

A photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a grey long-sleeved top with lace-up details at the chest. She is sitting and looking towards a man whose back is to the camera. The man is wearing a light blue shirt. The background is a simple indoor setting with a wooden shelf and grey curtains.

Rethink
Mental
Illness.

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Peer Support Workers: Exploring Rethink Mental Illness's Practice

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Executive Summary

About this report

This report documents the findings of a "Learning and Insights" project that was undertaken to explore the experience of paid Peer Support Workers (PSWs) at Rethink Mental Illness. PSWs are "...people who have lived experience of mental health challenges themselves. They use these experiences and empathy to support other people and their families receiving mental health services." ([Health Education England, 2023](#)).

Value and contribution of peer support workers

In summary, the findings presented in this report demonstrate that PSWs are significantly contributing to Rethink Mental Illness's services. The role itself is structured in such a way that PSWs are providing really practical, direct support that is helping people to pursue, and take steps towards, their recovery. PSWs are also able to take the time and space needed to really get to know and understand the people they're supporting.

In line with the existing evidence base, by explicitly drawing on lived experience PSWs are able to: inspire hope and motivation that recovery is possible; advocate for the support that people need; have the right words to say; understand, and not be afraid of, mental distress; bring a different level of empathy and compassion to the role; and develop qualitatively different relationships with the people they support. This relationship, in turn, has the effect that people can feel increasingly heard, understood and less isolated, and they receive truly person-centred support. PSWs are also playing an integral role with regards to shaping Rethink Mental Illness's services by offering their ideas and making observations about how current service delivery may be being received by service users.

"[PSWs] can create a bespoke service... depending on what's needed for the particular client or citizen."

(PSW Manager)

"It means you can relate to someone who has a different kind of understanding...it's deeper... you feel that you're not alone... They're more approachable."

(Service user)

The PSW role in practice

The majority of people involved in this review were positive about their experience of either undertaking their PSW role or managing PSWs. However, a lot is being learnt about the uniqueness of the role and what this means for our practice. As one of the survey respondents said: "Services with peers on board must understand and manage the complexities that come along with people working and living with mental illness."

1. Recruitment and induction:

Very often, the PSW role was someone's first role in the mental health sector. Being mindful about this in the recruitment process, both in terms of where the role is advertised and the interview process itself, was felt to be important.

2. Knowledge, skills and experience:

In addition to lived experience, there are range of qualities and skills that staff feel are important in these roles including:

- Being open minded, kind and compassionate
- Being patient, sympathetic and empathetic
- Being adaptable, self-aware and reflective
- Being fairly resilient and having an element of self-confidence
- Having good communication and interpersonal skills
- Having good organisational skills and the ability to work as a team
- Able to work independently, remain calm and have an element of life experience to bring to the role.

3. Management, supervision and support:

The majority of PSWs feel well supported in their role, especially when they are part of a team with other PSWs (*this aligns with existing literature). However, people felt that PSWs' internal support networks could be extended. Managers themselves are very thoughtful about how to balance their traditional supervisory role with a more supportive, "hands on" role, which is having an impact on managers' time and capacity.

"...we're much better supported in terms of having a team than a lot of other people who are doing this job." (PSW)

4. Training and development:

Staff are positive about the peer support training PSWs receive, however, a number of additional training needs were identified. There is also felt to be a gap in the progression and development opportunities for these roles.

"It would be nice to see lived experience being [in more senior roles]... higher up there... that would be the dream..." (PSW) Manager)

5. Boundaries of the role:

The difference between PSWs and other roles (e.g. Wellbeing Practitioners) was articulated by managers in terms of their duties, with PSWs not usually responding to initial referrals or getting involved in case or risk management decisions. Whilst the majority of PSWs are comfortable with the range of duties associated with their role, a couple of people questioned the appropriateness of their role in solely crisis-based services as well as working on a mental health phoneline.

"Definitely always making it about them, not about yourself... It's not a competition... It's not imposing anything from your side..." (PSW)

"You need to consider what the purpose of the role is... In [my region], I think people have just gone 'we need PSWs in mental health because it's the 'in' thing'" (PSW Manager)

6. Feeling valued:

The majority of PSWs feel valued by Rethink Mental Illness and external partners, and services are actively taking steps to ensure this is the case. However, the level of seniority, salary and perception of the role are leading some to feel undervalued.

7. Drawing on lived experience:

Interviewees were clear about when and how it was appropriate to share their lived experience, and the majority did not feel under pressure to share on every occasion.

8. What makes someone a peer:

Interviewees were thoughtful about what makes someone a peer (including factors such as mental health diagnosis, age, cultural background, personal interests etc) and deliberate choices are being made about matching PSWs with service users (where this is possible). A discussion arose, however, about how central someone's mental health diagnosis should be in this decision making process.



Ideas for Improvement

- Review the advertising routes and interview process for PSWs
- Provide a more holistic training offer for PSWs (not just on peer support)
- Improve the support routes for PSWs and their managers
- Review the development and progression opportunities available for PSWs
- Develop a more consistent approach across services that employ PSWs
- Respect the value of the peer support relationship when it comes to the end of someone's support with a PSW.

"The only thing is that it was a shock when [the peer support] came to an end very abruptly." (Service User)

"I think having an internal support system for PSWs is vital...[And] I think it would be nice for service managers ...to share some of the challenges they face..." (PSW Manager)

Conclusion

In many ways, the findings of this review mirror the range of themes and issues that are discussed in the existing literature, particularly around the value of peer support and the uniqueness of the role. However, it is felt that this review has added to our understanding of this topic by:

- 1 exploring the experience of PSWs outside of a clinical-based setting;
- 2 ensuring that our internal values and practices are fit for purpose and supportive of the PSW role;
- 3 demonstrating the value that PSWs are having not only on those they directly support, but on service development;
- 4 focusing in on the managers perspective and the implications of managing PSW roles specifically; and
- 5 acknowledging the role that Rethink Mental Illness (as the employer) has in ensuring that the principle of reciprocity, which is fundamental in peer support, continues to feature in a paid peer support role (e.g. in terms of training, development and progression).

Recommendations



Service Development

- The benefits of including PSWs within new service models should be actively considered given the added value that PSWs can bring to a service. However, the purpose of involving PSWs should be properly considered on each occasion.
- There is value in having more than one PSW within a service both to increase their internal support network and to increase the diversity of PSWs available to support service users.
- Services that do not currently employ PSWs may benefit from considering how PSWs could be adding value to the current service offer.
- Services that employ PSWs should ensure that managers have the required time and capacity to adopt a very supportive management style. For example, this may mean that managers will only ever have a maximum number of PSWs to line manage at any one time (*what this number would be needs to be discussed) and some managers may identify additional training needs.
- An appropriate training and development budget should be allocated to services that employ PSWs to ensure the principle of reciprocity is fully adhered to. This should always include some form of peer support training (e.g. ImROC).
- Rethink Mental Illness should look at how we can standardise processes and ensure that all services are working in accordance with an agreed set of 'best practice' guides and/or frameworks (e.g. SLEF) to ensure an element of consistency around the implementation and development of the PSW role across the charity. This should include guidance around managing any safeguarding issues that may arise.
- Rethink Mental Illness should take some time to review the Health Education England Competence Framework for Mental Health Peer Support Workers (2020) to explore if/how it applies to our context and practice's.
- Ensure that organisational policies (e.g. the code of conduct) are fit for purpose and are suited to the PSW role (e.g. around disclosure).

Recruitment and selection

- Review how and where PSW roles are advertised, ensuring that what is meant by 'lived experience' is extremely clear in the advert. This could include directly targeting IPS Employment services (both our own and external).
- Review the interview process for PSWs to ensure that people are able to demonstrate the required qualities and skills needed to fulfil the role, whilst giving people the best possible chance to demonstrate these (*this may include adapting the more traditional interview process).

Training and development

- Ensure that all new PSWs attend some form of peer support training, as this forms a significant basis for their practice.
- Ensure that PSWs have access to a wide range of courses, over time, which will enhance their knowledge base in the mental health field and equip them to deal with the range of responsibilities and duties they may have (e.g. resourcing a mental health helpline). This recommendation is in-keeping with section 2 of the [Health Education England Competence Framework](#) ("Knowledge for peer support workers").
- Develop one or more 'progression and development routes' specifically for PSWs; this is likely to be based on the individual's needs and aspirations. Connecting with the work by [Melanie Ball and Syena Skinner](#) may be worth exploring here, as well as the [apprenticeship for Peer Workers](#).

Management and support

- Review the internal support networks available for PSWs and managers of PSWs. This may include identifying an alternative contact for PSWs outside of the line management relationship or considering the value of restorative supervision.
- Share best practice amongst managers about how to balance the more traditional management responsibilities with adopting a more supportive management role, whilst not undervaluing or discriminating against people with lived experience.
- Find ways to share best practice and develop a community of PSWs within the charity (e.g. making the most of Workplace and the Knowledge Hub).
- Find ways to include PSWs in co-producing services given their ability to draw both on their own lived experience as well as their knowledge and understanding of Rethink Mental Illness as an organisation.

Policy and influencing

- Reflect on the findings of this review to explore our position on the national drive to increase the PSW workforce. In particular, it may be useful to draw attention to the findings that suggest 1) the purpose of including PSWs should be clear at all times and 2) the employer has a role in ensuring that the principle of reciprocity is built into the employment relationship.
- Consider if and when additional research or evaluation may be warranted to build on the findings of this review. This may include: including unheard perspectives (e.g. staff who work alongside PSWs but do not have line management responsibilities and/or staff who have lived experience but are not a PSW); reviewing service user outcomes data; or increasing the amount of feedback received from service users who are supported by one or more PSWs.

We would like to thank all of the participants who have shared their views and experiences so openly. This report, and all the lessons learnt, would not have been possible without everyone's contribution.



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Leading the way to a better quality of life for everyone severely affected by mental illness.

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