

New ways of working in mental health services: a qualitative, comparative case study assessing and informing the emergence of new peer worker roles in mental health services in England

Steve Gillard,^{1*} Christine Edwards,² Sarah Gibson,¹ Jess Holley³ and Katherine Owen¹

¹Division of Population Health Sciences and Education, St George's, University of London, London, UK

²Kingston Business School, Kingston University, Kingston upon Thames, UK

³Joint Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, St George's, University of London, London, UK, and Kingston University, Kingston upon Thames, UK

*Corresponding author

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

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Peer workers are increasingly being employed in mental health services in England. Peer workers are people with personal experiences of mental health problems, employed to use those experiences to help other people. There is some research about the benefits of peer workers but most of it is from outside England. The aim of this research is to find out if that international evidence is useful in helping to develop new peer worker roles in England.

We interviewed 89 peer workers, coworkers, managers and service users about their views and experiences of the peer worker role. We interviewed people in 10 different mental health services, in NHS mental health trusts and voluntary sector organisations. Some peer workers were working on psychiatric wards, some in community services and others in projects for black and minority ethnic communities.

We found a lot of good practice in the projects we studied, although there was room for improvement around pay, training and management for peer workers. Some things were done better in the voluntary sector, where peer workers had been introduced a few years earlier. Making new roles fit with existing structures was a challenge in the NHS. The most important issues were around valuing and supporting peer workers to use their personal experiences of mental health problems. Organisations needed to be flexible and allow traditional ways of doing things to change if peer workers were to do their jobs well and stay well themselves.

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Editorial contact: nihredit@southampton.ac.uk

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