SET UP for SUCCESS

Five lessons for effective implementation of peer work in your organisation

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Introduction

Peer Support Workers (PSWs) are 'experts-by-experience' who leverage their living and lived experience to provide support to others experiencing similar situations.[1]

In the housing and homelessness sector, peer support work has taken a step forward with the publication of a toolkit on peer support specialists by the Housing Agency.[2] This was developed as part of the Agency's work to operationalise the Housing First approach nationally, and is leading to increased interest in peer work from the sector.

In 2023, Focus Ireland launched a peer support work pilot. Initially, six peer support workers (PSWs) were recruited and placed in services in each of the main cities. The pilot was evaluated by Just Economics, an independent research company.

The evaluation demonstrated the potential of peer support work to add value in homelessness services through improved outcomes for customers, peer support workers and the host organisation.

The evaluation also yielded learnings about how to implement peer support work effectively.[3] The purpose of this report is to share these learnings with other organisations looking to integrate peer support work into their services.

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1 Mangan, J., del Cid Nunez, P., Daou, S., Richandi, G. E. K., Siddiqui, A., Wong, J., ... & Orkin, A. M. (2024). Peer and lay health work for people experiencing homelessness: A scoping review. *PLOS Global Public Health, 4*(6), e0003332.

2 Housing Agency (2024) Peer Support Specialist Toolkit: https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/2024-09/The%20Housing%20Agency%20103982_Peer%20Support%20Specialist%20Toolkit_FINAL.pdf

3 The evaluation is accessible via the 'Evaluations' page of the Focus Ireland website: https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/evaluations/

The report is structured around five key lessons, drawing on a combination of evidence from the research literature and the Focus Ireland experience:

LESSON 1   **Get your organisation ready for peer work**

LESSON 2   **Recruitment is key**

LESSON 3   **Prepare host teams**

LESSON 4   **Put in place appropriate supports**

LESSON 5   **Develop career progression pathways**

About the pilot and evaluation

The peer support work pilot was initiated by Focus Ireland in 2023 and consisted of six PSWs being recruited into frontline Focus Ireland services.

The PSW role was modelled on the project worker role, with PSWs employed part-time on the same salary scale as project workers.

In January 2025, Just Economics was commissioned to undertake a qualitative process and outcome evaluation of the pilot.

During the course of the evaluation, confidential interviews were conducted with PSWs (N=5), service users (7), staff (host teams and implementation, N=12). In addition, the research team undertook a review of the national and international literature on peer work and reviewed all relevant internal Focus Ireland documents.

Why peer work?

Peer work involves individuals with lived experience – of homelessness, mental health issues, addiction, or similar challenges – offering support to others in comparable situations.

While definitions vary across contexts, the emphasis is on shared experience, mutual respect, and fostering self-determined change.[4]

In Ireland, there is increasing interest in implementing peer work into services across a range of sectors. In the homelessness sector, the focus by the Housing Agency on Housing First, which has peer work as an integral element, is making this a priority.

Beyond this policy context, there is mounting evidence that points to the added value of peer work.

Evidence suggests that peer work is particularly effective at engaging and retaining individuals who are often marginalised or 'hard to reach' by traditional services.[5] Peer workers can build trust and overcome barriers rooted in stigma, previous negative experiences with services, or perceptions of professional staff being disconnected from clients' realities.[6] Research shows improved outcomes in service uptake and retention,[7] empowerment,[8] addiction recovery, and mental health.[9]

In addition, peer workers themselves often experience significant personal and professional benefits. These include increased self-esteem, social connectedness, recovery reinforcement, and career development.[10][11] Peer support work allows individuals to transform personal hardship into a source of strength for others, fostering a sense of purpose and mutual growth.

4 See for example: Fortuna, K. L., Solomon, P., & Rivera, J. (2022). An update of peer support/ peer provided services underlying processes, benefits, and critical ingredients. *Psychiatric Quarterly, 93*(2), 571–586.

5 Sokol, R., & Fisher, E. (2016). Peer support for the hardly reached: a systematic review. *American journal of public health, 106*(7), e1–e8.

6 de Zeeuw Wright, M., & Morgan, C. (2024). Certified Peer Support in the Field of Homelessness: Stories Behind the Work. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 1–11.

7 Giraldo, A., Shah, P., Zerbo, E., & Nyaku, A. N. (2024). The role of recovery peer navigators in retention in outpatient buprenorphine treatment: a retrospective cohort study. *Annals of Medicine, 56*(1), 2355566.

8 Burke, E., Pyle, M., Machin, K., Varese, F., & Morrison, A. P. (2019). The effects of peer support on empowerment, self-efficacy, and internalized stigma: A narrative synthesis and meta-analysis. *Stigma and health, 4*(3), 337.

9 David, D. H., Rowe, M., Staeheli, M., & Ponce, A. N. (2015). Safety, trust, and treatment: Mental health service delivery for women who are homeless. *Women & Therapy, 38*(1–2), 114–127.

10 Moran, G. S., Russinova, Z., Gidugu, V., Yim, J. Y., & Sprague, C. (2012). Benefits and mechanisms of recovery among peer providers with psychiatric illnesses. *Qualitative health research, 22*(3), 304–319.

11 MacLellan, J., Surey, J., Abubakar, I., & Stagg, H. R. (2015). Peer support workers in health: a qualitative metasynthesis of their experiences. *PloS one, 10*(10), e0141122.

Peer work good practice:
Lessons from the literature and Focus Ireland peer support work evaluation

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This section distils five key learnings from the research literature and an evaluation of peer support work in Focus Ireland.

LESSON 1

LESSON 2

LESSON 3

LESSON 4

LESSON 5

Get your organisation ready for peer work

Peer working is most effective where the organisational culture supports the approach, including active support by the leadership.[12]

In a systematic review of effective peer work in mental health, over half of papers identified organisational culture as important.[13] Key features of the culture are: being strengths-based,[14] open staff and management attitudes,[15] and general support of peer working within the organisation.

Achieving buy-in from the leadership and wider organisation is, therefore, an essential part of introducing peer working into your organisation. It is important that peer work is respected and seen as adding value.

In Focus Ireland, the guiding ethos was that peer work is 'different, but equal', with PSWs renumerated on the same pay scale as project workers. Organisation-wide information sessions were held prior to the recruitment of PSWs to raise awareness of the peer worker role and to achieve buy-in.

In addition to awareness-raising, there are a number of other steps organisations can take to get ready for peer work. These include developing a peer work strategy and establishing structures and processes to support effective peer working (e.g. around recruitment, see Lesson 2). You may want to set up an implementation or advisory group to oversee this process.

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12 Reeves, V., Loughhead, M., Halpin, M. A., & Procter, N. (2024). Organisational Actions for Improving Recognition, Integration and Acceptance of peer support as identified by a current peer workforce. *Community Mental Health Journal, 60*(1), 169–178.

13 Ibrahim, N., Thompson, D., Nixdorf, R., Kalha, J., Mpango, R., Moran, G., ... & Slade, M. (2020). A systematic review of influences on implementation of peer support work for adults with mental health problems. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology, 55*, 285–293.

14 Watson, E. (2019). The mechanisms underpinning peer support: a literature review. *Journal of Mental Health*.

15 Ibrahim, N., Thompson, D., Nixdorf, R., Kalha, J., Mpango, R., Moran, G., ... & Slade, M. (2020). A systematic review of influences on implementation of peer support work for adults with mental health problems. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology, 55*, 285–293.

When beginning on your organisations peer work journey, consider:

› Establishing a peer work implementation or advisory group to oversee the process. This could have representatives from each of the key parts of the organisation that will have a role to play in the successful implementation of peer work (e.g. senior managers, HR staff, service managers) as well as individuals with lived experience.

› Develop a peer work strategy for your organisation.

› Develop policies, processes and structures to support effective peer working (see Lessons 2–5).

› Hold information sessions in your organisation to raise awareness of peer work, its potential to add value and how it will be implemented.

Recruitment is key

A recurring success factor in the literature is achieving the right fit between the peer worker and the service they will be located within.[16] This means that effective recruitment is a key enabler of success for the key worker and organisation.

Many of those applying for a peer work role will have been out of work for some time, making the process even more anxiety-provoking than usual. For this reason, it is important to design an inclusive process. You might want to be guided by individuals with lived experience, who can help you to design the recruitment process from advertising through to the application form, interview and follow up.

Recruitment is also a vital part of assessing that the peer worker is in recovery. Many peer work programmes have a minimum requirement for time in recovery: the Housing Agency guidance states 12 months, while Focus Ireland stipulated two years. The interview provides an opportunity to see how a person is talking about their situation and it can be helpful to have an individual with lived experience on the interview panel.

In addition, role clarity is repeatedly identified in the literature as an enabler of successful peer working. As Kidd et al. note peer support cannot be an afterthought when designing services but must be robust in process and structure and clarity about the role is part of this.[17]

16 Černá, E., & Gojová, A. (2023). Peer support workers as equal team members. A case study of peer support in Glasgow housing first. *The British Journal of Social Work, 53*(1), 315–333.

17 Kidd, S. A., Vitopoulos, N., Frederick, T., Daley, M., Peters, K., Cohen, S., ... & McKenzie, K. (2019). Peer support in the homeless youth context: Requirements, design, and outcomes. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 36*, 641–654.

To ensure effective recruitment, you may want to consider following:

> Work with teams to identify gaps where a peer worker can add value.

> Develop a tailored job description that clearly sets out the role of the peer worker.

> Ensure that the application process is easy-to-follow.

> Involve the host team in the selection process, ensuring they are part of shortlisting and the interview panel. It can also be a good idea to have an individual with lived experience on the panel.

> Consider recruiting outside your own client population to reduce the potential for conflicts of interest.

> There is evidence that peer working is particularly effective where the lived experience of the peer worker matches the lived experience of the clients. You may want to look out for this in your recruitment.

Prepare host teams

Peer workers are more likely to successfully integrate when they join a team that has been well-prepared.[18]

This places an onus on working directly with host teams, over and above the organisation-wide awareness raising set out in Lesson 1.

There are sometimes concerns about peer workers joining a team, including around how the peer worker will cope without the professional qualifications held by project workers.

It is important to listen to these concerns and reassure staff by referencing the training, processes and procedures that are in place to ensure that the peer worker is set up for success. This preparation includes providing information about what support is available for the peer worker, teams and managers if things are not going well or extra support is needed.

It can be a good idea for host teams to join part of the induction and training programme that has been developed for peer workers.

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18 Reeves, V., Loughhead, M., Halpin, M. A., & Procter, N. (2024). Organisational Actions for Improving Recognition, Integration and Acceptance of peer support as identified by a current peer workforce. *Community Mental Health Journal, 60*(1), 169–178.

To ensure host teams are well-prepared, consider:

› Involving host teams as early in the process as possible, ideally right at the beginning when decisions are being made about where to place a peer worker (see Lesson 2) and throughout the recruitment and induction process for the peer worker.

› Listen to concerns that the host team may have and work with the team to address these.

› Ensure that the host team understands how the peer support role will operate and what support is available.

› Provide additional training to service managers that will host a peer worker and regular check-in to see how it is going.

LESSON 4

Put in place appropriate supports

Many peer workers will be starting their roles after a period out of work and often with less formal qualifications than project workers. In the Focus Ireland evaluation, PSWs talked about experiencing 'impostor syndrome'.

A robust induction and training process tailored to peer working can help to ensure peer workers feel supported and build confidence quickly in their roles.[19] This, in turn, drives effectiveness.

The research literature points to the importance of training that focuses specifically on the peer work role in its context – for example, on negotiating boundaries, self-care and so on – as opposed to training on addiction or mental health per se.[20]

Peer workers may also benefit from training in practical matters, such as office skills. In the Focus Ireland evaluation, managers reported that they were spending a considerable amount of time on helping PSWs with practical matters when they were settling into their roles.

Supervision is crucial element of the support scaffolding for peer workers. Given the focus on lived experience, there is the potential for the role to be triggering or retraumatising. Supervision will help the peer worker to navigate such challenges, establish boundaries, and engage in appropriate self-care.

Finally, peer workers may benefit from networking with each other, thus enabling them to share common challenges and provide each other with solutions.

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19 Barker, S. L., Bishop, F. L., Scott, E. B., Stopa, L. L., & Maguire, N. J. (2020). Developing a model of change mechanisms within Intentional Unidirectional Peer Support (IUPS). *European Journal of Homelessness, 14*(2), 97–127.

20 Gill, K. J., Murphy, A. A., Burns-Lynch, W., & Swarbrick, M. (2009). Delineation of the job role. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 75*(3), 23.

To ensure peer workers are provided with the right support, you may want to consider the following:

›   Develop and provide bespoke induction and training for peer workers, including:

  ›   Training in practical matters, such as office skills.

  ›   Training around how to deploy their lived experience in their role, as well as around boundaries and self-care.

  ›   On any areas where the peer workers may feel they do not have sufficient knowledge relative to colleagues with formal qualifications.

›   Ensure there are regular opportunities for supervision for all peer workers as a matter of routine.

›   Establish a network of peer workers for mutual support.

›   Ensure that existing organisational supports are utilised, including any mentoring or buddy schemes that may exist.

Develop career progression pathways

Career progression may not be the first thing that comes to mind when an organisation is establishing its first peer work roles, but it should be an important consideration.

In Ireland, as in many other contexts, the requirement for project workers to have formal qualifications can place a limit on career progression for peer workers,[21] who often do not have these formal qualifications.

In the Focus Ireland evaluation, every peer support worker that was interviewed was either working towards becoming a project worker or had expressed an interest in doing so.

Opportunities for career progression can act as an important source of motivation. They also provide a means for increased earnings for peer workers, who may be struggling on entry-level pay scales.

To support career progression:

› Regularly explore with peer workers their goals for the future and work with them to build individual development plans to achieve these.

› Consider providing peer workers experience of working in a range of different settings within your organisation to maximise learning opportunities.

› Provide additional support to peer workers to address any areas where the peer worker may need extra help accessing training or qualifications to ensure they meet regulatory requirements that otherwise could prevent career progression.

› Develop a peer work career path that enables progression as the worker gains experience and skills.

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21 Scott, A. (2015). Gaining acceptance: Discourses on training and qualifications in peer support. *New Zealand Sociology, 30*(4), 38–57.

Over to you...

> "Because I had been through it myself, I knew I could help."
> (Peer Support Worker, Focus Ireland)

> "There is something about her. Customers relate to her a lot more.
> A lot come in specifically looking for her, particularly people who
> are feeling low mentally." (Project Worker)

> "When I speak to people and tell them I have been homeless, they can't
> believe it. I tell them my story and they can see there is hope, that things
> can change." (Peer Support Worker, Focus Ireland)

> "She has had the same experiences as me, so she understands me in a way
> nobody else does" (Customer, Focus Ireland)

Peer work has the potential to enrich organisations, improving outcomes for service users, peer workers and the wider organisation.

Achieving this potential requires careful preparation and planning.

Drawing on best practice from the international literature and an evaluation of peer support work in Focus Ireland, this guide has distilled five key lessons for effective implementation of peer work.

The aim is to provide other organisations, whether in homelessness or another sector, with a shortcut to successfully integrating peer work into their organisation.

About the authors

The research was conducted by Dr Eilis Lawlor and Dr Eva Neitzert of Just Economics. Dr Lawlor and Dr Neitzert are evaluation experts, with a track record of more than 15 years research and evaluation around homelessness and housing. For more information about Just Economics and the authors, please visit www.justeconomics.ie.

Just economics

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› Kelly Anne Byrne, former Focus Ireland Lived Experience Ambassador

› Grainne Johnston, Housing First National Office, The Housing Agency

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