



# HEADSUP EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT PROJECT

LEARNING FROM OUR PEER SUPPORT WORKER DELIVERY MODEL



HeadsUp is funded by the European Social Fund and the National Lottery Community Fund



## 1 BACKGROUND



When developing plans for our employment support project in 2017, we were aware that one of the biggest challenges we might face would be engaging our target audience. Whilst there were several other employment provisions available, we heard time and time again that many did not meet the needs of those who experienced anxiety, depression and low confidence (often referred to as common mental health problems). In these cases, it was a mental health challenge that was the biggest barrier in taking steps towards employment, training, or education.

We knew that providing opportunity to share experiences could help build trust between our future delivery team and participants. A peer support approach offered this opportunity, and we developed a model that centred around Peer Support Workers (PSWs) supporting our potential participants on a 1:1 basis, being a role model of how to move forwards.

This report shares some of our key learning from the past 5 years of the HeadsUp project which finishes delivery in December 2022 when funding ends. As an organisation we will use this to inform future funding opportunities to continue working within a PSW model. We also hope it could be of use to other organisations and networks who embark upon peer support focussed projects.

**HeadsUp is free to participants and Funded through the European Social Fund and National Lottery Community Fund's Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme.**



## 2 INTRODUCTION TO PEER SUPPORT



A mental health PSW utilises learning from their own recovery experiences to support other people to navigate their own journeys. In peer support everyone's views and experiences are equally valued, rather than anyone being more of an expert than others. It's designed to complement existing services and more clinical approaches.

There are different types of peer support, but they all aim to:

- bring people with shared experiences together to support each other
- provide somewhere to feel accepted and understood
- treat all experiences as being equally important
- provide the opportunity to give and receive support

The importance of this approach in a broad range of mental health recovery programmes is now widely accepted in the UK.

The NHS Long Term plan and subsequent Health Education England's (HEE) report [Stepping Forward to 2020/21: The Mental Health Workforce Plan for England](#) describes the longer-term strategy to expand the mental health workforce, including a significant increase in peer support roles. The [NHS Mental Health Implementation Plan 2019/20 – 2023/24](#) gives numbers to this ambition, with a plan to recruit an additional 4,730 Mental Health PSWs to the workforce over 5 years.

## 3 PEER SUPPORT WITHIN HEADSUP



HeadsUp was developed to address unmet need in primary care/statutory employment provision and supports people who are deemed 'fit for work' but suffer with anxiety, depression or low confidence and self-esteem (common mental health problems). Participants are unemployed or economically inactive (not working for reasons such as caring responsibilities, bringing up a family or living with and financially supported by others). We support people to take steps back into work or find appropriate training or education courses, as our participants find this significantly challenging.

The project is led by Enable East, part of Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust and delivered through a project partnership of NHS and voluntary sector organisations working across Essex, Southend and Thurrock. Our PSW's are based within [EPUT](#), [EmployAbility](#) and [Signpost](#).

### 3 CENTRAL STRANDS OF ACTIVITY;



Our holistic approach to support includes a peer support model with a person centred, goal orientated focus to build resilience and improve wellbeing. Through the lifetime of the project feedback has shown that this approach has been the centrepin to the successful outcomes we have seen for our participants.



Worked with more than **950** people

Exceeded our employment target by **81%**

Life satisfaction of our participants has **doubled** during their time with HeadsUp

**85%** participants reported an improvement in their overall wellbeing

## 4 HEADSUP PEER SUPPORT MODEL



In developing our PSW support model in 2017, research identified several respected existing models and best practise. We incorporated recommendations and experiences shared in ImROC (Implementing Recovery through Organisational Change) papers '**Theory and Practice of Peer Support Workers**' and '**A Practical Guide to Implementation**' in our own delivery framework, following the 8 core principles of these respected papers.



Our team of PSWs each have their own lived experiences of mental health and unemployment bringing an important wealth of experience to the role. The uniqueness of each of their journeys along with their compassion, empathy, resilience, listening and care when working with participants, provides a positive environment impossible to offer without PSW involvement.

It's inevitable that the focus of each PSW/participant relationship is completely unique based around the perceived and real challenges faced by each participant. Whilst the HeadsUp model is goal orientated these goals are very much bespoke to the individual so the depth of work undertaken and the length of time that a PSW, and other members of the delivery teams might work with a participant, is entirely dependent on need.

## 5 THE IMPACT OF PEER SUPPORT - THE PSW PERSPECTIVE



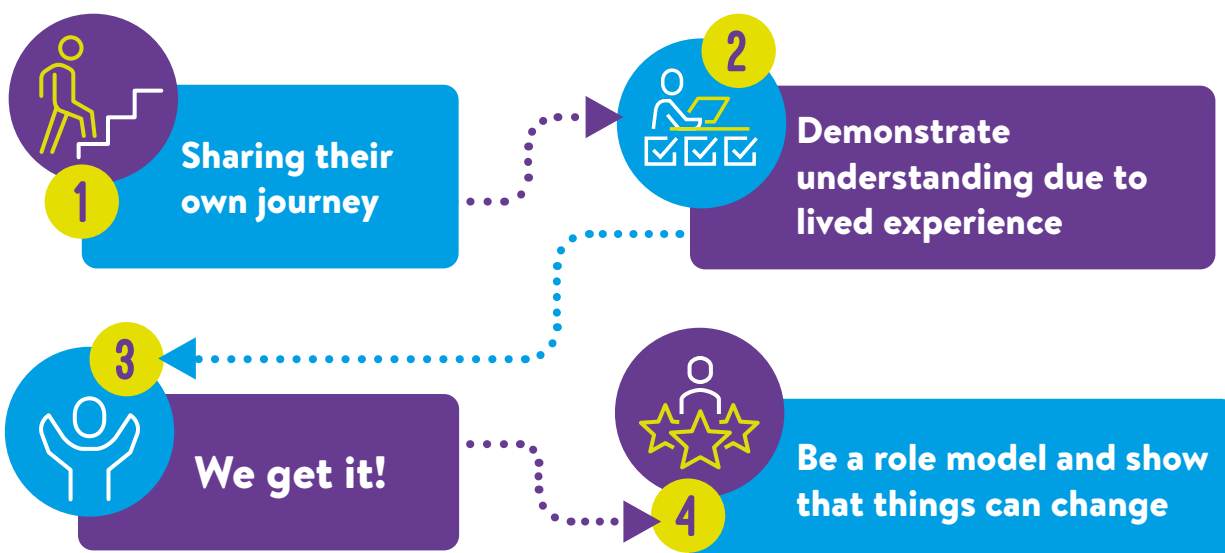
Once the project launched in 2017, it quickly became clear just how important the PSW lived experience of common mental health problems was on impacting the formation of a positive and trusted relationship with their participants. All our participants suffer from one or more common mental health problem such as anxiety, low self-esteem or confidence and depression. The shared recognition of the impact of these on the participants themselves and also their wider lives is invaluable.

Our PSWs know how important it is that they understand what participants are talking about (especially when trying to describe some of the effects of depression/anxiety). This can make the difference between being able to move forward with their lives or not.

One PSW shared that her participants seem to sense that she truly understands how they're feeling, and she's felt this was because she is providing a human to human experience, not expert to client. And, many of our PSWs have said that sharing parts of their own story resonates with their participants as their own positive end results seem to provide a calming effect. One PSW shared:

“ WE CAN UNDERSTAND AND EMPATHISE HOW DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY CAN ALTER OUR PERCEPTION OF OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD AND HOW IT CAN CONTAMINATE OUR THOUGHT PROCESSES. I BELIEVE THIS UNDERSTANDING IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THE ROLE. ”

### KEYS TO PSW IMPACT



One of our PSWs has lived with and managed their own anxiety for over 25 years, and still succeeded in having a career and a fulfilling life, they believe this is achievable for everyone who's open to working towards it.

“ I USED MY OWN EXPERIENCE WHEN WORKING WITH A PARTICIPANT WHO HAD LOST THEIR JOB HAVING PREVIOUSLY WORKED HARD TO ACHIEVE THEIR SUCCESS. **THEY WERE FACED WITH REDUNDANCY AND THE ASSOCIATED FEELINGS OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY.** I FELT ABLE TO SUPPORT THEM BY TALKING THROUGH THE PARTICIPANT'S FEELINGS AND THE IMPACT ON THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AS I'D ALSO LEFT A CAREER WHICH I'D WORKED VERY HARD TO ACHIEVE. I WAS ABLE TO TALK THROUGH THE FEELING OF LOSS THAT THE PARTICIPANT HAD EXPERIENCED: LOSS OF ROLE, LOSS OF STATUS, LOSS OF RESPECT, LOSS OF INCOME AND LIFESTYLE AND HOW THAT FELT MOVING FORWARD. ”

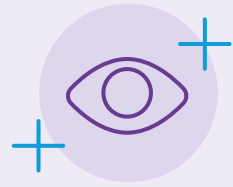


The PSW reflected that sometimes we're afraid to say something out loud for fear of judgement or ridicule and to have someone that really comprehends and has a true empathy can be one of the best supports.

“ I (THE PSW) FELT THAT MY ROLE WAS HELPING THIS PARTICIPANT, WITHOUT BIAS, TO WEIGH UP THE PROS AND CONS OF CONTINUING IN THEIR CAREER WITH MONEY, STATUS, FAMILIARITY, OR TO LOOK AT A ROLE CLOSER TO HOME, REDUCED HOURS, LESS MONEY BUT MORE TIME FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILY. **THE PARTICIPANT LATER FED BACK THAT THE FACT THAT THEY KNEW THAT I HAD EXPERIENCED A SIMILAR SITUATION AND FEELINGS HAD HELPED THEM MORE THAN ANYTHING.** ”



## 6 THE IMPACT OF PEER SUPPORT - THE PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



The true voice of the impact of our PSWs is that of the participant, and the strength of this voice is consistently evidenced in the feedback of the hundreds of participants who have worked with us to date. There is a great sense of non-judgement which gives our participants the confidence to share their concerns and anxieties with PSWs, along with discussing their progress and employment goals.

**“YOU KNOW YOU ARE COMING AT THESE PROBLEMS AS EQUALS, YOU KNOW THERE WAS A LOT OF ‘A SIMILAR THING HAPPENED TO ME’. YOU WEREN’T TALKING TO SOMEONE WITH TEXTBOOK EXPERIENCE, MORE LIFE EXPERIENCE, YOU KNOW?”**

Several participants comment on our PSWs’ ability to focus and build on the positive no matter how small, in turn helping to revisit the more difficult subjects perhaps a little later down the line.

**“ SHE JUST BUILT MY CONFIDENCE UP, BY CHATTING ABOUT ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING. BEING QUITE SILLY HELPED. WE WOULD LAUGH. IT WAS LIKE TALKING TO A FRIEND, NOT SOMEONE YOU DIDN’T KNOW AND NOT SOMEONE WHO WAS GOING TO JUDGE YOU. SHE IS PHENOMENAL ABOUT FINDING THAT LITTLE THREAD AND WORKING WITH IT, A LITTLE THREAD OF COTTON OR A SPARK OF SOMETHING.”**

**“ KNOWING SOMEONE ELSE HAS BEEN WHERE YOU ARE AND COME OUT OF THE OTHER SIDE IS PRICELESS. YOU FEEL SO HOPELESS STANDING IN A DARK TUNNEL AND HAVING SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN THERE WHO KNOWS THE WAY IS ABSOLUTELY PRICELESS.”**





# OUR PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCE

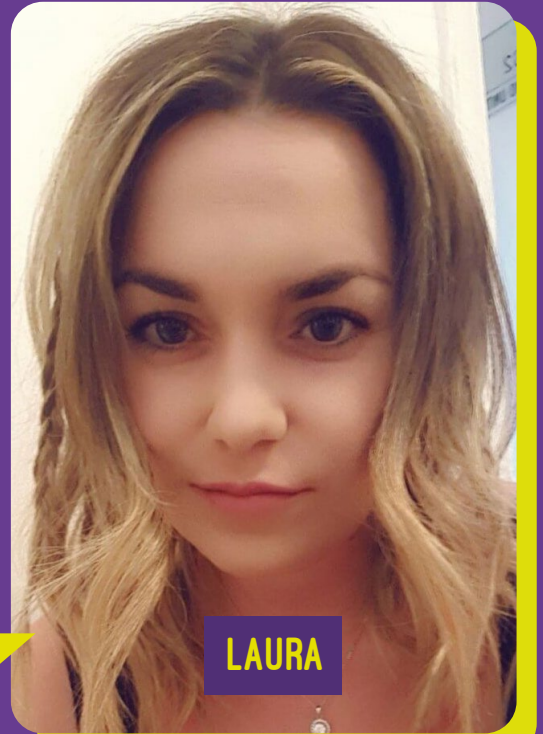


## LAURA

Her PSW helped Laura to face her anxiety about meeting or seeing people by slowly changing their meeting place from the same quiet café with a table tucked away to meeting in different cafés. Laura described how being pushed out of her comfort zone in a safe and supported way enabled her confidence and self-esteem to grow.

Since taking these steps Laura's family and friends have all noticed the difference in her, seeing her get back to her old ways, her confidence growing, and she even found herself smiling more. Laura said she is feeling:

**MORE CONFIDENT, (MY) SELF-ESTEEM IMPROVED AND I CAN NOW PUSH MYSELF MORE AND GROW AS A PERSON. HEADSUP MADE ME FEEL SUPPORTED AND COMFORTED BY BEING SUPPORTED BY SOMEONE WHO TRULY UNDERSTANDS.**



LAURA

## SUZANNE

Suzanne's confidence has grown, and she is now volunteering as a receptionist and has a Saturday job in a Barber's, which involves meeting and greeting people. She is quite rightly proud of these achievements as she has come a long way from where she was. She is now able to talk to people face to face and make conversation, accomplishments that are "pretty special".

**IF IT WASN'T FOR MY PSW I WOULDN'T BE WHERE I AM, I HAVE SO MUCH RESPECT AND ADMIRATION FOR HER... FINDING SOMEONE THAT HAS BEEN THROUGH SIMILAR SITUATIONS GIVES YOU HOPE... AND A GLIMMER AT THE END OF A VERY LONG TUNNEL.**



SUZANNE

Suzanne explained how hearing about someone's lived experiences and challenges and then seeing their career and achievements gives those in similar situations hope. Suzanne went on to explain how those that have not had a personal experience of mental health problems can empathise but can never truly understand, whereas our HeadsUp Peer Support Workers can both empathise and understand.

## 7 BEING A PEER SUPPORT WORKER



We have seen our PSWs all individually grow in confidence since they've started working with HeadsUp, each having their own journeys to where they are now. Interestingly many share that whilst helping others improves their own mental health, supporting participants can also act as a reminder of the steps they need to take to maintain their own wellbeing.

Many of our PSWs are not now in the career that they originally trained for due to their own mental health experiences and the personal decisions they have made in their own journeys back to the workplace. The PSW role has given them the opportunity to reaffirm that they still have important skills which they can now adapt and apply to helping others.

One PSW shared that she felt that it's important to remember how much she values being able to work even though she struggles at times. She said it can also inspire her to encourage her participants. Her own experience demonstrates that it's possible to work whilst feeling low and that it can often have a positive impact once you get going as it really helps with self-esteem and confidence.



**Our PSWs reflect that it's the successful outcomes of our HeadsUp participants that are the key to their enjoyment of work.**

**“ I SOMETIMES PUNCH THE AIR WITH A MIXTURE OF EXCITEMENT AND PRIDE FOR THEM. I FEEL HONOURED TO BE PART OF THEIR JOURNEY AND TO WITNESS THEIR POSITIVE CHANGE AND PERSONAL GROWTH. ”**

**And for some PSWs, the growth and support that they experience in their role has had such a significant impact that they have felt able to move on and progress their own career.**

## PREVIOUS PSWs REFLECT



**Katy Monk is a qualified teacher who began to experience anxiety and depression during a period when she was not working. She decided to use her skills and applied to be a PSW with HeadsUp where she had some amazing outcomes with participants whilst rebuilding her own confidence in the workplace.**

“ It sounds simple, but it was very important for my own recovery to get some praise and recognition when I'd done things that were hard - sometimes just getting out of bed and showing up to something when I really didn't feel like it. I think it's important to acknowledge these seemingly insignificant moments and congratulate people for fighting against their thoughts. I guess if you hadn't been through a similar experience, you wouldn't be aware how challenging these little things can be and then wouldn't be able to give the participant you are supporting the recognition they deserve.

[My job as a PSW] I loved it! I got such a boost from helping people and being out and about in society. I had hidden myself away for quite some time and I couldn't quite believe that I was now buzzing around Essex to places I'd never been before completely independently. I still had nerves and excess adrenaline, but I was able to overcome it for my participants. Anytime I went somewhere new or spoke up in a meeting I would congratulate myself too. The difference in me was so profound and so sudden that I couldn't quite believe it.

[Katy left HeadsUp after 18 months to go back into teaching] Prior to working with HeadsUp I would never have considered going back to teaching - my confidence was shot to pieces. Thanks to all the tips I'd learned through coaching HeadsUp participants, I bossed the application and the interview and got the job! It felt as though all the stars had aligned to bring me to that point and I will always be eternally grateful for the support that I received from HeadsUp. ”

**Dave Cooper is one of our current Delivery Partner Coordinators and has the full experience of the HeadsUp programme having initially enrolled as a participant, needing the help of a PSW to take steps along his own journey. Here he reflects on his experience of working with, and as, a Peer Support Worker.**



“ Due to physical health issues, I hadn’t worked for a long time. Although this was resolved through surgery, a split from a long-term partner left me in a pretty low place. Despite deciding to make a change by going back into education, I had to withdraw from my university course due to poor mental health. Social anxiety and depression prevented me from returning despite seeking a variety of support.

I tried various things such as volunteering to help my confidence and get work experience, but I was worried that I was unemployable because of the gap in my employment history and my extreme social anxiety. Feeling hopeless was making me feel really depressed and my anxiety levels were through the roof!

I then found HeadsUp and enrolled. My Peer Support Worker was so nice, she really made me feel that I had lots of strengths. She helped create a CV and find a job, supporting me through the application and interview. Just getting an interview made me feel more confident even though the process made me anxious, but with her support I attended.

I was offered the job after the second interview! Working has made such a difference to my life, when I had the chance to apply for a PSW role myself it made sense. My own journey taught me things I could pass on to others such as managing my mental health through meditation, mindfulness and CBT.

As a HeadsUp PSW I worked with participants as my own PSW had with me, and I felt proud to be able to contribute. Witnessing participant journeys and the impact my support could have ultimately catalysed progress to my current role as PSW team Coordinator.

I could never have predicted how much HeadsUp would help me. The amazing support I had from my PSW without whose encouragement I would never have applied for a PSW role myself, or been able to cope with the transition into working again. Peer Support Workers of this nature are fundamental to the impact of this kind of employment support. My PSW and colleagues will never know how grateful I am to them and how thankful I am to have met them. ”



## 8 MANAGEMENT SUPPORT FOR PEER SUPPORT ROLES



In creating roles specifically for colleagues who face their own mental health challenges, comes a responsibility for management to ensure that the PSWs own wellbeing is top of their priority list. There must be considerations around managing boundaries and of course regular and holistic support and line management.

Management should include honesty and recognition that our PSWs are living with their own challenges and that these can and do, emerge at times. Not surprisingly, this looks very different for every individual PSW, so support provided must be flexible to reflect the different needs of that individual. We've found that many of our PSWs benefit from working part time hours, with the space this provides giving opportunity to look after their own wellbeing.

But isn't this all just what good line management should be like anyway?

There are three types of supervision frameworks commonly used – clinical, line management and academic. Our PSWs are provided with supervision in two ways: through Project Coordinator's line management, which aims to ensure service effectiveness and delivery are addressed and enhanced; and clinical supervision.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CLINICAL SUPERVISION

Clinical supervision for PSWs is conducted by a mental health professional to provide a "safe space" for discussion. Given that individuals have lived experience of mental health issues, there is a need to support them and explore their wellbeing in a supportive and confidential setting.

This type of supervision encourages reflection upon individual practice through group discussions that explore challenges and how they might affect PSWs. The role of the PSW is independent and therefore can be quite isolating, so coming together as a group at these times also helps those working remotely to feel connected and avoid stress that can be related to isolation. Subject matter is always led by the PSWs themselves, with everyone being involved in varying degrees with each topic.

#### PSW Katie Marsh shares:

“ THERE IS WARMTH AND A SENSE OF BELONGING WITHIN THE GROUP AND I ALSO FEEL HELD IF I AM STRUGGLING WITH ANYTHING OR EVEN IF I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE SOMETHING VERY POSITIVE. I VALUE VERY MUCH THE FEEDBACK FROM MY PEERS. ”

Having lived experience can be helpful to participants, but it can also be difficult for PSWs to recognise when there is a transference or counter-transference of emotions between Participant and PSW. For people with lived experience this can lead to emotional entanglement with participants. Supervision seeks to help the PSW regulate their emotions in the relationship and give them insight into possible challenges/ issues arising from their work.

## Lou Brewster – Clinical Supervision Lead:

“THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF WORKING WITH PARTICIPANTS ON PSWS CANNOT BE UNDERESTIMATED AND SUPERVISION SEEKS TO ASSESS HOW EVERYONE’S WELLBEING IS AFFECTED BY THEIR WORK. PEERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE EACH OTHER IN RECOGNISING THEIR CURRENT MENTAL HEALTH STATE AND SHARE POSSIBLE IDEAS/STRATEGIES TO HELP.”

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SUPPORTING PSWs

It would be unwise in exploring the huge benefits of the Peer Support Model to ignore that there are also challenges that go alongside.

All projects need to accommodate staff sickness, and when roles are front facing with vulnerable participants it is vital to have a contingency plan to allow for least interruption to the continuity of support. We found that our PSWs did not present with increased patterns of sickness, but that it was more likely that if an individual was off it was relating to their mental health, and that subsequently time away was for a longer period. This of course impacts the participants but can also impact the remaining PSWs in that team if they need to pick up additional work.

The empathy held by all our PSWs is so important to their positive impact with participants. It’s also the reason why some have found it difficult to step back at times and acknowledge that they have provided a participant with as much support as HeadsUp could offer.

Coordinators found that their biggest challenge when managing the PSW teams was to be find a balance between supporting participants, supporting the PSWs’ sense of autonomy and experience, and needing to meet requirements of a target driven project.

### POSITIVE MANAGEMENT PROVISION

Support/supervision planning with focus on PSWs’ health and wellbeing

Inclusion of both line management and clinical supervision for PSWs

Presence of contingency plans in case of staff sickness

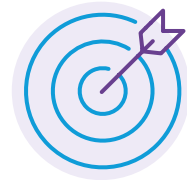
Allow PSWs to focus on what they are good at

Recognise PSWs as experts in their area of work and feed into project development

Have supported processes in place so PSWs can step back from participants when required



## 9 AN IMPORTANT FUTURE FOR THE PEER SUPPORT WORKER MODEL



In reaching the last year of funded delivery for HeadsUp we can reflect upon our own learning and align that with the current needs of society. Sadly, following the pandemic, the number of people experiencing common mental health problems is growing. With a direct relationship between mental health and unemployment, the need for projects such as HeadsUp is greater now than ever before.

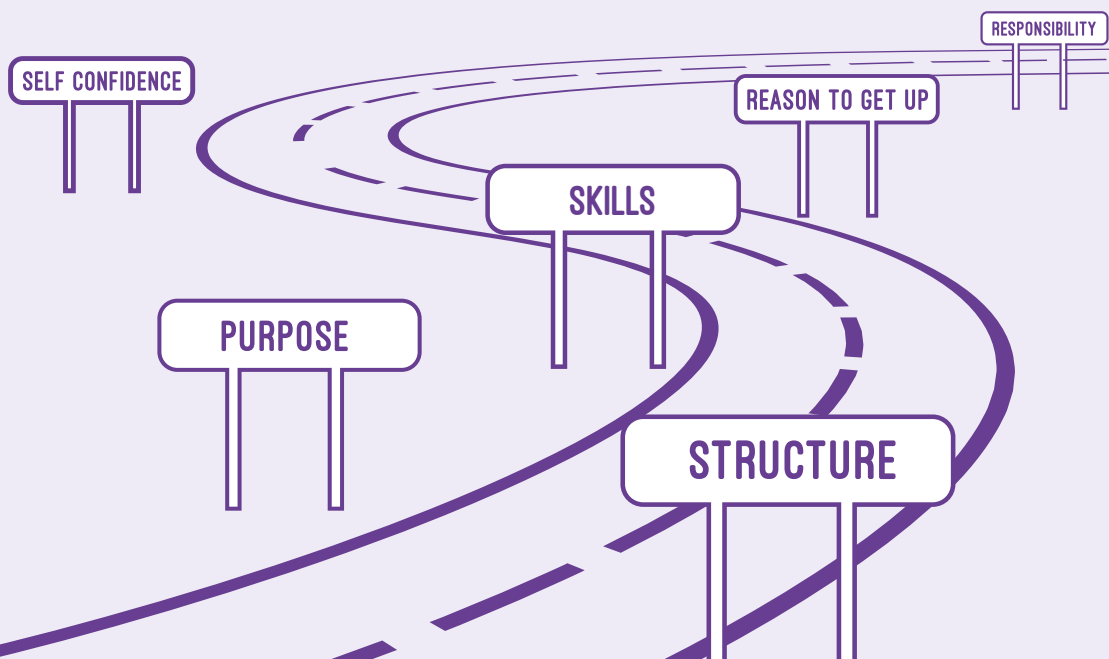
Our experience of working with a goal centred approach, offered by a Peer Support Worker led support structure has clearly demonstrated the positive impact this can have. Indeed, our experience has shown that this has had the greatest impact on positive engagement with our target audience.

Outcomes can be seen not just in the numbers of participants moving into employment or training, but in those who exit the project armed with newly developed practical employability skills giving them the confidence to job search independently. Of equal (or perhaps even greater) importance, is their new awareness of the importance of their own wellbeing and personal resilience to life's challenges, developed through their work with their PSW. Collectively this learning and progress can have a huge impact on both the participants themselves and the family and friends around them.

We are seeking funding to continue to share what we have learnt with those who are unemployed or economically inactive beyond the end of our existing funding December 2022. We also recognise the important part that our experience and findings can play in the NHS Long Term Plan to increase the mental health workforce through, in part, increases in peer support roles.



**OUR PEER SUPPORT WORKERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IS WHAT SETS US APART FROM BEING JUST 'ANOTHER EMPLOYMENT PROJECT'.**





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