

A peer-delivered intervention to reduce harm and improve the well-being of homeless people with problem substance use: the SHARPS feasibility mixed-methods study

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Declared competing interests of authors: Catriona Matheson has received personal fees and non-financial support from Indivior (Richmond, VA, USA) and personal fees from Camurus AB (Lund, Sweden) outside the submitted work.

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

Dedication: This report is dedicated to Deano, one of the SHARPS participants, who sadly died on 10 November 2020. Deano will be remembered for his humour, his strength and his love for his dog, Bailey. He will be missed by many.

Published February 2022

DOI: 10.3310/WVVL4786

Plain English summary

The SHARPS feasibility mixed-methods study

Health Technology Assessment 2022; Vol. 26: No. 14

DOI: [10.3310/WVVL4786](https://doi.org/10.3310/WVVL4786)

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Plain English summary

People who are homeless have worse physical and mental health, and higher rates of drug/alcohol (substance) use, than the general population. For people experiencing these challenges, completely stopping the use of substances can be difficult. Harm reduction services can be useful in reducing risks. Approaches delivered by people who have had similar experiences (peers) are also promising. Some research has highlighted the importance of trusting relationships with service staff. More research is needed on how all of these should work with people who are homeless and who use substances.

This study consisted of four 'Peer Navigators' providing practical and emotional support to a group of people who are homeless and use substances to help improve their quality of life and health. The Peer Navigators had similar past experiences. The Peer Navigators were hired, and worked with around 15 'participants' each, for 2–12 months. They were based in third-sector homelessness residential and outreach services in Scotland and England.

The Peer Navigators developed relationships with participants. They worked with (and often accompanied) them to access services, such as substance use treatment, health care, housing and welfare/benefits. The Peer Navigators had access to a small budget to pay for essentials, including food and bus fares. The relationship between the Peer Navigators and participants was most important, so the Peer Navigators spent time getting to know and listening to them.

The aim was to understand if this intervention could be delivered to individuals experiencing these challenges. This study was not designed to know if the intervention worked; a larger study is needed for that. Despite some challenges, the participants were able to make positive changes to their lives, and they valued working with their Peer Navigator. The Peer Navigators enjoyed their roles and staff generally supported the intervention. The next step is to conduct more research to assess if this intervention can make a difference.

Health Technology Assessment

ISSN 1366-5278 (Print)

ISSN 2046-4924 (Online)

Impact factor: 4.014

Health Technology Assessment is indexed in MEDLINE, CINAHL, EMBASE, the Cochrane Library and Clarivate Analytics Science Citation Index.

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 16/153/14. The contractual start date was in May 2018. The draft report began editorial review in July 2020 and was accepted for publication in October 2020. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HTA editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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