

# Online peer support

---

Learning summary

## About peer support

While there are many definitions of peer support, they all have similarities and speak to common core values. Generally, in peer support people draw on shared personal experiences, characteristics or circumstances to support each other to improve their health and wellbeing. Peer support is a mutual approach in which people both give and receive support.

There is growing evidence of the impact of peer support and about what makes peer support effective. National Voices hosts the [Peer Support Hub](#) – a repository of quality evidence and learning on peer support.

In 2019 the [NHS Long Term Plan](#) made a commitment to Universal Personalised Care for people with long-term conditions. The NHS Personalised Care model has six core components including supported self-management. The plan for delivering Personalised Care recognises that peer support is a key way of supporting people to manage their own health and wellbeing and commits to enabling more people with long-term conditions to access peer support. However, in practice access to peer support is patchy.

Through the Covid-19 pandemic, as many people with long-term conditions were asked to shield, and many more saw vital support cut back or inaccessible, the role of peer support in enabling to cope became even more apparent. Groups and organisations rapidly adapted their delivery to try to continue to support people. Many opted to move their peer support offers online.

In November 2020 National Voices hosted a webinar to share learning from this phase of rapid adaptation and to draw out key lessons about the opportunities and challenges of online peer support.

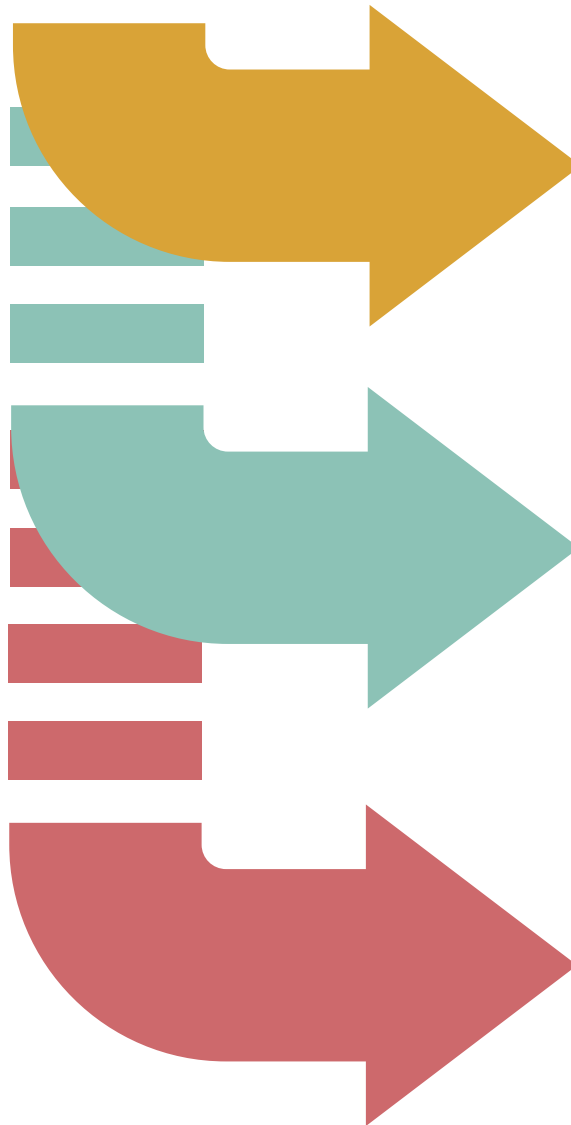
## Online peer support

**In November 2020 we brought experts together to think about their experiences of providing peer support online.**

For many groups and organisations, the Covid-19 pandemic prompted a rapid shift towards online peer support.

Some organisations accelerated pre-existing plans to develop ways of engaging online and others adapted rapidly from a standing start.

However, we also recognised that some models of peer support have always been based around online engagement.



### Always online:

- Bespoke online forums and chat rooms
- Facebook groups (also Instagram groups etc)
- Some peer support meetings for very dispersed communities (e.g. rare conditions) – using Zoom etc

### Moved online:

- Peer support groups who usually meet face to face – mainly using Zoom, but some smaller groups using WhatsApp etc
- Activities such as exercise classes, peer training and skills sharing
- One-to-one meetings with peer support workers / buddies

### New adaptations/ hybrids:

- Using WhatsApp groups to stay in touch between meetings
- Groups who met face to face before the pandemic setting up WhatsApp groups or email distributions to keep in touch
- Small groups meeting online and sharing notes and updates via email or phone

**We recognised that online peer support was not a panacea and is not the solution for everyone.**



**Some are more likely to be excluded from online engagement**



**There are barriers to people getting online**

***In response***

**Many groups were seeking “low tech” or “no tech” alternatives to online support**

# Models that were always online

Different models have different pros and cons

## Online forums



### Positives

- Potential to remain anonymous
- Easier to take time to step back, think and formulate thoughts
- No pressure to contribute
- Easy to engage at a time that suits you
- Can come for information and stay for companionship
- Can be easier to be frank or open when there is more distance



### Negatives

- Not always very user friendly
- Need to trust the platform – there can be concerns about privacy
- Requires careful moderation / can be unsafe if not moderated
- Cliques form and it can be hard to join in

## Facebook (and other social media) groups



### Positives

- Easier to take time to step back, think and formulate thoughts
- No pressure to contribute
- People are often on these platforms anyway and can pick up bits of support as they go
- Can be easier to be frank or open when there is more distance
- Easier to engage at whatever time works for you



### Negatives

- These groups often lack structure
- Can be risky as many are not moderated
- Limited reach with certain demographics (depending on the platform)

# Models of support that have (mainly) moved online

Different models have different pros and cons

## Peer support groups online (e.g. via Zoom)



### Positives

- Work well to keep established groups going
- More accessible to people living in remote areas
- Open to people who face barriers to travel
- Can be more accessible to people who experience social anxiety
- Allow people to come together across wider geographies
- Can see people's faces and feel more connected
- There are options to turn your camera off / join with audio only if you are less comfortable (if groups allow this)
- Easier for those who are time poor – as no travel time / easier to dip in and out



### Negatives

- Harder to replicate purely social elements
- Conversations need more management – as people can't talk over one another
- Harder to read non-verbal cues
- Harder to allow people to connect in smaller groups
- Harder to create a "safe space" – as some people may be joining from places in which they feel unsafe, or may feel uncertain because they are connecting into others' homes
- Can be difficult to support people who become distressed during meetings without the option to offer a hand on the shoulder
- Leaving meetings can feel very stark

# Models of support that have (mainly) moved online

Different models have different pros and cons

## Providing activities online

Some groups have opted to use online tools for activities rather than meetings – including meditation, exercise classes, “how to” webinars, skill sharing sessions, and training as well as social activities such as quizzes and film nights.

These activities enabled peer groups to stay connected, during periods in which face to face meeting was not possible



### Positives

- Work well for those able with good digital access and who are confident using digital tools
- Effective for people who are naturally quiet
- Work well for people who prefer more structured activity
- Give people access to useful resources and coping techniques



### Negatives

- Harder to replicate purely social elements that sometimes happen around the side
- Don't offer the full experience of mutual support



# Challenges and limitations of online peer support



Many of the challenges faced online can also be encountered in face-to-face models – challenges around avoiding cliques, supporting people through distress and safeguarding people are also encountered in face to face models.

However, the processes for managing these challenges can be more onerous in online environments, and many of the solutions are not yet familiar or accessible to many groups.

## Key lessons on peer support

**There were some key lessons that came out across all forms of peer support online:**

- Enabling online peer support requires specific skills – facilitating and moderating is hard work and requires training and support
- Moderators and facilitators face particular strain managing online peer support, particularly at a time of increased need
- Online peer support is not a cheap option – there are costs to platforms, and issues such as safeguarding and accessibility are not manageable without investment
- Peers need to be involved in “contracting” the terms of engagement for their group – agreeing the rules around moderation, facilitation. There are new issues to consider online – e.g. whether cameras should be on / off, around names and anonymity, muting etc.

Many groups want to continue offering peer support online, but alongside face to face alternatives



# Barriers to online engagement



## Practical barriers

- Cost of equipment or data
- Access to broadband and / or WiFi
- Inaccessibility of platforms in use – e.g. lack of user-friendly interfaces
- Language barriers



## Skills barriers

- Lack of familiarity with online tools



## Confidence barriers

- Fear of “breaking” equipment / making mistakes
- Concerns around safety / confidentiality / risk of scams etc
- Feeling nervous about the online experience



## Motivational barriers

- Sense of disillusionment at online connection - “it’s not the same”
- “Online fatigue” e.g. among those who spend all their working lives online

# Online peer support does not work for everyone

## Some groups may face particular barriers to online engagement

Online forums / Facebook groups



- People who struggle with written formats – e.g. people with dyslexia / for whom English is a second language

Online meetings and activities



- People who are deaf or hard of hearing (adaptations are available but carry a cost)



- People who lack a safe / private space in which to join meetings



- Carers who are unable to take time away from their loved ones

## Communities that are disadvantaged in accessing peer support face-to-face, often also face barriers to online peer support - there are common barriers around:



- Affordability



- Accessibility



- Lack of information



- Lack of cultural sensitivity or appropriateness



- Time poverty

**Across all forms of peer support work on inclusion will be vital.**



# Alternatives to online

While many organisations had managed the transition online, others were still struggling, due to a lack of access to both equipment and connectivity, skills and confidence and support with the additional costs and work involved with supporting people's safety online.

**It is important to remember that most groups have not yet managed to move online, and many people who engaged in peer support face to face have not made the move online.**

To keep connected during the pandemic groups were using:



- Telephone trees



- Email lists



- Sharing information on DVD



- Meeting face to face under the exemptions available for support groups

## Looking to the future

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the scale of health inequalities.

Online peer support may have potential to support the overall objective of widening access to peer support and may be particularly effective for some people who face barriers to accessing face to face peer support.

However, without specific action to address inequalities of access – not just to digital technology, data and skills in general, but also to peer support specifically – communities that face barriers to health and wellbeing support more widely including people Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, people with disabilities and people on low incomes, will also be excluded from online peer support.

National Voices has called for confronting inequality to be at the heart of the pandemic response – setting this out as one of the **five key principles** that need to inform our response. NHS leaders have **endorsed** these principles.

Ensuring that the principle of confronting inequality is applied as we extend access to peer support will be vital.

National Voices is the leading coalition of health and social care charities in England. We work together to strengthen the voice of patients, service users, carers, their families and the voluntary organisations that work for them.

We have more than 160 members covering a diverse range of health conditions and communities, connecting us with the experiences of millions of people.



**Address**

1st Floor, Bride House,  
18-20 Bride Lane,  
London, EC4Y 8EE

**Contact**

[www.nationalvoices.org.uk](http://www.nationalvoices.org.uk)  
020 3176 0738  
[info@nationalvoices.org.uk](mailto:info@nationalvoices.org.uk)  
[@NVTweeting](https://twitter.com/NVTweeting)