Peer Support

A consultation with families of prisoners

May, 2021

Contents

Background and context

Peer Support groups provide people with similar experiences the opportunity to come together and support one another and have the potential to enable participants to: feel less isolated, build confidence, and receive support and information from others who have a shared experience.

This consultation was undertaken to develop Pact's understanding and awareness about prisoners' families' perceptions of Peer Support:

- Is this a form of support they would be keen to access?
- What might be the barriers to accessing Peer Support?
- What needs to be considered to deliver effective Peer Support?

The consultation was undertaken during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Public Health England ceased in-person prison visits in England and Wales on 24 March 2020, and despite a short re-opening of social visits during the Summer of 2020, a large proportion of families did not have any face to face contact with their loved ones in custody for over a year. As a result, the opportunity to engage with other families in similar situations in prison Visitor Centres, access face to face support from family engagement workers, or seek support from community-based services, was greatly diminished. This, in addition to the anguish associated with not being able to visit loved ones and the anxiety related to the impact of the Pandemic, has only served to exacerbate the isolation and vulnerability of many families with a loved one in custody.

'If I had been offered [peer support] in the Covid world I would have taken the option… it feels good to talk to people, share experiences.' (Partner of a prisoner)

Despite the negative impact of the Pandemic, it has led many to recognise the value of online platforms. This consultation invited individuals to reflect on the benefits and limitations of online support forums, compared to face to face, community based groups.

Methodology

Individuals accessing Pact support services (via Befriending schemes and prison visit centre teams) were invited to contribute to the consultation either via online survey or telephone interview (conducted by Pact Befriending Volunteers). A total of **28** individuals contributed to the consultation. Interviews were conducted, with the informed consent of participants, during Befriending sessions. All interviewees were given a £15 e-voucher to thank them for their contribution.

13 online surveys were completed.

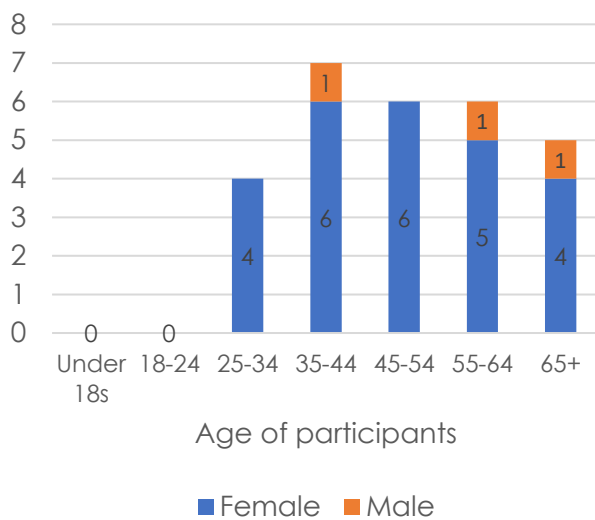15 telephone interviews were conducted.

Executive Summary

- The majority of respondents (75%) were interested in attending a Peer Support group. Those who stated they would not want to attend were restricted by time pressures or did not enjoy group activities.
- Respondents identified several **perceived benefits** of accessing Peer Support:
  - reduced isolation and an opportunity to feel part of a community
  - an opportunity to be amongst people who do not judge or stigmatise
  - an opportunity to talk and share experiences and emotions
  - an opportunity to receive information, advice and emotional support from those with lived experience.
- Respondents identified **potential barriers** to attending Peer Support groups:
  - anxiety and low self-confidence
  - fear of judgement
  - practical or logistical challenges such as childcare, travel or poor health/disability
  - lack of understanding of, or confidence in, the benefits of Peer Support.
- Over a third of respondents (38%) would be happy to attend a group online or face to face. A further 38% of respondents would prefer to attend a face to face group and 21% would prefer an online group.
- Respondents described **benefits of both online and face to face provision**. **Online groups:** overcome the financial and logistical challenges that some participants might face, encourage those who are less confident in groups to attend and offer greater anonymity/reduced fear of judgement. **Face to face groups:** avoid technical challenges associated with using online platforms, reduce isolation (particularly following Covid restrictions) and support genuine connection between people that facilitates empathy and relationship building.
- The majority of respondents would only **travel up to 5 miles** to attend a group.
- The majority of respondents felt that a Peer Support Group should **only be attended by those who had experienced family member imprisonment**. 8 respondents suggested that they would benefit from attending a **group concerned with a specific experience of family member imprisonment** – such as related to a specific type of offence or theme (such as mental health).
- The majority of respondents (26 out of 28) said that a Peer Support group should **facilitate open discussion** that enables participants to ask questions and share experiences and 20 respondents stated that the agenda and format should be set by group members.
- 66% of respondents felt that **monthly groups** would be sufficient.
- Respondents suggested the following should be considered to ensure **effective and sustained engagement** in a Peer Support group:
  - identify what support individuals might need to be able to attend
  - provide clear, accessible information about Peer Support
  - ensure a Pact worker supports the delivery of the group
  - ensure that group members feel safe
  - provide refreshments
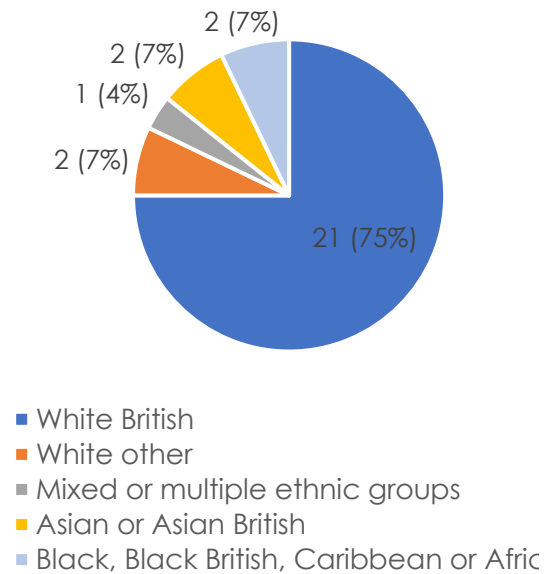 - create a sense of an inclusive community.

Participants

Respondents represented a cross-section of ages between 25 and 65+. The majority of participants were White British (75%) with 18% from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. 57% of respondents were from the South of England (London, SE or SW). Of the 18 respondents who disclosed which member of their family had experienced imprisonment, 61% had a child in custody and 28% had a partner in custody.
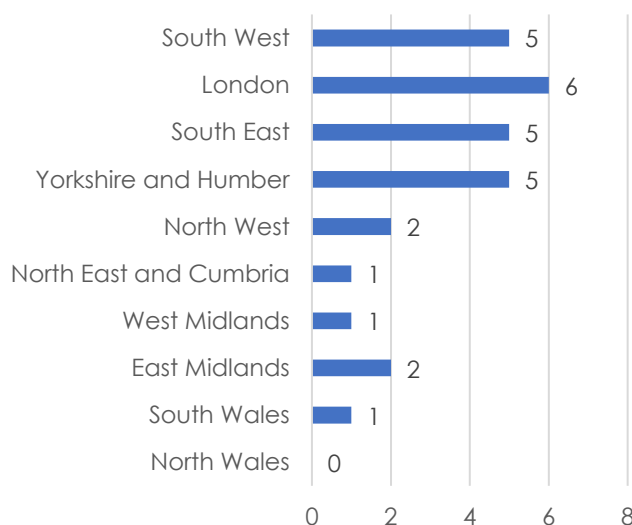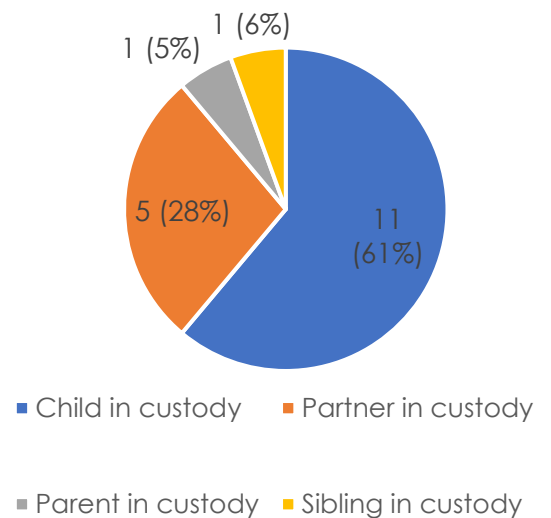
a) Age

Age of participants

■ Female ■ Male

b) Ethnicity

2 (7%)
2 (7%)
1 (4%)
2 (7%)
21 (75%)

■ White British
■ White other
■ Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
■ Asian or Asian British
■ Black, Black British, Caribbean or Afric

c) Geographical location

Location	Value
South West	5
London	6
South East	5
Yorkshire and Humber	5
North West	2
North East and Cumbria	1
West Midlands	1
East Midlands	2
South Wales	1
North Wales	0

d) Family member imprisonment

1 (6%)
1 (5%)
5 (28%)
11 (61%)

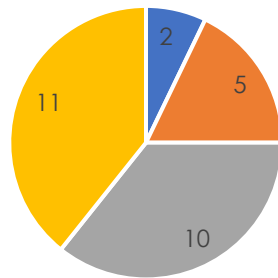■ Child in custody   ■ Partner in custody

■ Parent in custody   ■ Sibling in custody

Perceptions of peer support groups

a) Interest in accessing Peer Support

Participants' interest in attending Peer Support Group

- ■ No, definitely not ■ I'm not sure
- ■ Yes, maybe ■ Yes, definitely

21 of the respondents (75%) said 'yes' they would be interested in attending a Peer Support group.

Of the 3 male respondents, 2 said 'yes' and one said they 'were not sure'.

Those that said definitely 'no' to attending a group said that this was because they *'didn't like groups'* and that they *'would not be able to fit it into [their] life'*.

'When help is out there, I would be crazy to miss out on this opportunity.'

'For years I thought you had to be weak to need befriending or support groups. I said yes in a moment of desperation and nearly didn't answer the call. So glad I did.'

'Maybe – because I feel I am coming out of the situation, though I might face challenges in the future.'

b) Perceived benefits of peer support
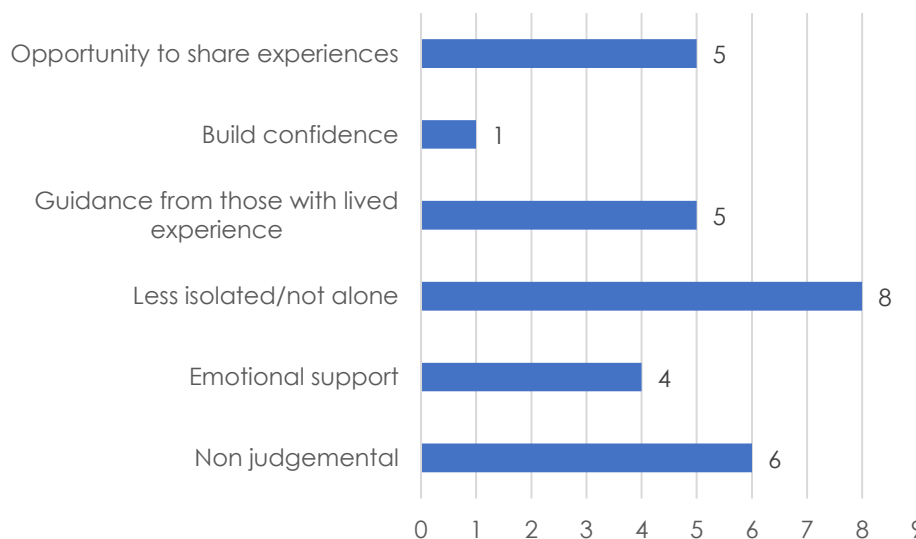
Respondents identified several potential benefits of accessing Peer Support for families who have experienced imprisonment. Their perceptions of how Peer Support might provide benefits did not vary depending on age.

8 of the respondents (29%) said that being in a support group with people who had had similar experiences would enable individuals to **feel less isolated and alone**:

'Can help people feel less alone and reassure them that others understand their experience. Can help with feelings of isolation and judgement.'

'[It would help them to feel] like they are a part of something bigger.'

'You would feel good – not on your own, you would help each other – they have been through it themselves.'

Participants also felt that a Peer Support group might provide a valuable environment where they were **not judged or stigmatised**, as everyone had had similar experiences:

'Being able to share their experiences in a non-judgemental setting with people who have shared experiences will give participants the opportunity to truly know that they're not alone.'

'Not being judged, being able to be yourself.'

'To be able to talk in a safe place without judgement.'

'It is a needed service for those to share their experiences in a safe space. To reduce the taboo of prison. It would be a valuable support network.'

Respondents felt that a safe and non-judgemental environment with others who had experienced family member imprisonment, would allow them to **talk and share experiences/emotions** in a way that might not be possible elsewhere:

'Open up when together,., want to talk about things and explain things more, which you don't do when you are speaking to one person and more honest to each other.'

'Feels good to talk to people, sharing experiences.'

5 respondents said that Peer Support would be valuable as it would provide the opportunity to **receive information and advice** from others with lived experience:

'Shared advice and guidance from real life scenarios of people who've got lived experience.'

'It's great to get advice and hear from people in a similar situation.'

4 participants also felt that Peer Support could provide **valuable emotional support** and that others in the group may be able to empathise more readily due to their shared experience:

*'People in the same boat would have empathy and understanding.'*

'It may give them comfort and feel less worried about what's happening.'

'Sharing how they're feeling in this setting may also allow them to feel that their emotions are normal.'

'It is important to talk as it is very helpful and stops you seeking anti-depressants, and you are no longer alone and isolated.'

c) Potential challenges associated with peer support

Barriers associated with accessing Peer Support
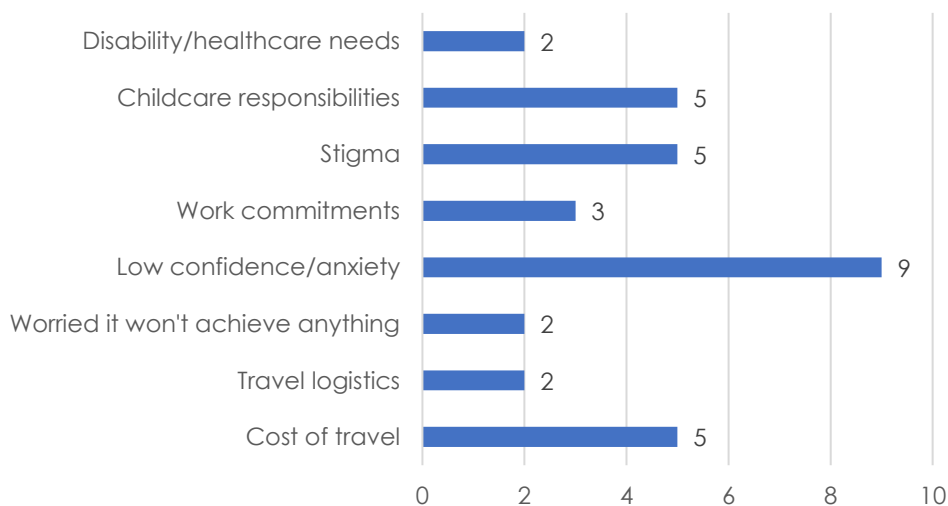
Almost a third of the respondents (32%) said that **anxiety and low self-confidence** may act as a barrier to individuals attending a Peer Support Group:

'Attending a group meeting for the first time could be quite a daunting experience. Particularly for those people who may not have shared their story before.'

'The fear of the unknown.'

'Some days you might not feel emotionally ready.'
'There could also be a fear of not meeting certain standards and so think of oneself as a failure. Lack of confidence.'

Despite many respondents stating that a Peer Support group may provide a safe and non-judgemental environment, they also felt one of the barriers to attending might be **fear of judgement or stigma**, particularly in relation to sharing details of their family members' crime:

'Because feel vulnerable, might not want to disclose specific or personal information in a group.'

'They are ashamed and humiliations of the crime, also denial.'

'If you are a shy person and you are embarrassed about the nature of a loved one's crime, it could be difficult to manage a face to face meeting.'

Respondents also identified **practical barriers** to people attending a group concerned with **childcare, travel or poor health/disability**:

'Logistics, no access to car, and issues with public transport. Cost implications related to travelling, particularly for those based on a low income.'

'The location of it could be an issue, as travelling is a restriction.'

'Disability could stop people getting to a meeting. People with agoraphobia would be too scared to leave their home. Some people with disabilities would be anxious about what people think of them.'

2 respondents felt that a **lack of understanding of, or confidence in the benefits of Peer Support** may also prevent people from attending a group:
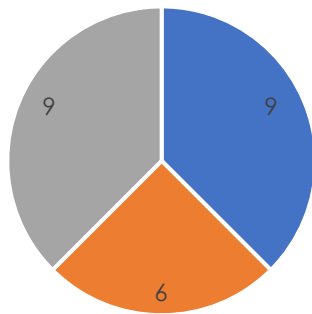
'Different expectations of benefits of peer support groups.'

'People might think it is a waste of time and won't achieve anything.'

Messages to inform delivery of Peer Support groups

a) Face to face groups versus online groups

Participants' preferred delivery model

■ Face to face group ■ Online ■ Either

Over a third of respondents (38%) said that they would be happy to attend a Peer Support group *either* face to face or online.

The same number of respondents said that they would prefer to attend a support group if it was face to face.

21% said that they would prefer an online group.

Benefits of virtual/online support groups

Respondents identified a number of advantages to delivering Peer Support groups online:

- Online groups could **overcome the practical and financial challenges** (such as travel and childcare) that could prevent people attending physical groups.

  'I also have childcare a full time job and caring responsibilities.'

  'No travel concerns, reduces that cost and means it is more inclusive. Carers might find it hard to find the time to travel.'

  'People with financial restrictions and work might find online groups easier.'

- Online groups may **encourage those who are less confident to attend**.

  'I'm not very good face to face. I panic and hide behind my own defences.'

  'Some people would be anxious at the thought of going outside the house and meeting strangers.'

- Online groups may **offer greater anonymity** and reduced fear of judgement. For some respondents, not being in a physical group with people in their local area, provided these advantages.

'People weren't judgemental when I was previously involved in an online peer support group.'

'I attended the Lucy Faithful group online - easier as people lived further apart geographically, also anonymity, also the type of offence is important - wouldn't want to bump into someone, also not sure how needy people might be, so online an advantage.'

Benefits of face to face groups

The impact of the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 Pandemic led respondents to suggest that face to face groups could provide a valuable **opportunity to re-connect** and address the isolation that many families had felt.

'Nicer to interact with people especially after so long being isolated.'

'Getting some people out of the house/Increase social contact.'

It was also felt that face to face meetings could be more effective at **enabling genuine connections** between people that supported empathy and relationship building:

'I feel that a face to face meeting would allow for better engagement and for one to one discussions, in a way in which would be hard to replicate virtually.'

'It is easier to assess what people are feeling and there is greater empathy in dealing face to face.'

Face to face meetings were also thought to be beneficial as they **avoided issues concerned with online platforms or IT equipment**.

'I don't have access to a laptop/pc at home.'

'I am not used to Zoom and might struggle with it. Face to face would be better for us, but it depends on the individual needs.'

2 respondents also shared a **distrust of online platforms**:

*'[I'd prefer] a real person over a potential troll.'*

'The nature of my partners offence was digital, so I became anti digital.'

Respondent were asked how far they would be willing to travel to attend a face to face group. The majority of participants who responded said that they would only be willing to travel up to 5 miles to attend. 2 respondents said that they would not be willing to travel any further due to disability. One respondent said that, if a Peer Support group was to be offered in the prison visit centre, the distance from their home would make this impossible:

'Attending a peer group in person would be difficult. It would be a 11/12 hour round trip to attend Lindholme.'

While another respondent suggested that facilitating Peer Support groups in a visit centre before or after a visit, may be valuable:

'Might be nice to talk before or after visits to support each other with people who have loved ones in the same prison.'

Distance participants prepared to travel

b) Group participants

Criteria for attending Peer Support group
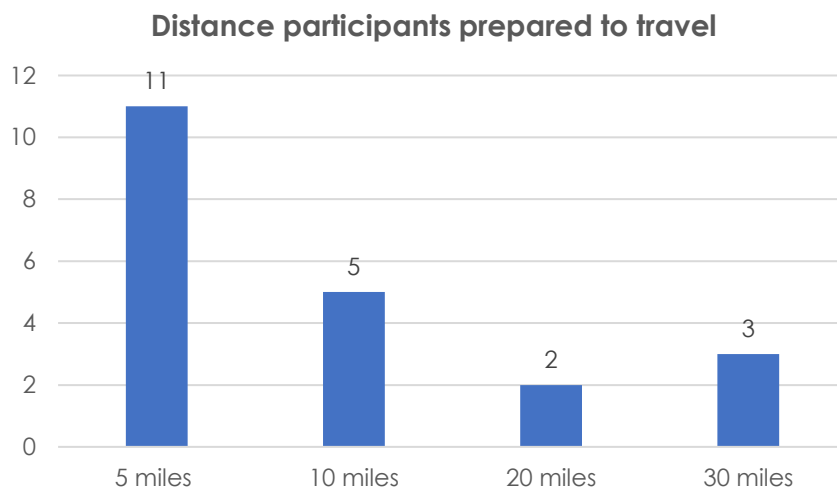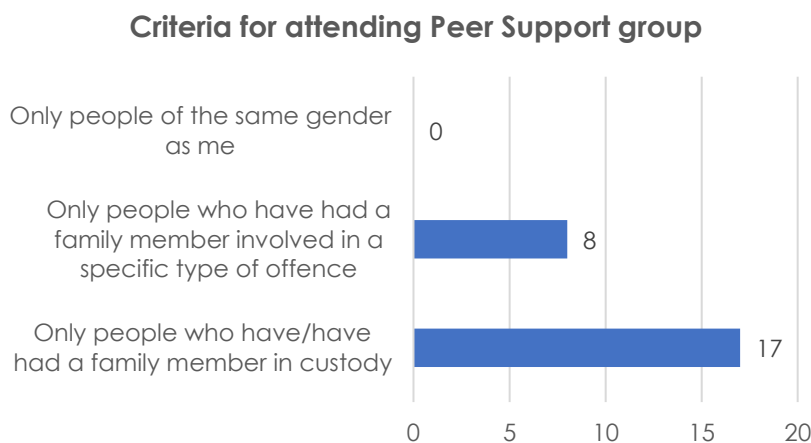
The majority of respondents said that they felt group members should all have/have had a family member in custody. One respondent said that it was important not to limit members any further as all families affected by imprisonment may require support:
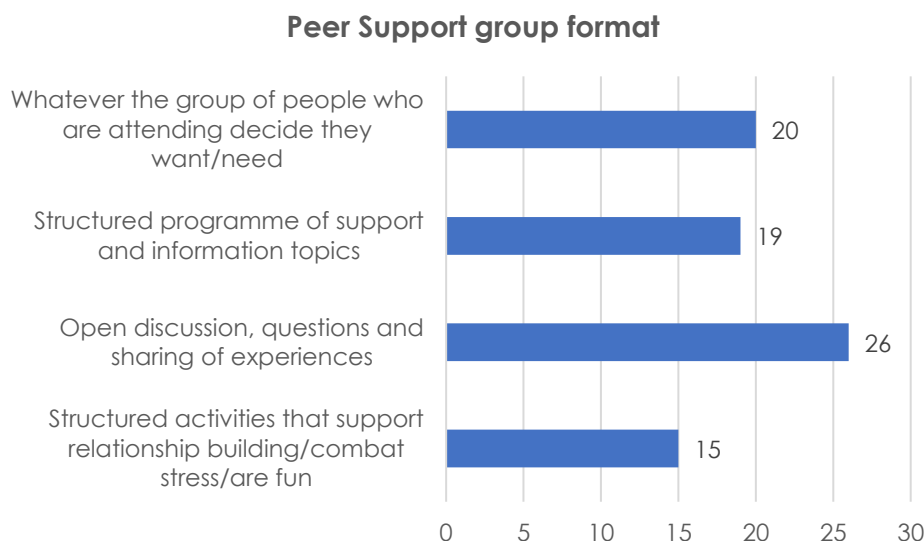
'I wouldn't want to discriminate against anyone . All family Members suffer as a result of a custodial sentence.'

8 respondents said that a group for individuals whose family member had been involved in a specific type of offence would be beneficial for them. Two respondents suggested that it would be helpful to develop Peer Support groups focused on specific themes:

'Different themes may also be relevant... Mental health, Young offenders, parents in prison, child in prison, those serving life sentences, habitual offenders etc.'

'Location, timing, and peer group category would all need to be considered. Having a relative in prison may not necessarily be the common ground for a peer group. If I was to attend a group I might be wanting to meet a very specific group of people who had a relative who was mentally ill in prison etc'.

c) Group format

Peer Support group format

Format	Count
Whatever the group of people who are attending decide they want/need	20
Structured programme of support and information topics	19
Open discussion, questions and sharing of experiences	26
Structured activities that support relationship building/combat stress/are fun	15

The majority of respondents (26 out of 28) said that a Peer Support group should facilitate open discussion that enables participants to ask questions and share their experiences. 20 respondents felt that the agenda and format of the group should be set by group members.

'Ask group members what they want from the meetings.'

1 respondent said that varying the format and content may also be beneficial:

'Should change weekly to mix it up. But emphasis on advice AND support. Up to date information.'

19 respondents (68%) said that structured content, focused on specific topics may also be helpful, for example:

13

'Provide help with e.g. debt and provide information requested.'

'Information about the prison and how to get in contact with individuals in prison.'

'The meetings must be well organised and structured.'

How regularly should Peer Support groups meet?

■ Weekly ■ Every 2 weeks ■ Once a month
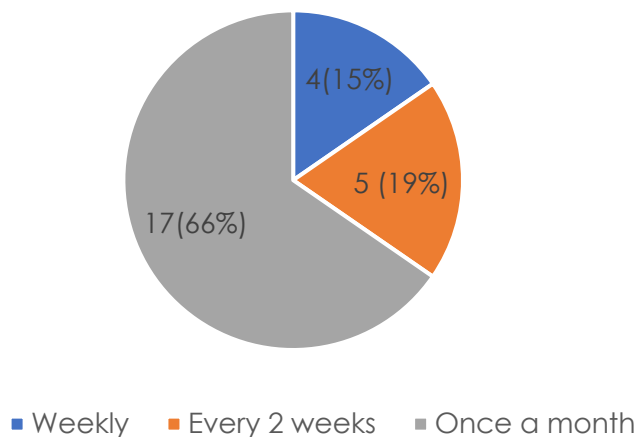
The majority of participants (66%) felt that monthly support groups would be sufficient. It was suggested that the frequency of the groups could also depend on whether they were online or face to face and/or how far participants had to travel.

d) Supporting group attendance

Respondents identified a number of ways in which to support and encourage people to attend a Peer Support Group:

1. Identify what support individuals might need to be able to attend

Of the 28 respondents, **8** (29%) said that they would need support to attend a Peer Support group. This included:

- IT/tech support to access online groups
- emotional support to have confidence to attend
- support with transport to attend a physical group (both financial and practical).

'As I am disabled and don't have a car I would need help with transport and or money for taxis. I would need encouragement to attend.'

A Peer Support group should ensure that all participants are asked whether they require support to attend to ensure inclusivity. Other Pact services may be able to

provide the initial support required to engage participants, for example, 1:1 Befriending support could help to build confidence in an individual prior to them attending a group.

'Befrienders should encourage people to attend the group.'

2. Provide potential participants with clear, accessible information about Peer Support

Respondents felt that, to encourage people to attend, individuals would need information about:

- What top expect from a Peer Support group
- The benefits of attending a Peer Support group
- The format of a Peer Support group
- Dates and times of group meetings (in advance)
- How people are kept safe in a Peer Support group

'I would want to be fully informed of how the sessions were going to be run etc.'

'Be clear about what the benefit to them would be.'

'Advertise benefits of peer groups (friendly, non-judgemental, not too busy).'

'Positive comments from others who have attended a peer support group.'

'Knowing well in advance so they can plan.'

'Promote it as a safe, unjudgmental space.'

3. Ensure a Pact worker supports the delivery of the group

Two respondents suggested that having a consistent and trusted facilitator from Pact would provide a valuable 'known face' for some participants and confidence that the group would be facilitated safely and effectively:

'Knowing that a Pact worker is there to support and run the groups is important.'

4. Ensure that group members feel safe

Respondents emphasised the importance of Peer Support groups providing a safe environment where participants feel respected and supported, rather than judged and stigmatised. It was suggested that the use of ground rules that address issues such as confidentiality and inclusivity as well as ice breakers and 'wellness' checks (at the start and end) could all contribute towards creating a 'safe' environment:

'I assume there will be basic rules and regulations for everyone to follow in terms of confidentiality.'

'Avoid personal questioning.'

'Offer support in a secure environment.'

'It would be good for the support group to have a wellness check in, acts like an icebreaker and encourages people to open up. Do this at the start and end to make sure the session has not left anyone more emotional.'

'Knowing there is a code of confidentiality.'

5. Provide refreshments

Respondents suggested that the provision of drinks and snacks in a face to face support group would support engagement.

6. Create a sense of inclusive community

Respondents highlighted the importance of creating a sense of inclusivity and community amongst group members, as they felt this would both encourage people to attend and contribute to providing a safe environment. Ground rules and effective facilitation (for example, challenging judgement or discrimination and encouraging engagement) would support this to happen.

'The groups must be inclusive, not dominated by one person.'

'It is important that everyone is involved, but also allow those who want to just listen to listen.'

'Sell the idea of being in a community.'

'[You don't want] people who would judge you - if someone's son was in for burglary but my son is in for child abuse and they feel that he is much worse.'