

Putting the ‘lunatics’ in charge of the ‘asylum’? Handing over the keys of power to peer support volunteers

Alex Duffield

Alex Duffield describes a fascinating project at Bromley Mind to train and support people with lived experience of mental health difficulties – peer support volunteers – to run ‘drop-in’ sessions at their centres.

Key words: Peer support volunteers; Mental health; Lived experience; User-run services

Shortly after I had started work as the peer support co-ordinator at Bromley Mind, I was at a team meeting discussing the project to train and support people with lived experience of mental health difficulties to run ‘drop-in’ sessions at Bromley Mind’s centres. The staff team were thoughtful and supportive of the changes, but I had the feeling it was difficult for people to express their underlying concerns.

Then Min, a peer support volunteer at the meeting, put her finger on it when she said dryly: *‘Perhaps you are worried about putting the “lunatics” in charge of the “asylum”?’*. As a ‘peer’ she was able to challenge the staff team to really confront the difficult questions that might have been at the back of their minds. What if volunteers became unwell and broke confidentiality?

What about that peer-run project people had heard about that became unsafe, with people drinking or taking drugs in the centre? What if the volunteers started advocating forms of self-harm as ways of coping? Could a volunteer cope with someone who was aggressive and drunk? What if a volunteer ‘relapses’ because of the pressure?

Support structures

Fortunately, the peer support development group (PSDG) attended by peer volunteers like Min, was committed to the introduction of peer support sessions, and had been thinking through all these issues for several months. The group felt that the key to making user-run peer support sessions a success was

in getting the underpinnings and support structures right, and making sure that people were not set up to fail. As a result, they had set out the training that the volunteers would need, and developed the person specification and role description for the new post of peer support co-ordinator, who would be involved in the training, supporting and supervision of volunteers. The recruitment of a dedicated staff member was felt to be crucial to ensure that the project had the resources and support it needed to work.

Training

The PSDG then worked with Bromley Mind staff to develop a six-session introductory peer support training programme, which covered the following areas:

- context and journeys through mental health services
- the role of peer support volunteer and diversity
- active listening, communication and confidentiality
- dealing with challenging behaviour and emergencies
- health and safety and supervision
- recovery and community signposting.

The group also secured funding from National Mind for additional training from outside providers on each of these topics, as well as on first aid and food hygiene. Once they had completed the training, all the volunteers went through a formal application and interview process, and were then formed into teams of between two and four people to deliver the sessions.

Ensuring a safe space

These preparations also helped meet the main concerns of the service users attending open access 'drop-in' times in the day services. The first was that peer volunteers would not be able to ensure the 'safe space' so valued by those who attended. In response, the PSDG was able to point out that volunteers had been successfully running a twice-weekly evening group for a number of years and that, as people with personal experience of mental health issues, they were well placed to understand what would make the environment feel safe.

Benefits for volunteers

There was also a feeling among some that the volunteers were being exploited and pushing paid workers out of a job. The PSDG argued that high-quality training and support, as well as a pathway to other opportunities such as paid work, were the most important things they wanted to gain from the role. Many of the prospective volunteers did not feel ready to go straight into a paid role (and some were clear that they didn't want to do this at all) and were keen to give something back to the organisation.

Benefits for staff

The staff team welcomed the time that would be freed by the volunteers running open access sessions, because it gave them time to develop their new roles as support time and recovery workers. This meant engaging in more individual 'person-centred planning' to support individuals to identify and work towards goals important to them, and 'bridge building' support to help people access mainstream community activities and venues.

Managing anxieties

But, of course, each step forward was accompanied by increased anxiety, as well as a shared sense of excitement. In particular, I remember doubting whether we had been too ambitious when a number of the first group of volunteers suffered from serious physical health issues at the time of the first interview, and one volunteer had a relapse in her mental health shortly afterwards.

Containing anxieties about volunteers taking on the role is a real challenge as they are often hidden behind, what can appear to be, intractable reasons for not moving forward. I have had to learn and relearn the importance of resisting the urge to make decisions for the volunteers because of an understandable, but misguided, urge to protect them and me from the possibility of failure.

Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks have been one area that has often provoked a disproportionate amount of anxiety, perhaps because of a concern that past mistakes or illness will prevent them from taking on new responsible roles. A common question is: 'Why do I have to have a CRB to work with "vulnerable adults" when I am regarded as a "vulnerable adult" myself?'. In practice, very few relevant records have been uncovered and, for those that were, we have been able to make an appropriate risk assessment.

Evaluation

At the end of the pilot period, which ran from April to September 2008, Bromley Mind began to evaluate these changes. The evaluation has recently been published under the title, *Working Together: An Evaluation of the introduction of user-run peer support sessions and development of person-centred planning and bridge building support in Bromley Mind*. The results were very encouraging. Some key findings of the evaluation were:

- 96% of service users felt that the peer volunteers provided a safe space for service users, and were friendly and welcoming
- 60% reported a lasting improvement in being better able to deal with the challenges they face, which was particularly impressive as only 44% had received person-centred planning support
- 79% of people felt more confident overall as a result of the pilot

- 86% felt that they could make a valuable contribution to the services they were involved in.
- During the pilot period, there was an average attendance of 18 at the open access sessions during the day and 10 in the two evening sessions, figures that increased as the pilot progressed.

Successes

Harder to capture are the everyday successes experienced by the volunteers while carrying out the peer support work. For example, the volunteers that:

- overcame a phobia about unplugging and cleaning the dishwasher out because it was part of their role
- dealt firmly but sensitively with a service user in distress who was angry with them for being reminded to sign in
- listened to someone who felt overwhelmed by the decision of whether or not to keep an unexpected baby, giving her space to talk it through for herself and resisting the temptation to tell her what she 'ought' to do
- managed to stop drinking spirits as a way of self-medicating.

Old ways of working

Overall, the atmosphere of the sessions steadily became more lively and creative.

However, old ways of working are surprisingly hard to let go of. One example is that, some time after the first peer-run sessions when all staff were on leave, I gave volunteers the code to get into the centre, but not the keys to the office. This meant that they did not have access to the phone or the float of money for the till. I think that vague concerns about keys and money going missing had somehow held me back.

Of course, the real question was *how*, not *if*, we should hand the keys over to the volunteers, and after some discussion, we decided to install a key cupboard in the centre and all the volunteers signed for a key. Keys to the main safe and confidential information that the volunteers did not need for their duties were kept in a separate staff key cupboard in the office, so that it was clear who had responsibility for what.

This system is now working very well. I think that this shows how it is important to plan as much as possible in advance, but to recognise that some

developments also happen in an organic way when the time is right – in this case when the volunteers felt confident enough to assert their right to access to the office.

Making it work

To conclude, I think that some of the keys to ensuring a successful peer-run project developing within day services are:

- making sure that the 'peers' take a lead in developing the project and do so from the outset
- getting the 'underpinnings' in terms of structures, procedures, training and support right and spending time on these before you start
- making sure that there are appropriate and sufficient resources and support for the development to succeed
- acknowledging and valuing the existing informal 'peer support', which happens in all day services
- involving staff so that they feel they have ownership of any changes to their roles and that they are trained and supported to make these changes
- ensuring that the concerns of other people using the services are heard and taken into account
- adopting a robust 'recovery-based' approach that values 'lived experience' of mental health difficulties, which plans for future risk and sees setbacks as important learning points, rather than reasons for not continuing
- thinking in terms of what 'resources' 'peers' need to achieve their goals rather than trying to provide 'services' to cater for the needs of 'service users'.

Some key resources peer support volunteers need

Qualifications, training and supervision – clarity about the role, ongoing quality training and recognition for their hard work.

Keys – access to all the areas needed.

Cash and budgets – responsibility for handling money and making sure activities are supported by appropriate funding.

Kudos – Ensuring their roles are valued and given due recognition.

Contacts and information – giving volunteers access to all the information that they need.

For a copy of the *Working Together* evaluation report please contact alex.duffield@bromleymind.org.uk or visit www.bromleymind.org.uk.

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