NUI Maynooth, lead researcher of the Irish component of RE-InVEST, a European research project funded by Horizon 2020 to explore the social impact of the global financial crisis. The Irish aspect of the research was based in Maynooth University and used a qualitative participatory methodology to work with a group of experienced peer researchers from Focus Ireland.

Dr Murphy's presentation addressed the Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach (PAHRCA) and the research methodology used to conduct the RE-InVEST research. She discussed some of the key issues involved, including ethics, research validity, the risk of tokenism, practical resource limitations and the time required to implement the methodology successfully.

Other speakers included the following.

> Paul Haughan, Emma Richardson and Daniel Hoey, all of Focus Ireland, presented on *Peer Research: Learnings from a Monitoring and Evaluation Programme*. This presentation reflected on the experiences of two peer research projects. See Focus Ireland's website for more details on their research programme: www.focusireland.ie

> Jade Ward of University of York, and peer researchers Tia Brennan and Amy Mook, presented on *Care Leavers' Transitions to Independent Secure Housing: Evaluating The House Project and Staying Close*. Both these initiatives are part of the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. Further details on the programme can be accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/childrens-social-care-innovation-programme-insights-and-evaluation

> Mat Amp and Martin Burrows of Groundswell, presented on *Lessons Learned from Peer Research in Groundswell*, giving an overview of several peer research initiatives undertaken by Groundswell. See Groundswell's website for more details on their research programme: www.groundswell.org.uk

- Hayley Peacock, Adrian Whyatt and Asan Ugborogho of St. Mungo's, presented on *St Mungo's: Work and Homelessness – Tackling Insecure Work and Transient Housing*. This presentation outlined the experience of their organisation in peer research on precarity and transience in housing and employment. See St Mungo's website for more details on their research programme: www.mungos.org
- Peer researcher Robbert Brouwer, and Dr Nienke Boesveldt and Maarten Davelaar of Utrecht University, presented on the *Paja! Project: Participatory Audits and Five-Year Studies on Recurring Homelessness, De-institutionalising and Decentralising*. Their presentation outlined the reflections from this peer research project. Further details on the Paja! Project can be accessed at: https://onderzoekmobw.socsci.uva.nl/index.php/en/research/

The seminar concluded with a discussion among a panel of researchers, advocates and service providers on the benefits and potentials of peer research. The panel comprised:

- Dr Nienke Boesveldt, Utrecht University
- Ursula McAnulty, Senior Researcher, Housing Agency
- Mauro Striano, Participation Officer, FEANTSA
- Amy Mook, Peer Researcher
- Dr Mary Murphy, Maynooth University.

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