Accepted: 7 February 2022

DOI: 10.1111/chso.12555

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

Children & Society ncb WILEY

'Keeping the informal safe': Strategies for developing peer support initiatives for young people who have experienced sexual violence

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Funding information
This project was supported by Oak Foundation [grant number OCAY-16–457]. The funder had no role in the design of the project, collection or analysis of data or input into the development of this manuscript.

Abstract

There is increasing recognition of the value of trauma-informed approaches when working with young people affected by sexual violence. Peer support is a key principle of a trauma-informed approach; however, there are limited examples of peer support programmes for this group. This paper draws on interviews with 25 respondents with knowledge and experience of peer support initiatives with young people impacted by sexual violence. The article outlines their perspectives on how peer support initiatives – that may be viewed as more 'risky' than traditional casework – can be kept 'safe'. Six strategies are identified together with implications for practice.

KEYWORDS

mentoring, peer support, risk, sexual violence, young people

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been increasing acknowledgement of the value of adopting a trauma-informed approach when responding to young people affected by child sexual exploitation (CSE) and other forms of sexual violence (Bovarnick & Cody, 2021; Cody, 2017; Hardy et al., 2020; Hickle, 2019, 2020; Landers et al., 2020; Muraya & Fry, 2015; Sapiro et al., 2016). A trauma-informed approach recognises the potential impacts of trauma and actively seeks to avoid

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re-traumatisation through sensitive interactions and interventions. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) outlines six key principles to trauma-informed care. This includes safety, transparency and trustworthiness, collaboration and mutuality, peer support, empowerment – voice and choice and the acknowledgement of cultural, gender and historical issues. If organisations working with young people affected by sexual violence are committed to adopting a trauma-informed approach, this means considering how, as a service, these principles can be embedded. Thinking about peer support, which in the context of this article is defined as – a formalised supportive relationship between individuals who have lived experience of sexual violence in common, where one individual may be employed by an organisation or offer support on a voluntary basis – requires services to contemplate how they may facilitate, or initiate, activities and opportunities for young people to gain support from those with shared experiences.

In the UK, there are limited examples of peer support initiatives or group work with young people affected by CSE (Brodie et al., 2016). The literature indicates that professionals are concerned about the risks of bringing young people with histories of exploitation together (Frost, 2019). However, research that has sought to understand the experiences and needs of young people affected by the issue, acknowledges the value of peer interaction and group work with others who have faced similar experiences (Gilligan, 2016; Hagell, 2013; Smeaton, 2013; Warrington, 2013; Warrington et al., 2017). Peer support provision for young people affected by CSE in the UK is limited which means so too is the evidence base. However, within the international literature, there is increasing recognition of the potential value of peer support for young people affected by different forms of CSE (Blintiff et al., 2018; Bovarnick & Cody, 2021; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Kenny et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018; Rothman et al., 2020; Williams & Frederick, 2009). The acknowledgement of the promising nature of this form of support aligns to the growth in peer support interventions evident in other fields of social care (du Plessis et al., 2020; White et al., 2020).

This article addresses the paucity of evidence surrounding this topic by drawing on interview data with 25 respondents with knowledge and experience of peer support initiatives for young people impacted by sexual violence. The majority of respondents ($N = 18$) had experience of setting up and supporting either: peer mentoring services, group work opportunities or peer-led workshops. Seven respondents had experience of providing peer support to other young people. Respondents were based in the UK, North America and Eastern Europe. Based on the findings, we argue that there is value in supporting initiatives that enable peer support between individuals with experiences of sexual violence. However, being cognisant of the potential barriers, challenges and tensions inherent in this work, there is a need to consider strategies to, as one respondent remarked, 'keep the informal safe'. This paper sets out six strategies identified by respondents that helped them to design and manage peer support initiatives safely.

BACKGROUND

The importance of the 'relationship' in responses to sexual violence

Sexual violence is a significant public health and human rights issue impacting on individuals in every society (WHO, 2002). Research and practice identify that young people who have experienced different forms of sexual violence may be affected in a variety of ways physically, emotionally and psychologically (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Fisher et al., 2017; Hossain et al., 2010;

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McClelland & Newell, 2013; Stanley et al., 2016; Warrington et al., 2017). Researchers exploring the dynamics of child sexual abuse and exploitation highlight the potential impact of these experiences on a child or young person's ability to trust others and develop healthy positive relationships (Burton et al., 2011; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). For young people who have experienced CSE, the research draws attention to the abusive or disorganised attachments that may develop between a young person and the individual exploiting them (Beckett, 2011; Reid & Jones, 2011). It is, therefore, not surprising that 'relationships' appear central to effective responses.

Despite the lack of evidence regarding 'what works' when responding to young people affected by sexual violence, including those impacted by CSE (Bovarnick et al., 2017; Lefevre et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2019), there is agreement amongst professionals that relationships are at the heart of 'good practice'. Brodie et al. (2016:28) sum up '*the research evidence is clear that positive relationships lie at the core of effective practice in CSE services*'. Although myriad approaches have been identified as promising – including approaches that are described as rights-based (Muraya & Fry, 2015); strengths-based (Dodsworth, 2012; Scott et al., 2019) and trauma-informed (Hickle, 2019; Muraya & Fry, 2015; Sapiro et al., 2016) – relationships remain at the core.

In the UK, the most common form of support for young people affected by CSE is provided through one-to-one work with a key worker (Scott et al., 2019). Research with professionals and young people in various countries points to a number of consistent messages about what facilitates and sustains positive relationships between young people and professionals in the context of CSE. These include the need for non-judgemental support (Ahern et al., 2017; Aussems et al., 2020; Barnert et al., 2020; Gilligan, 2016; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2017); a warm and friendly environment (Ahern et al., 2017; Gilligan, 2016); openness, transparency and good communication (Aussems et al., 2020; Barnert et al., 2020; Lefevre et al., 2017); clear information regarding confidentiality (Barnert et al., 2020; Lefevre et al., 2017; Warrington, 2013); flexibility and 'downplaying' the formal nature of interactions (Ahern et al., 2017) and consistency through working with the same individual (Berelowitz et al., 2013). These elements are essential for professionals to consider when working with young people. It could, however, be argued that the desire for 'less formal' interactions and non-judgemental support may also indicate that other types of supportive relationships may also be desired or helpful – mirroring the centrality of peer support within wider trauma-informed literature. For example, young people impacted by CSE have expressed a preference to work with professionals who have 'walked in their shoes' or experienced other forms of trauma (Aussems et al., 2020). These young people note the frustration they feel when professionals say they understand what they are going through when they themselves have not experienced such trauma (Aussems et al., 2020; Barnert et al., 2020). Yet despite indications that peer support may be beneficial in supporting young people, little is known about models or sources of support that do not centre on the traditional relationship between a young person and a professional.

The mentoring relationship as a form of peer support

In recent years, recognition of the importance of building and introducing positive relationships into the lives of young people affected by CSE has turned attention to mentoring as a potential additional source of support alongside traditional casework. In a review by Dubois and Felner (2016), exploring the potential of mentoring for young people impacted by commercial sexual exploitation in the USA, the authors propose that mentoring relationships may

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bring benefits such as helping young people stay engaged with services. Whilst this review explores different forms of mentoring, the authors note that within the field, there is a sense that matching young people with peer, or 'survivor', mentors may bring added value. Meanwhile, there has been increased funding for mentoring programmes for young people affected by exploitation and trafficking across the USA (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Protection, 2019). Examples of 'peer mentoring' programmes – where individuals with lived experience of sexual violence mentor young people – still appear less common. However, there are some notable exceptions with recent evaluations of peer mentoring schemes for young people impacted by CSE in both the UK and USA reporting positive benefits (Buck et al., 2017; Kenny et al., 2020; Rothman et al., 2020).

Considering the 'risks' associated with peer support

In considering why there may be a dearth of opportunities for peer support, including peer mentoring between those impacted by sexual violence, it is worth reflecting on how individuals affected by sexual violence may sometimes be perceived by professionals. Fisher et al. (2018:2107) note that *'social welfare clients are mainly identified as either capable of posing a risk, or vulnerable and therefore "at risk", although victim-survivors [of sexual abuse] are often simultaneously identified as both'*. For a number of years, academics have highlighted the problematic discourse surrounding young people affected by CSE (Dodsworth, 2012; Melrose, 2013; Pearce, 2009; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Brodie, 2018). Beckett (2019:27) provides an overview of this narrative noting how young people are often viewed as either a *'"puppet on a string" or [as] "making active lifestyle choices"'*. On the one hand, young people may be seen as children with no agency who need to be rescued. This leads to young people being perceived as 'too vulnerable' to be involved in decision-making or efforts to improve services and support others. On the other hand, where young people's agency is recognised, this can be overplayed and lead to perceptions that young people have been complicit in their abuse and have 'put themselves at risk'. Through this lens, young people may be considered a source of risk to others, with potential to introduce other 'vulnerable' children and young people to new 'unsafe' individuals, networks or situations (Frost, 2019). This overly simplified framing inevitably results in young people routinely being left out of opportunities for group and peer-based work and support (Warrington & Brodie, 2018).

Current study

This study was designed to learn more about peer support for young people (aged 10–24 years) impacted by sexual violence and how such initiatives work in practice. Twenty-five respondents from 12 different organisations and initiatives, with experience of engagement in peer support initiatives for young people affected by sexual violence, took part in the study. The respondents were located across five countries, three in Europe and two in North America. This paper draws on the findings to explore the question *how can we make peer support initiatives for young people impacted by sexual violence safe?*

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METHODS

Following an initial call for evidence to identify peer support initiatives for young people affected by sexual violence, which yielded few results, the research team took a purposive approach to sampling. In order to identify a sample of respondents who had the appropriate knowledge and experience, the team reached out to contacts and undertook online searches. This approach led us to identify 18 organisations and initiatives that were known to provide opportunities for peer support to young people affected by sexual violence. Representatives from 12 of these organisations and initiatives responded and agreed to take part in the study.

Semi-structured individual or group interviews were set up online or face-to-face with a total of 25 key informants from these 12 organisations and initiatives. Group interviews were undertaken at the request of a number of professional participants who felt this would be a more efficient and useful method for capturing complimentary perspectives from different team members. In the case of peer supporters, four respondents shared that they were more comfortable in doing these together in pairs. Questions posed to respondents were designed to capture information surrounding the evolution of peer support initiatives and how peer supporters were identified, selected, trained and supported. Questions also aimed to understand potential perceived benefits to young people, peer supporters and the organisations involved, together with challenges and barriers experienced.

The study received ethical clearance from the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire. Prior to interviews commencing, all respondents were provided with information about the aims of the study and information on consent and confidentiality. Written consent was obtained from all respondents. The majority of interviews were undertaken in English as participants were either native English speakers or were fluent, and used to communicating in a work environment, in English. However, in two of the group interviews with peer mentors at one organisation, the young people were not fluent in English. In preparation for this, we had discussed employing a translator, however, at the request of the peer mentors, a member of staff from the organisation provided translation to enable the participants to engage in the research. The consent form and information sheet were also translated into the local language and shared with the respondents in advance of the interviews.

Key informants

Of the 25 respondents, 18 key informants had been involved in setting up and/or supervising peer supporters from 10 different organisation initiatives (Table 1).

This sample included a number of representatives from organisations who had mentoring models in place. These mentoring programmes either involved 'peer mentors' or a mix of mentors including those with and without lived experience. Due to the limited number of examples of peer support initiatives working with this population, the research team also interviewed two individuals who had led group work with young people affected by CSE and trafficking. These interviewees were able to provide insights into the role of 'peers' and the potential value and challenges of informal peer support that may arise with this population in supervised settings.

Seven 'peer supporters', those with experience of supporting other young people, from four organisations were also interviewed. (Table 2).

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TABLE 1 Respondents with experience of supporting peer support initiatives

Respondent code	Organisation/initiative code	Location	Primary model of peer support	Status of peer supporters	Type of organisation
1	A	North America	Peer mentoring	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
2	B	Europe	Group work	N/A	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
3, 4	C	North America	Specialist mentoring programme (involving mentors with and without lived experience) for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking	Employed	Housed in wider service for young people
5	D	North America	Peer mentoring	Employed	Housed in wider service for young people
6, 7, 8, 9	E	Europe	Peer-led workshops	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
10	F	North America	Peer mentoring	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
11	G	Europe	Peer mentoring	Volunteer	Peer organisation for women

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Respondent code	Organisation/initiative code	Location	Primary model of peer support	Status of peer supporters	Type of organisation
12	H	North America	Specialist mentoring programme (involving mentors with and without lived experience) for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking	Volunteer	Housed in wider service for young people
13	I	Europe	Group work	N/A	Housed in wider service for young people
14, 15, 16, 17,18	J	Europe	Peer mentoring	Volunteer	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/ trafficking

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TABLE 2 Peer supporter respondents

Respondent code	Organisation/initiative code	Location	Form of peer support	Status of peer supporters	Type of organisation
19	K	Europe	One-to-one peer support	Voluntary	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
20	L	Europe	Peer group support	Voluntary	Independent support group for university students
21	E	Europe	Peer workshop facilitator	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
22, 23, 24, 25	J	Europe	Peer mentor	Voluntary	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking

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Data analysis

The majority of interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. A number of interviews were not audio-recorded at the participants' request. In these cases, notes were taken and written up following the interviews. All transcripts were anonymised. A thematic approach was taken in our analysis, to enable us to identify important themes related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process to thematic analysis, two of the authors familiarised themselves with the data by reading and re-reading a selection of the transcripts and then generating initial codes. Coding was inductive and driven by the data. However, the authors recognise that with our awareness of the existing literature and associated theory, that this knowledge will have informed and contributed to the identification and framing of codes. Following discussion of initial codes, all transcripts were then coded by the first author using NVivo 11, a software programme primarily used for analysing qualitative and mixed methods data. Then came the process of searching for themes within and across codes. These themes were then used to inform the structure and framing of the original research outputs. During the writing up phase, these themes and conclusions were shared with another of the authors who offered an additional lens on the interpretations of the participants' experiences and words. In order to answer the specific question posed in this paper, 'how do you keep the informal safe?', the original codes and themes were revisited and six key areas were identified as being directly relevant to the question. These are explored in the following section.

FINDINGS

Before exploring the different strategies that organisations and peer supporters employed to maximise safety and well-being, it is helpful to contextualise this by briefly reflecting on the findings that related to the value of peer support – and as such why it may be worth taking a 'risk' in the first place.

The value of peer support

> The thing that I do recognise is that only a former "whatever" [a person with lived experience of whichever issue is being addressed] really understands the situation from a very visceral perspective...because in the beginning, "well you don't really understand you've never been there" well with the peer mentors, they have.
>
> (Respondent 5, Organisation D)

A relationship with a 'peer' (someone who themselves had experienced sexual violence) was identified as being notably different from relationships with other professionals who may not have had these experiences in four significant ways. Firstly, there was a sense that someone with lived experience could relate to a young person more closely. Although no two personal experiences are the same, having lived experience meant that person may be perceived as more credible in the eyes of the young person. Secondly, and, linked to the ability to relate, one respondent talked about how someone with lived experience could 'translate' for the young person – acting as a mediator between the young person and professionals in their life – helping them to make

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sense of the processes they were engaged in. Thirdly, a number of respondents talked about how peers who were older, or at a different stage in their recovery, could act as role models, illustrating pathways to recovery. Finally, the voluntary nature of these relationships was noted to reduce young people's sense of hierarchy and increase their confidence to direct activities and conversations. It could also provide a supportive space where there was less onus to focus on their experiences of abuse. Although not specific to peer support, this final element was thought to be more likely to arise in these types of peer relationships. In sum, respondents felt that peer support, when done well, was positive and could also keep young people engaged in accessing other forms of support (Cody et al., 2020a).

Inherent risks

Despite these benefits, several respondents recognised that facilitating peer support opportunities for young people with experiences of sexual violence required an understanding of, and ability to identify and manage, significant risk. It was noted that young people, and particularly those affected by CSE, were likely to have complex needs. As such, it was important for professionals involved in setting up or supporting these initiatives to have the experience, knowledge and associated skills required to work with young people affected by sexual violence. Some felt that due to the central focus of peer support on developing and maintaining relationships, extra caution was required:

> It's too sensitive, you know, I think, to just try to do something like this, and implement something like this, it could go so wrong for these girls if you're not doing it the right way, they're so vulnerable, these girls, and if you're not putting the right people in place to develop that, such a sensitive relationship with them, it could be very dangerous.
>
> (Respondent 1, Organisation A)

KEEPING IT SAFE

> It has to be safe because otherwise if could be a disaster...I won't have an unsafe organisation.
>
> (Respondent 11, Organisation G)

In considering the safety of both those being supported and those providing peer support, six key strategies were identified. This included assessing peer supporters for 'readiness'; building in a period of shadowing and observation for new peer supporters; ongoing training; providing support to peer supporters and encouraging self-care; having a range of additional resources in place to meet the wider needs of young people using the service and, as an organisation, taking the time to reflect on how these initiatives are working and develop practice accordingly.

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Assessing 'readiness'

There were different approaches for identifying, selecting and recruiting peer supporters. Where organisations were recruiting ex-service users into these positions, staff members made their own assessments over how ready they felt individuals were to provide formal support to others based on their knowledge of working with the individuals. If staff members advertised externally for these positions, there appeared to be more emphasis on the screening process at interview. Respondents from four organisations spoke about having fairly rigorous interview processes in place.

There were three key areas identified as important to explore during the interview process. Firstly, respondents talked about the importance of getting a sense of what support individuals had received to address the trauma they had experienced:

> When we interview someone and [name of staff member] asks them at that first initial screening, "is there, what do you do to take care of yourself?", or "what have you done to recover?", and if they say "I haven't needed anything, I'm fine, I can do it on my own", we say "we don't think you're ready to do this work."
>
> (Respondent 10, Organisation F)

> ...you know, what kind of work did they do therapeutically to address the trauma, and you know, and many of them had experienced childhood trauma and did they do any work around that.
>
> (Respondent 5, Organisation D)

The importance of individuals acknowledging the need for, and accepting, support was seen as central. The second element was having some distance from, and perspective on, their experiences of abuse.

> I guess it's like the distance they have from the experience and how well they have worked through the issues that got them involved, that perpetuated it and helped them leave.
>
> (Respondent 5, Organisation D)

> I'd want them to have some distance or perspective between their experiences and where they are now.
>
> (Respondent 11, Organisation G)

Having that perspective was seen as necessary for individuals to be able to effectively support others from a more objective place. Thirdly, it was noted that it was helpful to understand from individuals how ready they were to draw from and revisit their own experiences and hear others' experiences. Respondents felt peer supporters needed to have a certain level of comfort in re-immersing themselves in the emotions, dynamics and struggles that accompany young people on their journeys post-abuse. However, one of the tensions that arose in this study was around whether or not it was appropriate and helpful for peer supporters to share personal details about their experiences. Although sharing was identified as helpful among some respondents, not all felt it was necessary or indeed wise and some actively advised against it.

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Connected to this, for some respondents, they felt that being identified as a peer supporter may mean that that individual would have less control over the narrative surrounding their status as a victim/survivor and therefore, it was important to understand how they felt about that:

> And that was part of the interview like "are you comfortable sharing your story?"... if you're not ready for your face to be on a billboard saying you've had these experiences then what are the consequences for you. Like "do you have a family who know about this? Who doesn't know about this?"
>
> (Respondent 3, Initiative C)

Observing and shadowing

Linked to this idea of 'readiness', a number of respondents spoke about the importance of having a period of time where they could observe the peer supporter's skills and behaviours either through role play during training or through being shadowed during a probationary period.

Two respondents talked about the importance of shadowing and being shadowed before allowing a peer supporter to meet with a young person alone:

> They are shadowed or shadow for a long stretch of time.
>
> (Respondent 10, Organisation F)

> Then it's a lot of intensive shadowing at first, with our survivor mentor that's there now supervising.
>
> (Respondent 1, Organisation A)

Shadowing worked well for these two organisations but was only possible because they already had other, more experienced, peer mentors in place. For organisations that are starting out, and who do not have experienced peer support staff in place, shadowing may prove to be challenging practically. However, there may be opportunities for new peer mentors to shadow existing staff in their engagement with young people or to be shadowed by other staff members.

Training

Respondents talked about the importance of training peer supporters. The training was viewed as offering a multitude of safeguards for the peer supporters and the young people receiving support. The level, intensity and formality of training varied with some respondents leading the training themselves, whilst others hired consultants to lead or support training. Some respondents referenced the use of accredited modules or established mentoring curriculums from other programmes. One respondent, who was involved in a specialist mentoring programme which included mentors with and without lived experience, spoke about developing additional training modules specifically for peer mentors:

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> And then for people with lived experience, we had an additional training just about managing you know sharing your story if that were to come up and how to deal with some of the triggers that might come up as a result of working with this population.
>
> (Respondent 3, Initiative C)

Providing good training addressed multiple issues and concerns. For example, one of the main challenges identified by respondents was the difficulties peer supporters could face in setting boundaries, for example, around contact time. It was noted that training could help with this. One respondent also spoke about how training could help peer supporters develop a deeper understanding of some of the issues the young people they were supporting may be facing, which could, in turn, help prevent burn out and enable them to respond more effectively:

> the more you know the less it feels like 'I'm crazy, the kids are crazy, this will never get better', do you know what I mean? Like the more you can say like "oh, actually that feeling that kid was experiencing, that's the post-traumatic stress disorder and that can get better and I felt it too" and I think it helps a lot.
>
> (Respondent 10, Organisation F)

One respondent raised another important dimension of training. She voiced that it was essential that individuals in these roles were provided with opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills and expertise so that they were not relying purely on their own personal experiences. She felt this helped ensure peer supporters were viewed, and rightly treated, as 'experts':

> so what we find is then that survivor is in a meeting or that survivor is doing the work and all they have to draw from is what they've been through and so, one, that's profoundly triggering and, two, it's very limiting to that survivor... And so she gets very much pigeon-holed into being, oh she's the survivor. And we don't believe in that. We believe that any survivor on our team can become an expert in the field ...
>
> (Respondent 10, Organisation F)

This respondent highlights the limits and risks for individuals in being identified purely as 'survivors'. In such settings, individuals may feel that they have to self-identify as a survivor to be heard, yet this can be uncomfortable, lead to tokenistic involvement and may mean that their expertise and direct knowledge of the issues is overlooked (Hart et al., 2016).

Support and supervision

The support and supervision of peer supporters was seen as critical. There was recognition that supporting young people in the midst or aftermath of abusive situations and relationships could be 'triggering' and that such intensive and highly emotive work could lead to traumatisation and burn out. Respondents shared how regular support and supervision ensured that 'cases' were being monitored and that peer supporters were feeling supported – which, in turn, meant the work was likely to be more effective and safe. Organisations had different arrangements in place in regards to support and supervision. Three distinct forms of support were identified:

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Structured supervision

Most respondents described some form of supervision for peer supporters with a staff member and in some cases that was with a colleague who had clinical training. For the majority of initiatives where peer supporters were employed, this supervision happened weekly.

> All of our staff by virtue of being employed in our programme received an hour, so 60 minutes, of individual supervision weekly where they would sit down directly with me and we would review all of the youth they were serving making sure their needs were met.
>
> (Respondent 3, Initiative C)

> I supervise the mentor right now...just to make sure that she continues to maintain herself in a healthy place, avoiding that when she's triggered, counter-transference all of those types of things that could be really difficult, I think, for mentors, and I think that's very important.
>
> (Respondent 1, Organisation A)

Supervision was, therefore, viewed as a chance to ensure both the peer supporters' needs, and the needs of the young people they were supporting were being sufficiently met.

Coaching

Two respondents mentioned additional support that involved group support or personal development coaching.

> ...they received a two hour support group monthly. It was mandatory so they had to show up where they actually came and talked about what their needs were and the challenges with doing this kind of work. [Name of trainer] also did once a month, she did what we referred to as coaching which was more like personal development.
>
> (Respondent 3, Initiative C)

> 'They also get ongoing coaching and support from our [staff member] who is a survivor herself.... [in addition] our Clinical Director is really gifted at helping people look at where their professional identity and their personal stuff can collide.
>
> (Respondent 10, Organisation F)

As respondent 10 notes, having this space to explore, alone or with others, some tensions and issues that may cut across their professional and personal lives was seen as being particularly relevant to those with lived experience.

Self-care outside of work

For respondents from a number of organisations, it was also important to encourage peer supporters to seek support outside of formal work structures.

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> So I think that people just need to understand that survivor mentors need a lot of support and so they need support outside of what the programme can....we also made sure that they had support outside of work, you know that they were going and seeing their own therapists that they had family and friends they were connecting with on a regular basis.
>
> (Respondent 3, Initiative C)

> Then in addition they can use up to one hour per week of paid work time to go to therapy. So we encourage people to be in individual therapy. If you're not you can use that hour to go to an NA [Narcotics Anonymous] or an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] meeting or some other kind of group...we didn't want people who felt like "God, I could really use help talking to somebody but I don't have the time... so we wanted there to be no excuses."
>
> (Respondent 10, Organisation F)

In this later quote, through the organisation paying for peer supporters' time to access additional support, this signalled the priority given to self-care and removed barriers to engaging with support.

Access to other resources

Finally, it was noted that young people with experience of sexual exploitation, in particular, are likely to have varied and complex needs. A number of respondents spoke about the importance of having other staff members in place to address these needs, so that the burden of support did not fall solely on peer supporters. Similarly, respondents noted that it was important that these initiatives had access to other resources so that referrals could be made. For peer supporter respondents, this was critical for reducing the burden and supporting them to maintain boundaries:

> If young people felt like they needed further support [the name of the organisation] had somewhere to refer them to, like proper counselling maybe. It wasn't a counselling relationship that we had with them.
>
> (Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

> Obviously we're not there to counsel people... But obviously we might have to refer you to someone else, or ask for advice from other people because we're not here to counsel, we're just here to support.
>
> (Peer supporter respondent 20, Initiative L)

Ongoing reflection

Some respondents shared challenging situations relaying how they had responded to problems by changing their approach or introducing different strategies. Respondents from two organisations shared how they had 'paused' their programmes when they encountered difficulties to enable them to reflect on and learn from those experiences. The need for critical reflection appeared central in keeping everyone involved safe and supported.

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DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study point to a number of aspects that need to be considered and addressed for any organisation interested in facilitating peer support initiatives. This includes the processes required for assessing 'readiness' of potential peer supporters; building in opportunities to observe and shadow peer supporters in their role; offering ongoing training; having regular support and supervision in place and encouraging self-care; ensuring that other forms of support are available to the young people being supported and taking the time to reflect on and consider how these initiatives are developing and working.

There are a number of implications from these findings; some relate to the fine detail of how peer support initiatives may work in practice, whilst others pose larger questions surrounding context and organisational culture. In thinking about the practicalities of developing peer support interventions, one significant consideration surrounds identifying the 'right' peer supporters.

Firstly, in attempting to assess 'readiness', a number of respondents shared criteria to consider, including the 'distance' an individual had from their experiences of abuse. Although this may appear straightforward, recovery is not a linear process and therefore, it may be challenging to set a specific point in time when a person may be 'ready' to take on a formal supporting role (Hart et al., 2016). Nevertheless, as distance and time may be one factor to consider, this may mean that services may need to recruit older individuals, rather than those of a similar age to the young people the services are supporting. In this study, the age of peer supporters did not surface as a significant factor. However, one peer supporter respondent did comment that individuals at a similar stage in life may be better able to relate to each other. Services need to understand more from young people themselves whether age, experience or the 'semi-professional' nature of these relationships, or all three aspects, are important elements in receiving peer support.

Additionally, if it is advisable for peer supporters to have had some time and distance from their experiences, this also suggests that organisations may not be able to recruit from their current service-user base. This may make assessment processes more complex given that professionals working with individuals regularly may be more 'tuned in', and better able to gauge – from their professional perspective – when an individual they are working with may be perceived as 'ready' to take on additional roles (Hart et al., 2016). However, it must also be recognised that 'readiness' will be a two-way street as organisations supporting and supervising peer supporters must also be 'ready'; ready to not only support these roles with adequate resources, but also to trust and relinquish power to those who may not be seen as traditional experts or professionals. This links to the next point about investment and culture.

Secondly, despite the different peer support models represented in this study – and the fact that some peer supporters were volunteers, whilst others were paid members of staff – there was recognition that training, supervision and support were central. Whether peer supporters are employed or not, this requires resources and an investment by services facilitating these initiatives. One respondent noted that fears can arise when 'non-professionals', including young people, are given a role and responsibility but are not trained to the same level of staff. However, this respondent observed that when training is given *'to the same degree that you would expect your staff to be trained, then there's very little to fear. But it is about investing in the young people'* (Respondent 13, Organisation I). Through the study, concerns were also voiced over how individuals with lived experience were often not compensated fairly or integrated fully into staff teams (Cody et al., 2020b). Therefore, there is a need for organisations to consider how they view, value and support individuals with lived experience. Organisations need to consider available resources and

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the actions required to ensure spaces are welcoming before taking steps to develop peer support initiatives.

Thirdly, respondents emphasised that there was a learning curve when taking a new approach to supporting young people. A number of respondents shared that it had been incredibly helpful for them to be able to learn from, and talk to, others who had more experience of implementing peer support initiatives for this group of young people. This emphasis on the need for reflective spaces and shared learning aligns with messaging from others championing more strengths-based and participatory approaches when working with young people affected by sexual violence (Brodie et al., 2016; Cody, 2015; Cody & D'Arcy, 2017; Lefevre et al., 2019; Warrington, 2020; Warrington & Brodie, 2018).

Finally, in thinking about organisational culture, another important area to consider is how organisations view risk. In this study, respondents and their organisations witnessed the benefits of peer support and were thus able and confident to hold and manage associated risks. Organisational buy-in is critical for such initiatives to work as practitioners need to know that the organisation is willing to identify risks, manage those risks and take responsibility (Warrington & Brodie, 2018; Warrington & Larkins, 2019). As Warrington (2020) notes, it may not be possible to anticipate every risk or avoid risk altogether, but it is important for organisations to consider their level of comfort in holding risk.

As one peer supporter respondent shared in her interview:

> A lot of the time there's a lot of focus on what can go wrong instead of what can go right and how powerful it is if you can have that in place and the value that you get from it... And there's so many amazing things that could come from that... I think they're just seeing young people [potential peer supporters] as "they're so vulnerable they need to be protected". Well yea in a way that's right but don't limit them as well, you want to support them to do things like this.
>
> (Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

Organisations need to be able to 'imagine' and understand the benefits of peer support work in order to take those initial exploratory steps. Whilst the respondents of this study talked about responding to trauma, they did not directly affirm whether as an organisation, they adopted a trauma-informed approach, or whether peer support initiatives were set up to align to a trauma-informed way of working. It is, however, likely that as more services adopt the language of trauma-informed approaches and are exposed to models such as SAMHSA's (2014) principles of trauma-informed care that emphasise peer support, there will be a growth in opportunities for group work and peer-based support initiatives. This study has highlighted a few of the elements and strategies that may help services and young people to develop these initiatives. Evaluations of such initiatives, together with more participatory research with young people and peer supporters, would help develop a clearer understanding of the value and challenges associated with these models of work. Having space and forums for continued learning and reflection between practitioners will also help ensure that peer support initiatives remain effective and safe.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest were declared.

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ETHICS APPROVAL

This research received ethical approval from the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire reference IASR_12/17.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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How to cite this article: Cody, C., Bovarnick, S., Peace, D., & Warrington, C. 'Keeping the informal safe': Strategies for developing peer support initiatives for young people who have experienced sexual violence. *Children & Society*, 2022;36:1043–1063. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12555

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