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Evaluation of European Social Fund peer mentoring Wales: Summary



Evaluation of ESF Peer Mentoring Wales

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Executive summary

This report presents a process and outcome evaluation of the Peer Mentoring Wales (PMW) project. The project, overseen by the Welsh Government, has the primary aim of assisting ex-substance misusers across Wales to enter employment or further learning. It was funded by the European Social Fund initially for a four-year period (October 2009 to September 2013), funding subsequently being extended until March 2014. PMW has been delivered throughout by six different providers, all of which have developed links with employers and employment agencies, trained some clients as peer mentors to support others, and offered a variety of courses, opportunities for volunteering or work experience, and other activities to raise motivation and prepare people for work.

The evaluation is based on analysis of a variety of datasets, principally a Welsh Government (WG) database which logs information from providers' three-monthly statistical returns; a sample of 178 casefiles from across Wales; one-year samples of both paper-based registration forms and outcome forms from all providers; and interviews with over 100 people, including WG officials, provider agencies' managers and staff, peer mentors and clients, partner organisations and other stakeholders. The researchers also attended many delivery team meetings and other events which gave them the opportunity to engage in informal conversations about the project.

Between October 2009 and September 2013, 9,627 clients were registered as participants in the project. Based on those registered up to June 2013, just over two-thirds were male, over three-quarters were between 25 and 54, and the great majority were White European. Only 30 per cent had qualifications at NQF Level 2 (i.e. GCSE level) or above and at least a third had none at all. Well over a third had been dependent on substances (most commonly alcohol, followed by heroin) for most of their adult lives, and most of these had been unemployed for a similar period. Although the project was originally designed as a post-treatment intervention, in reality a significant minority of clients were continuing to use substances or experiencing relapses. Even so, over half of all participants expressed strong motivation to find work.

Although there was not always a clear divide, there were some broad differences of approach between providers. Some focused strongly on activities directly related to getting clients into jobs, for example by appointing staff with employment expertise or forging close links with employers who were willing to take on people with a history of substance misuse. Others considered it important to build clients' self-confidence and address other problems before nudging them towards applying for work.

On average, clients remained with the project for about seven months. Entries on the Welsh Government database suggest that during this period they took part in around 24 hours of formal activities. However, data from our sample of casefiles indicate that this seriously under-represents the amount of work actually undertaken. Here it was found that on average participants had engaged in 110 hours of activities, the largest proportion of this spent volunteering. The average time spent in individual face-to-face contact with peer mentors or staff was 23 hours.

The path followed by participants after registration varied between providers, but the most common pattern was for them first to take one or more short non-accredited courses (which was helpful as a gentle introduction to the service, as well as allowing the provider to claim an 'other positive outcome'), followed by allocation to a key worker and/or peer mentor to assess the case and make an action plan. At this stage, depending on their needs and aims, some would take more courses to enhance their social skills or confidence levels, some would start training for a qualification relevant to their planned area of employment, others would begin volunteering or work experience, and still others would start applying for jobs. A minority, too, would begin to train as a peer mentor.¹

The researchers identified three broad categories into which most participants could be loosely placed. Each of these tended to be dealt with somewhat differently by the providers. The largest group (at least 40 per cent of all participants) consisted of people who had few qualifications, long-standing substance misuse problems and/or

¹ One service provider, CRI, began its delivery of peer mentoring with a different operating model, whereby *all* participants (who were more carefully selected than elsewhere) trained as peer mentors. However, this changed later in the funding period owing to concerns about failure to achieve target numbers of participants.

had been unemployed most of their lives. Many of these were not considered 'work ready' and stayed with the project for long periods, engaging in numerous individual mentoring sessions and interventions to build their confidence, skills and motivation. The second group (perhaps 20 per cent) was made up of people who had qualifications and a past history of regular employment, but had been out of work for some time due to acquiring a drug or alcohol habit. These often needed specific kinds of assistance in order to gain a particular qualification or find a certain kind of job, and tended to stay only until this had been achieved (or not). The third group (estimated at 15 per cent) contained people from a variety of backgrounds who were interested in working to help other substance misusers. These mainly undertook the peer mentor training course, and went on to work as volunteer or paid peer mentors, in some cases eventually moving on to similar posts elsewhere.

Clients selected or choosing to become peer mentors underwent thorough training, mainly through a standard eight-week course supplemented by individual supervision. Once qualified, most began work in a voluntary capacity, but when vacancies became available could move into a paid post. The turnover of such posts varied, some providers aiming to move people on after a set period (eg one year) while others encouraged them to stay for as long as they wished. The larger organisations were also able to offer posts in other branches or with different client groups. However, we do not know what proportion of all peer mentors went on to sustainable longer term employment in this or other fields.

The providers achieved almost all the four-year targets set for the project, which had been revised downwards in 2010 in the light of changed circumstances (especially the economic recession and the advent of the Work Programme). Ten per cent of clients had entered employment; nine per cent had entered further learning; 14 per cent had gained a qualification; and 65 per cent had achieved at least one 'other positive outcome' - most often, completing a course or volunteering (the above figures are not mutually exclusive). Evidence from the local casefile sample shows that it is common for individuals to complete several different courses or volunteer more than once. As only one outcome in each category can be entered on to the database for each person, many positive outcomes remain unrecorded.

Unsurprisingly, the types of client most likely to gain paid employment were those falling into the second broad category of participant defined earlier – i.e. those who on entry to the project had some qualifications and/or previous work experience, were now abstinent from substance misuse, and were strongly motivated to seek work. Most of those people in this category who did find work achieved this quite quickly and without close engagement with the project (those who failed to find work also exiting quite quickly). Importantly, however, the majority of all employment outcomes were achieved through considerable investment of time and resources. Among those who eventually found a job, the average time spent with the project was 8.4 months, involving 55 hours of activities (including course attendance, training, mentoring sessions and volunteering). This clearly suggests that providers worked with many difficult clients and did not engage in ‘cherry picking’ in order to meet their targets.

In addition to employment-related outcomes, our casefile analysis found evidence of other important gains: in particular, there were mentions of reductions in substance misuse in almost a quarter of cases. There was also strong qualitative evidence of increases in self-confidence, motivation and general well-being.

Finally, clients’ views of having been peer mentored were overwhelmingly positive, with frequent mention of the value of advice and support from someone who has ‘been there and understands’ but has managed to overcome their own problems and rebuild their life. Peer mentors, too, generally felt that they had benefited greatly from their work, both by boosting their self-confidence and enhancing their longer term job prospects.

The main findings of the evaluation can be summarised as follows:

- Overall, in terms of helping people into jobs, results were at or above the level achieved by other similar ESF funded projects. Moreover, the results compare very favourably with early outcome figures from the DWP’s Work Programme, although direct comparisons are difficult to make.

- While initially conceived as a ‘post-treatment’ project, PMW took on many clients who were still using substances and/or prone to relapse. Most of these were not ‘job ready’, needing lengthy preparatory work on other problems, thereby rendering the original employment targets unrealistic. It is to the providers’ credit that they not only invested much time in helping such clients to progress (avoiding any temptation to ‘cherry pick’), but still met nearly all the (revised) targets.
- Most of the relevant evidence suggests that the task of helping ex-substance misusers into work is better led by substance misuse experts than employment experts. However, there are major benefits in working closely with the latter, either in formal partnerships or by taking some on as staff.
- Peer mentoring is highly successful in terms of engaging and retaining clients. It also benefits the mentor as much as, if not more than, the ‘mentee’. However, while some peer mentors went on to obtain related forms of employment in the third sector and elsewhere, and while the advent of ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ (the imminent large-scale commissioning of probation services from private and third sector bidders)² may create more opportunities of this kind, it is unclear how many such jobs the market can sustain in the longer term.
- The formal data collection system for the project served the narrow purpose of monitoring official outcomes, but was poorly designed from the point of view of evaluation. Basic data about clients’ histories were lacking. As only limited numbers of outcomes could be recorded per individual, it also failed to reflect fully the large volume of positive results which were actually achieved.

Seven recommendations are made on the basis of the findings:

1. Every effort should be made to secure the continued existence of the Peer Mentoring project, which has not only been successful in helping well over

² See <http://www.justice.gov.uk/transforming-rehabilitation>.

1,700 ex-substance misusers into paid employment or further education, but has helped several thousand others to make significant progress along their journey towards a more fulfilled and productive life.

2. The service can be regarded as an effective means of filling an important gap that has been identified in the implementation of the Substance Misuse Strategy for Wales (2008) – namely, the provision of effective post-treatment support services, or ‘aftercare’ – and consideration should be given to possible ways of funding it as such.
3. The service should continue to be led by providers with expertise in substance misuse, but it would benefit from formal partnerships (and ideally co-location) with employment agencies or experts, to whom clients can be referred when appropriate. Efforts should also be made to consolidate and increase formal links with employers who are able and willing to offer a regular flow of opportunities for clients.
4. Thought should be given to creating clearer ‘routes through the project’ for those who train as peer mentors, balancing the need to develop the careers of existing peer mentors with that of freeing space to take on those newly trained. This should include attention to career development from an early stage, so that those moving on do so with firm plans and preparations for the future.
5. Closer attention should be paid to the risk of negative consequences arising from the rule that participants must officially ‘exit’ the project when they obtain employment elsewhere: it was generally agreed to be counter-productive to remove support from people at the moment they get a job – a time at which they may actually need *more* support. The advent of the Employment Support Scheme (ESS)³ has alleviated this problem, but it merits further attention.

³ This is an ESF funded project aimed at supporting people in work who have substance misuse problems, as well as assisting employers with training and advice (see, for example, <http://www.drugaidcymru.com/services/default/employment-support-service.aspx>)

6. The research found that the project recruits at least three broadly distinct client groups: those with few qualifications and long histories of substance misuse and unemployment; those with good work records interrupted by episodes of addiction; and those (of varied background) who are keen to become peer mentors with the hope of later employment in a related field. This suggests that if the peer mentoring model is redesigned in the future, it should include greater clarity about who it is for and should incorporate different approaches appropriate to groups with different backgrounds, needs and aims.

7. In any future all-Wales project for which it is planned to commission an evaluation, the researchers should be appointed at an early enough stage to have a meaningful input into the design of the data recording systems.