



Department
for Education

Peer support and children's and young people's mental health

Analysis of call for evidence activities

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Summary

We sought views and evidence in nine key areas relating to peer support:

1. Interest in peer support programmes for mental health and emotional wellbeing

Children and young people: There was interest both in receiving and providing peer support for mental health. 50% of the 1,800 respondents in the online call for evidence said they would be interested in being a mentor/peer supporter for mental health and emotional wellbeing. Girls were more likely to be positive about this than boys.

Adults: Although there was a mixed response to the importance of having mentors in schools, most people felt that good peer support schemes have the potential to provide benefits.

2. Key features of successful peer support programmes

Children and young people: They said that successful peer support programmes should be flexible and appropriate to the circumstances and users. 69% said the most important feature is that peer supporters are friendly and approachable, followed by 50% who felt they should be trained and knowledgeable.

Adults: 70% felt that appropriate and focused training, both for the young people and the supporting adults involved, is the key to any successful peer support programmes.

Research review: Studies show the importance of programmes being well run, with a clear focus, strong leadership and support throughout the school. Successful projects depend on the quality of the peer supporters who are trained, well-supported, enthusiastic and with strong communication and interpersonal skills.

3. Peer support for children and young people's mental wellbeing

Adults: To translate good peer support practice into support for mental health and emotional wellbeing, programmes should ensure effective training, understanding of safeguarding issues, strong support and supervision structures, clear boundaries and partnership working.

Research review: Successful programmes are clearly planned but with a flexible approach that adapts to lessons learnt. They should be fully integrated throughout the setting, well publicised with effective leadership. Peer supporters should be well trained and supported.

4. Setting up mental wellbeing peer support programmes

Children and young people: To encourage young people to take part in programmes they should be flexible with regards to timings and settings. The language used needs to be considered sensitively and they should involve influential pupils and teachers where possible.

Adults: To encourage organisations to offer programmes guidance, evidence based examples of best practice and pilots that show the effectiveness of the outcomes should be made available. There should be a range of options available so that organisations are able to choose an approach that is suitable for them.

Research review: To encourage children and young people's interest and participation in schemes the review found that it is important to have a clear and robust process for selecting peer supporters, and a sound mechanism for support and supervision. Prominent marketing and publicity in school can also help to encourage take-up.

5. Training, information and support

Children and young people: 96% who responded to the online call for evidence felt that some training for participants was needed when developing and delivering peer support programmes. Training should occur before they become mentors as well as throughout the programme. It should cover the issues of confidentiality, safeguarding, role boundaries and pathways for further support.

Adults: All respondents listed the quality of the training (for any scheme) to be of paramount importance. This training should be tailored to fit the needs of the young people involved and should be in addition to embedding awareness of mental health and wellbeing throughout the organisation.

Research review: Successful projects include well-trained young people who have a high profile and command respect throughout the organisation. Structured good quality training is important for both the adult co-ordinators and peer mentors.

6. Recognition and rewards

Children and young people: 60% of young people said the most important recognition would be the ability to be able to refer to their peer support skills on their CV or UCAS application. Younger children felt recognition from school was the most important reward that they could be given.

Adults: 75% felt that having some kind of recognition or acknowledgement of their participation would encourage young people to take part in peer support schemes. This recognition should include the life-skills developed as part of the programme such as listening skills, empathy and negotiation.

7. Online support

Children and young people: They felt that it is very important that websites should be private and that the information they hold should be protected. They want to be confident that what they share is anonymous. They would need to feel confident about the quality of the website and the integrity of the person with whom they were sharing details.

Adults: They considered the most important feature to be the content of the website; its accuracy, reliability and the appropriateness for the young people using it. It should be clear, factual and non-stigmatising and young people should be able to know that they are able to trust the advice.

Research review: A key benefit of on-line programmes is that they offer anonymity, avoiding the fear of a mentor being able to share personal information about the mentee with the wider community. Some studies suggest that this can be more suited to males, who typically are less likely than females to seek professional help.

8. Access to specialist services

Adults: Adults felt that peer support can be a helpful early intervention and a stepping stone to further services as necessary. However there was widespread agreement that it is vitally important that any peer support system is fully integrated into an easily accessible support network of adult and clinical support.

Research review: It identified gaps between levels of support as a critical factor in the success of programmes. Adult support and supervision of peer mentors is key to establishing effective peer support programmes, with the young people knowing where to seek further help.

9. Risks

Adults: They felt that the greatest risks come through inadequate training, support and supervision of those providing the peer support. Concerns were raised about safeguarding, confidentiality and ensuring children and young people have the right knowledge or experience to support their peers.

Research review: This identified the main risks to successful delivery include conflicting priorities within the organisation, low take-up of programmes from the pupils and possible negative impacts on participants.

Introduction

It is the Government's ambition that all young people achieve as well as they can academically and leave school prepared for life in modern Britain. Supporting them with managing their mental health and wellbeing is a vital underpinning to this aim.

We know that around one in ten children and young people aged between 5-16 years have a diagnosable mental health disorder, which is an average of three in every classroom, and that a further four or five children per class potentially have less severe problems or conditions. That is why the Government will be investing an additional £1.4 billion in children and young people's mental health services before 2020. However, as the *Future in Mind*¹ report made clear, providing more specialist services is not enough on its own to meet the challenges we face in improving mental health outcomes. There needs to be a greater focus on prevention and early intervention.

Schools and colleges have an important role to play in supporting the resilience and mental health of children and young people. We are committed to helping schools and colleges to support children and young people's mental health, putting the information, tools and working practices in place that will enable them to both provide appropriate support themselves and to work collaboratively and effectively with health services and other providers.

To make a real difference we need to listen to young people and capture the enthusiasm they have for driving better mental health and wellbeing themselves. Young people have told us² that when they need information or help for mental health concerns, apps or websites and their friends are the two sources they most frequently turn to first. They have also said that they would like to see more peer support available as a way of supporting their mental wellbeing and that they would like more settings to offer safe, effective programmes.

This report summarises and presents the findings from a range of activities undertaken by the Department for Education to develop our understanding and find out more about people's knowledge and experience of peer support for children and young people's mental health. This included support available within schools, in community settings and online. We wanted to better understand what best practice looks like, what training or accreditation it might include and how peer support fits within the range of mental health support available.

The call for evidence was part of work led a Steering Group and an Advisory Group. It comprised a range of workshops, an online call for evidence, a literature review and polls

¹ [Future in Mind](#)

² [YoungMinds CYP and families engagement report](#) and [Youth Select Committee report](#)

on social media. There was a strong focus on ensuring maximum engagement with young people to ensure we reflected their views.

Peer Support

Rationale

Peer support programmes, in schools, colleges, community setting and online, have the potential to provide effective early support in a format that young people prefer. Good schemes with well-trained mentors and a comprehensive support structure can help to identify issues and can prevent them from escalating. When necessary they can provide effective pathways to specialist support. They can create an environment which promotes good mental wellbeing, and where young people have the skills, confidence and knowledge to give and ask for help from one another.

This should happen within a 'safe' structured system, which, if young people want it, recognises and accredits the support they are providing. If young people are accessing online support, they need to have enough knowledge to know what to look for.

Many schools already provide peer support schemes on a wide range of topics including friendships, transition and bullying. Some already run peer support programmes for mental health. Many other organisations outside of school settings have also developed schemes for peer support, including online approaches.

What we mean by peer support

Peer support can encompass a variety of models and levels of formality from helping a friend discuss emerging issues, through buddying and befriending schemes, to formal 1:1 and group support sessions within supportive environments. It is equally about promoting good mental wellbeing for all and supporting those with problems.

Peer support is not a replacement for specialist support from a mental health professional but it should help to signpost those who need it to the appropriate services and might help to complement it going forwards.

Terms

Peers = friends or contemporaries, including an older young person, or a near-peer.

Mentor / peer supporter = children and young people who listen to their peers issues and difficulties and provide appropriate support.

Mentees = children and young people with concerns, issues or problems who talk to their peers and receive appropriate support from them.

Evidence

In order to develop our understanding and evidence base about peer support for children and young people's mental health we undertook several actions to find out what best practice looks like, how settings could be encouraged to provide programmes, what training and accreditation might be needed and how and where peer support fits within wider mental health support and treatment offers. We asked for evidence and experiences of peer support across a range of settings; schools, colleges, community settings and online.

- We established a Steering Group and an Advisory Group in December 2015, comprised of a range of practitioners, academics and experts, with the aim of identifying ways to increase and improve the quality of peer support for mental wellbeing made available to children and young people by schools. They have been working with us to consider the outcomes of the evidence gathering and will make recommendations about the key features of good peer support programmes and what we can do to encourage more excellent practice;
- We launched two national online calls for evidence³ in February 2016 to find out more about children, young people's and adult's knowledge and experiences of peer support for mental health and wellbeing;
- We ran a series of thematic workshops with stakeholders in February and March. There were four workshops with adult stakeholders that were focused around: vulnerable children, schools, the Voluntary and Community Sector and families;
- We ran a series of young people's workshops in March. There were five workshops with young people that were organised with the kind support of the National Citizen's Service, the National Children's Bureau, British Youth Council, Kids – a charity for disabled children, young people and their families, and Riverside School – a community special school for children 4-19 with severe and profound learning difficulties. The young people involved ranged in age from 13-23 years and had varying levels of experience of peer support;
- We identified that although there have been programmes and projects about peer support for which evidence has been published, there has been no central

³ The children and young person's survey was quantitative and the adults' survey collected qualitative data. The survey questions are given in Annex B and C. Both the adult and children and young people's calls for evidence utilised an opportunity sample. Links to the survey were shared online via the DfE consultation website. 987 children/young people responded via the DfE site and 827 children/young people responded via NSPCC. The responses cannot be assumed to be representative.

assessment of their effectiveness or comparison of the different approaches.

Therefore we commissioned a literature **Research Review** ⁴ which looked at peer support interventions for school-age young people from the past 10 years, including international evidence where available. It described the key features of the models; summarised the available evidence for their effectiveness, evaluating the robustness of their evidence; considered the reasons for the success or failure of projects; and provided recommendations on what the evidence indicates that the key features of successful peer support programmes are.

- We undertook a series of 'flash' Twitter polls throughout February and March, which asked a short-lived 'question of the week'.⁵
- We asked all groups how parents and families could best be engaged with peer support programmes.

Details of the organisations that were involved in our evidence gathering are given in Annex A. We are grateful to all the external organisations who encouraged their young members to take part in the survey, including the British Youth Council and the NSPCC.

Involvement

There were approximately 1,800 responses from young people to our online call for evidence, including 827 responses from the NSPCC.

There were 113 adult responses to our online call for evidence.

The flash Twitter polls received 741 responses.

52 adults and over 30 young people attended our workshops.

⁴ Link to Research review? (not sure if it will be published alongside this report)

⁵ Further details of the Twitter polls are given in Annex D

Vulnerable Groups

As part of our evidence gathering we focused on the needs of different groups, including vulnerable children and young people.

A child might be described as vulnerable⁶ if he or she:

- is disabled and has specific additional needs;
- has special educational needs;
- is a young carer;
- is showing signs of engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviour;
- is in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as substance abuse, adult mental health problems and domestic violence;
- has returned home to their family from care; and/or
- is showing early signs of abuse and/or neglect.

Evidence⁷ shows that there is a much higher prevalence of mental health issues for vulnerable children and young people.

Throughout the consultation we asked for evidence about how effective peer support programmes take into account the needs of vulnerable groups and how they ensure the effectiveness of their interventions.

⁶ Safeguarding children guide 2015

⁷ ONS 2004 mental health study

Analysis of findings by theme

During the workshops and the online call for evidence we asked adults, children and young people questions about their knowledge, experiences and interest in peer support. Some questions and discussions were about what best practice looks like for good peer support programmes across all types of issues (e.g. transition, bullying, friendship, mental wellbeing) while others were more specific to mental health and emotional wellbeing. Others asked how peer support models can fit with, or link to, wider mental health support systems.

We asked what support and training peer supporters need to have to be knowledgeable, confident and effective and what recognition or accreditation could be offered that would inspire and reward young people and organisations to take part. We also asked participants to consider what the risks might be, for both those giving and receiving support.

We considered peer support across a range of settings; schools, colleges, community settings and online. We also focused on the needs of different groups including vulnerable children, parents and families.

Analysis is presented here by theme. For each theme we have presented the context, the questions asked, and the findings for each of the different data sources; workshops, online surveys, Twitter polls and the academic research review. If a data source is not mentioned then it did not cover this theme.

Adult responses include those from the online survey and discussions at the thematic workshops. Children and young people's responses include the online survey responses (a combination of the 987 responses to the DfE survey and the 827 responses gathered by NSPCC), the Twitter polls and the five workshops.

1. Interest in peer support programmes for mental wellbeing

Context: There is increasing interest in peer support from schools and colleges and from children and young people that want to get involved to support their friends when they are facing emotional difficulties. Future in Mind and the Youth Select Committee report into children and young people's mental health both refer to the power of, and need for, facilitated peer support.

To gauge interest we asked children and young people what they thought about the idea of peer support for mental health and emotional wellbeing and how interested they would be in participating in these schemes from both perspectives; as someone providing the support (mentor) or as someone receiving it (mentee). We also asked about the potential benefits of peer support programmes.

Children and young people's responses

Many young people are interested in developing the idea of peer support / mentoring for mental health and emotional wellbeing. 50% of respondents to the online call for evidence said they would be interested in being a mentor/peer supporter for mental wellbeing. Where it was possible to analyse by gender, girls appear more likely to be positive about this than boys.

Around a quarter said that they don't currently know enough about emotional wellbeing to decide if this is something they would like to do, with a fairly even gender split.

Just under a fifth of young people said they would not want to be involved with giving peer support for mental wellbeing.

A roughly equal proportion of respondents would be interested in receiving peer support (45%) as giving it (50%).

In the young people's workshops it was suggested that having peer support for mental health as part of a comprehensive approach to peer support across other issues such as friendships, bullying, day to day worries etc. could reduce stigma and encourage take-up.

Adults' responses from workshops

Although there was a mixed response to the importance of having mentors in schools, most people felt that good peer support schemes have the potential to provide benefits. These could include:

- decreasing isolation and helping young people to feel better supported;
- helping them to feel better able to manage their own emotions and problems;
- providing an empowering effect on the mentor, often including positive recognition from within their school or community organisation;
- improving attendance and attainment at school for those being supported; and
- helping to develop the life skills of the mentors providing the support, with positive implications for their future education and employability.

Adults felt that while schools should provide a range of support for young people, there are other methods that might be more appropriate in some circumstances. They felt that rigid minimum standards can potentially have a deterrent effect, dissuading schools and colleges from taking action because they are unable to meet all the criteria. A range of different approaches and levels of programme are needed, without losing the important safeguarding points.

They agreed that access to professional support such as CAMHS for mental health problems must continue to be a priority. Peer support programmes, whatever form they take, must not be done in isolation but be part of a continuum of support.

2. Key features of successful peer support programmes

Context: Peer support programmes have the potential to work well in a variety of settings on a number of different topics and delivered through a variety of models. There are a number of common features within these models and settings that we have sought to identify.

We asked respondents about their experiences of peer support across all types of issues including, but not limited to, mental health to find out what types of peer support programmes are currently available. We also asked what the most important features of an effective peer support programme are and what best practice looks like.

Children and young people's responses

Young people were clear that successful peer support programmes should be flexible and appropriate to the circumstances and users.

69% of young respondents in the online call for evidence, and with equal gender split (where it was possible to analyse), felt that the most important feature is that peer supporters are friendly and approachable. This was followed by peer supporters being trained and knowledgeable which 50% selected.

43% of respondents thought that flexibility of seeing the supporter as an when you needed was important. Young people in the workshops expanded on this to say that they felt that they should be able to choose where and when they are supported (in school or after school), who supports them (age, right personality mix), the format (one-to-one or group support) and how long they use peer support for.

In the young people's workshops some concerns were raised about the peer support process, particularly around confidentiality issues. Some were concerned that where existing friends provide each other with peer support there may be potential issues around friends inappropriately sharing information or exploiting what they know about each other. Of those that said they would not use peer support 44% of the online respondents said that they would not use peer support because of concerns over their privacy.

Some young people said they would prefer their mentor to be older, and if possible, not from their school. However this was not mirrored in the call for evidence where similar proportions of young people would choose friends as peer supporters (16%) and those who would prefer someone from a different social group (17%).

Within the workshops some young people said that if possible they would like the peer supporter to have experienced similar difficulties to them in the past so they can empathise and over a third of online respondents agreed.

Adults' responses

In the online call for evidence a large majority of respondents flagged that appropriate and focused training, both for the young people and the supporting adults involved, is the key to successful peer support programmes.

Many respondents described programmes that have been developed to meet local needs, often with input from education, health, VCS organisations and young people. Some gave examples of best practice that involve structured support from national organisations, while others observed that programmes that have been co-produced with young people help to reinforce their applicability and sense of ownership.

They felt that it is important to be able to offer differing levels of peer support depending on the needs of the young person. For this to be effective differing levels of mentor training and knowledge are also needed.

Adults and organisations involved in providing peer support for vulnerable groups (such as looked after children, LGB&T, young carers etc) fed back that there can be value in young people having the opportunity to receive support from others who have had, or are having, similar life experiences.

Within the workshops respondents were clear that successful peer support programmes are part of a whole school approach. The involvement, knowledge and commitment of adult staff are critical to their success and sustainable programmes are needed that are not vulnerable to changes in leadership or key staff. Actions such as including it within any school improvement or development planning could help to address this.

Having the sufficient time and funding to effectively run the programmes, as well as the right physical space in which to deliver them, was also a reoccurring theme within the responses in the call for evidence. The importance of ensuring parents and carers are supportive of the programme was a reoccurring theme in the workshops.

Many adults felt that more evidence is needed on the outcomes of peer support programmes, particularly around evaluating their impact and effectiveness. It was noted that schools aren't always the best settings for support and it is important to use and learn from work done within existing high-quality community networks.

Research review

There is great diversity in the various types of peer support schemes available and these differ in terms of their aims and approach, source of delivery and the types of activities on offer. Previous reviews have found mixed evidence of success for peer support schemes, with some studies identifying positive outcomes but others finding no evidence of significant differences resulting from participation. Overall, the evidence indicates that different schemes have had varied levels of success, but that peer support programmes can potentially result in a range of positive outcomes for young people.

Successful programmes have a clear focus, strong leadership and are supported throughout the school, including by senior management. Peer mentors are specifically trained supporters who are enthusiastic, committed and reliable, and who have strong communication and interpersonal skills. They are well supervised and supported. Some studies point to the value of co-production in the designing of schemes with substantial input from the children or young people themselves.

Several studies suggest that more formalised projects tend to be more successful. Specific elements of formalised projects include: a structured process of monitoring and evaluation; having a dedicated space for peer support, with dedicated time slots; and formal training of peer supporters and co-ordinators.

3. Peer support for children and young people's mental wellbeing

Context: The key features of peer support schemes, including those provided by community groups, could be applied to programmes specifically aimed at supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

We asked how best practice across all types of peer support could be translated into effective peer support for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. This included:

- what the key features of peer support important for mental health programmes would be;
- how peer support approaches in community settings could translate into programmes within schools and colleges; and
- how peer support programmes could sit within the wider school curriculum and pastoral approach.

As these questions were focused on how successful implementation might use lessons learnt from other peer support schemes, they were only included in the adults' survey.

Adults' responses

To translate good peer support practice into support for mental health and emotional wellbeing, responses from adults across the call for evidence and the workshops emphasised:

- The need for the adults and young people involved to have the right training and information they need to effectively take part;
- The importance of all involved being clear about safeguarding and confidentiality issues;
- That all involved, including any external health and specialist services, know how and when difficult issues are escalated;
- The need for strong support and supervision structures across the programme with informed and committed leadership teams;

- That programmes should have clear objectives and that outcomes are regularly reviewed. As programmes develop they should be changed due to the lessons learned;
- That mental health and wellbeing education should be embedded and commonplace for all pupils across the whole school;
- Boundaries need to be clear and although flexibility is important, programmes need to ensure that there are not excessive time or emotional burdens on participants;
- That the language used to describe peer support should be positive, with care given to not label problems. Not presenting peer support as a deficit model will help reduce stigma; and
- That programmes must take into account the needs of the peer mentor as well as those being supported, as it is possible that providing support may cause mentors distress by 'reawakening' any of their own issues.

Collaboration and partnership working between schools and community settings can help schools to learn from existing good practice and to potentially draw on experienced help from volunteers. Community organisations may also help schools to work alongside less formal physical settings, which the young people may prefer.

Many of the respondents felt that support for specific mental illnesses such as eating disorders or depression should be overseen by a medical professional, as peer support could inadvertently make a problem worse. However others felt that well trained peer mentors could be used to provide additional support to that provided by medical professionals, as young people may feel more able to talk openly to their peers.

Research review

The research review found several key elements that are found within successful projects, although in many cases this evidence is based on self-reported success. It found that successful projects:

- have a clear and realistic plan of timing and resources;
- have a flexible approach, enabling the scheme to develop and change over time as necessary;
- have clear programme management, with effective leadership and support from the senior leadership team;
- are fully integrated and part of a whole-school approach;
- have well trained and supported peer supporters; and
- are well publicised and regarded throughout the school.

4. Setting up mental wellbeing peer support programmes

Context: We would like to encourage schools, colleges and community organisations to develop and establish peer support programmes for mental wellbeing that are right for their children and young people. We asked what they

would need in order to do so and what their key considerations should be.

We asked children, young people and adults how schools, colleges and community settings could be encouraged to offer peer support programmes for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and what they would need in order to set up and facilitate these successfully.

Children and young people's responses

Again, young people responding to this question in the workshops emphasised the need for flexibility to encourage them to take part in these programmes. They felt that there is a lack of space in the timetable at school to take part in peer support sessions during school time and so there needs to be a range of options offered, including using other locations. There was a mix of views around doing the peer support after school; young people were clear that they should have a choice to do what works best for them.

Many were concerned about the language used and felt that this needs to be done sensitively or participation would be impacted.

They suggested using key influencers in the school such as popular and well liked pupils and teachers to promote the programmes.

Adults' responses

Many adult respondents across the call for evidence and workshops mentioned the increasing interest schools have for providing peer support for mental wellbeing, which is often driven by evidence on how it can impact on behaviour and consequently improve outcomes.

Respondents suggested that practice should be evidence based and pilots which are evaluated may help to encourage organisations to offer programmes. In addition this could be expanded by examples of best practice from organisations which already deliver programmes.

Guidance on the best way to develop and deliver effective peer support was mentioned as a potentially useful resource. However there should be a range of options available so that organisations are able to choose an approach that is suitable for them.

The most frequent requirement mentioned was training, which many respondents recommended should initially be provided by an external professional who has experience in children and young people's mental health. Following on from this there should be continuous ongoing training for the staff and young people involved with the programme, building on lessons learnt.

Again it was noted that programmes should have clear leadership with an identified lead person and be appropriate for the needs of children and young people. Respondents felt that there should be commitment from senior leadership and governors and the policy

should be embedded throughout the setting. It should have clear objectives and boundaries and be planned and agreed in advance, ensuring other agencies and organisations are involved before it is implemented within the school or community setting.

Participation could be encouraged by recognition from Ofsted for successful programmes. Schools could ensure it is within school development plans and their provision is clearly described on their websites.

However many respondents mentioned that a lack of time to develop and embed approaches and funding pressures are potential barriers to effective implementation, as well as a lack of resources such as staff time and physical space.

Research review

The research review found that schools provide peer support schemes on a wide range of topics including friendships, transition and bullying. We know that some already run peer support programmes for mental health and we have met with community and voluntary organisations who are also developing and running schemes to develop peer support for young people's mental health.

Consistent with the online call for evidence, there was a pattern across several studies that found peer support programmes are more popular among girls than boys, which may create challenges in encouraging boys to use the services offered. However some studies suggest that online projects in particular may be suitable for boys (Horgan et al. (2013) and Hutson and Cowie (2007)). As previously stated, the review also found that it is important to have a clear and robust process for selecting peer supporters to encourage pupil engagement, along with clear structures for support and supervision. Prominent marketing and publicity in school can also help to encourage take-up.

5. Training, information and support

Context: In any peer support scheme the role of the peer mentor is central to the success of the programme. The quality of support that they offer will have a direct result on the interest in, and impact of, the programme.

These questions asked what training would be needed in order to set up and deliver effective peer support for mental wellbeing.

Children and young people's responses

96% of the young people who responded to the online call for evidence felt that some training for participants was needed when developing and delivering peer support programmes. When asked what that training should include we received the following responses:

- 41% mentioned training around the rules on confidentiality and the boundaries of

- the role;
- 37% felt it important that peer mentors should receive training before they begin;
- 42% would like mentors to have training on what to do if they are upset or worried about what they hear;
- 37% think there should be training on safeguarding and keeping others safe; and
- 37% think there should be ongoing training.

Young people said peer supporters should have training on how to spot the warning signs for more serious mental illness but that they should mostly know how to talk to people and relate.

They felt that it is important that the peer supporters themselves have access to emotional support when they need it and that they are able to take a break if necessary. They thought this was particularly important at busy times of year such as during exams.

Adults' responses

All respondents listed the quality of the training for any scheme to be of paramount importance. This training should be tailored to fit the needs of the young people involved and it should be clear that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. There was wide agreement that the training should be in addition to embedding awareness of mental health through general classwork and whole-school approaches to knowledge about mental health and wellbeing

Within the call for evidence almost all the respondents discussed the need for effective adult support. However some focused on recommending the use of mental health professionals while others focused on the knowledge and training needed by school staff to support the programme.

There was acknowledgement of the importance of the initial training package and the need to get it right for young people and staff, as well as the need for ongoing training and support. There were differing views as to whether this training should be delivered through nationally recognised packages or through more bespoke packages individually developed.

Many adults felt that it is important for the training to provide clear boundaries and expectations for all involved on what the programme can and can't provide. That this is necessary to establish trust between the mentors and the mentees, and they all understand the rules on confidentiality and safeguarding.

Research review

Several studies say the success of their project depends on the quality of the peer supporters and having trained pupils who have a high profile and command respect. Suggested skills for effective peer mentors include:

- good communication and interpersonal skills;

- active listening and problem-solving skills;
- ensuring a non-judgmental attitude;
- knowing the limits of their expertise and when to refer for further support;
- awareness of confidentiality and ethical issues; and
- awareness of child protection issues.

Many school-based programmes involve structured training (either formal or external) of peer supporters, and the importance of this is emphasised in a number of studies. Good quality training was considered important both in preparing the adult co-ordinators to run a programme and in equipping peer supporters for their roles. Programmes which offered quality training to their mentors also had more successful matches between mentor and mentee.

Studies also underline the importance of effective training for school staff and co-ordinators, both in management and co-ordination skills as well as understanding issues relating to peer support.

6. Recognition and rewards

Context: To become effective peer mentors young people will need to develop a range of personal and communication skills. Recognising and acknowledging this may help to encourage participation within schemes.

This question asked what type of recognition and rewards could be effective in encouraging young people to take part in peer support activity. It also asked what might help them to capitalise on their experiences and skills in the future.

Children and young people's responses

Within the call for evidence, 60% of young people said the most important recognition would be the ability to be able to refer to their peer support skills on their CV or UCAS application. Where it was possible to analyse by gender and age this appeared more important for girls than boys and more important to secondary aged children than to primary aged children

It appeared that the younger age group feel recognition from school is a more important reward.

41% of all young people thought it would be a good idea for mentors to get an award from a recognised wellbeing organisation.

Adults' responses

Around three quarters of the adults who responded to the call for evidence felt that having some kind of recognition or acknowledgement of their participation would encourage young people to take part in peer support schemes.

They felt that it is important the any recognition should include the life-skills developed as part of the programme such as listening skills, empathy, negotiation etc.

Some suggestions for such recognition included:

- awareness/appreciation from across the school or organisation for their role;
- badges or certificates;
- awards ceremonies;
- the ability to include their roles and skills on UCAS / CV forms, or for training to lead to UCAS points; and
- the ability to act as an ‘ambassador’, representing their school or organisation and sharing experiences/good practice with other young people.

7. Online support

Context: Online communication is an increasingly significant part of young people’s lives. Responsible and safe sites can offer high quality and accessible information and support anonymously. These questions are about the increasing number of peer support online and mobile apps that children and young people are accessing for help.

These questions focused on identifying the important features of effective online support for mental wellbeing. They included consideration of:

- confidentiality and safeguarding features;
- how online support could be used effectively by schools, colleges and community settings; and
- ways to ensure quality of information, resources and support.

Respondents were also asked how comfortable they would feel recommending websites to others.

Children and young people’s responses

From both the call for evidence and the young people’s workshops, young people were clear that it is very important that websites should be private and that the information they hold should be protected. They want to be confident that what they share is anonymous.

In the call for evidence:

- the most important feature of online support, selected by just over half of respondents, was the confidentiality of information. Where it was possible to analyse by gender and age, this appears to be more important to girls than boys, and to older young people - 45% felt anonymity was important for online support.
- 44% of respondents felt that it was important for any online setting to be a safe place for advice.
- A third of respondents would like the advice to be provided by professionals.

In the workshops, young people told us that they would need to feel confident about the quality of the website and the integrity of the person with whom they were sharing details.

Some said they would feel less concerned if the site was a well-known national branded site, because then they might be more able to trust it. However others said that although it would be more trustworthy, they would be reluctant to use websites recommended or approved by adults. Just under a quarter of online respondents thought that having an award or seal of approval was important and only 12% said that it was important for a teacher or other adult to recommend it.

Some of the young people were concerned that their discussions may not remain confidential if others took screen-shots of their conversations and their anonymity was compromised.

Whilst the anonymity of online sites appeals, this is offset by the lack of consistent relationships. Online support might be through different people each time whereas face to face is more likely to have more longevity.

With regards to online risks many of the young people said that although they know how to report bullying and abuse online, they could be reluctant so because of the stigma attached to reporting. There was a perception that bullying is more normalised in the online world and online provision would need to tackle this expectation.

Adults' responses

Within the call for evidence, adults considered the most important feature to be the content of the website; its accuracy, reliability and the appropriateness for the young people using it. It should be clear, factual and non-stigmatising and young people should be able to know that they are able to trust the advice.

They considered the oversight of the website to be equally as important as the need for online privacy. Websites that enable chat and discussions should be effectively and promptly moderated by experts to ensure the appropriateness of the advice and the discussions. Safeguarding should be a priority.

Within the workshops stakeholders commented that for high-traffic sites a fully moderated model of online peer support that checks every post can be difficult to deliver. However there are many different models of moderation, including community moderation and post moderation, which could be explored.

Adults in both the call for evidence and the workshops felt that online support can be very beneficial to those who just want further information or who would be reluctant / unable to use face-to-face-services, as online is where young people automatically turn to for information. However these websites and apps should complement face-to-face services rather than replace them entirely and they should signpost young people to the right type of face-to-face support when needed.

The main issue respondents had about recommending websites or apps to young people is around quality assurance. They want to know that they are safe and provide high quality information and support. Suggestions about how this reassurance could be given include:

- the website/app is provided by an established and respected mental health or youth organisation that has proven experience of working effectively with children and young people; or
- a kite-mark/registration scheme which shows the safety and quality has been externally assessed on a regular basis and that it meets core quality standards; or
- publically published data or evidence on the impact of the website or the app on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Some raised the issue that whilst branding of online content may help to address issues around quality and safety, it may be off-putting to young people who prefer to find their own places to talk and find support. Any branding would also need to be careful around the language used – young people don't want sites to make it obvious that they are looking for information on a mental health issue or any other type of 'crisis'.

Families are also seeking resources and information to help them to help their children and some of the respondents commented on how parents could use online websites and apps to do this. They can also use peer support services for themselves – there are increasing numbers of parents using befriending services to talk to other parents in similar situations

There is a need to take into account the age and vulnerability of the young people and the subject matter. Some expressed concerns about the appropriateness of them for peer support for particular groups such as primary school children or those with learning difficulties.

Research review

The review found that a key benefit of on-line programmes is that they offer anonymity, avoiding the fear of a mentor being able to share personal information about the mentee with the wider community. It also provides an open space to meet without preconceptions, personalities or boundaries.

Some studies suggest that online communication can be more suited to boys with emotional issues than face to face methods, especially for boys who typically are less likely than girls to seek professional help.

Evidence of the effectiveness of online projects is not robust, though some studies indicate that the use of chat rooms may be effective, especially in combatting depressive symptoms in older young people. These studies highlight the potential benefits of interacting with peers on the internet and how informal support via chat rooms can

reduce depressive symptoms; however they offer little information on peer support processes.

Other studies suggest that online projects can “equalise the playing field as socially marginalised groups are able to communicate, and find the social support online that is often lacking in their traditional relationships”.

8. Access to specialist services

Context: Peer support is not a replacement for support from adults or specialist support from mental health professionals, but it should be able to signpost those who need it to the appropriate services.

These discussions and questions focused on how peer support programmes can fit within the wider continuum of mental health support for children and young people. Respondents were asked how peer support programmes can fit within processes that ensure appropriate referrals to professional help when needed.

As these questions were focused on how systems and processes might effectively work together it was only asked to the adults as it was felt to be less relevant to young people. However, over a third of young people that responded online said that peer support programmes should have an adult to speak to about any serious problems that arose.

Adults' responses

Adults in both the call for evidence and the workshops felt that peer support can be a helpful early intervention and a stepping stone to further services as necessary. However they felt that it is important that any peer support system is fully integrated into an easily accessible support network of adult and clinical support.

Some respondents in the workshops suggested that as part of developing a peer support programme, schools and community organisations should ensure they engage in advance with GPs, health providers, social care providers, VCS organisations and other providers in their local areas and collaborate to share good practice.

They felt that referral pathways should be drawn up in advance with the agreement of all the services involved. All involved in the peer support scheme should be aware of these processes, and they should be regularly reviewed as to their effectiveness.

Numerous respondents suggested that a lack of access to CAMHS and other specialist support would be a risk to peer support programmes. They mentioned the importance of having sufficient support services and a clear pathway for referrals. They were clear that the decision to escalate to specialist help, such as CAMHS, should not be taken solely by the young mentor but should be done with the support of an adult.

There was consensus that all mentors should be able to immediately flag up an emergency situation to an on-site adult, irrespective of the subsequent pathway.

Research review

The review didn't focus specifically on the relationship between peer support and specialist services, though it did identify gaps between provisions as a critical factor in the success of programmes.

Adult support and/or supervision of peer supporters is often seen as vital to school peer support programmes, particularly to ensure that supporters are not left to operate alone beyond their limitations, such as dealing with highly sensitive issues.

Peer supporters also need to know when to seek help and who to seek it from. Collaboration between young people and adults is central to the effectiveness of a peer support programme and pupils need to be trained and monitored so that they know their own limitations and when to seek help.

9. Risks

Context: Activities where children and young people disclosing personal information to one another, either face to face or online, carry certain risks around privacy and safeguarding. We want to know more about what the possible risks might be both for those offering and those receiving the support.

Adult respondents were asked to consider what the risks might be around providing peer support, either through face-to-face or online methods.

These questions were focused on the risks to successful implementation and were only asked to the adult respondents.

Adults' responses

In the call for evidence most respondents felt that the greatest risks come through inadequate training and ongoing support and supervision of those providing the peer support. The major concern is that children and young people don't have the right knowledge or experience to support their peers. This can lead to issues such as:

- the problems are exacerbated through incorrect advice;
- the peer supporter ends up feeling isolated and distressed when they are unable to help; and
- both the mentor and mentee are unsure of when and how to seek professional help.

Issues around safeguarding and confidentiality were also a major concern, particularly around ensuring that young people know when information is to be kept private and when it must be shared with an adult.

The other major issue raised was how to ensure the relationship between the mentor and mentee is appropriate and effective without the boundaries 'blurring' between the roles.

In the workshops, concerns were raised that setting up support systems that don't continue can create more issues than it helps. They felt that any peer support programme needs to be part of a wider, sustained approach based around the whole needs of the child. This includes not having a cut-off at school leaving age as for many vulnerable young people this can be a very challenging time.

They also had concerns around labelling vulnerable young people by creating peer support groups that obviously focus on particular issues. Good systems should allow young people to find their own commonality of experience, though it was acknowledged that this can be difficult if funding is ring-fenced for specific issues.

Research review

The main risks to be addressed to ensure successful delivery were identified as being:

- Lack of sustainability because of conflicting priorities in the school, a lack of time, or an over-reliance on a single co-ordinator who may leave the school. These issues can be addressed by making sure there is support from senior management and other staff, and in setting up the scheme with a clear and realistic plan of timing and resources.
- Low take-up of the scheme by pupils. This can be caused by a lack of trust in the peer mentors or by general disengagement with the scheme. To address this, it is important to have a clear and robust process for selecting peer supporters, and a sound mechanism for support and supervision. Prominent marketing and publicity in school can also help to encourage take-up.
- Negative impacts on participants: the review has highlighted that some programmes may have a negative impact on young people (e.g. bullying projects where exposure to others with experience of bullying may re-inforce their attitudes and behaviours).
- There are also risks of exposing children and young people to unsettling or overwhelming information about mental illness, particularly in programmes that address more serious mental health issues such as self-harm. In some cases this may impact on the mental health of the peer mentors. This can best be addressed by ensuring robust procedures and sufficient staff to provide support to the mentors.

Annex A – Organisations that contributed

The Department for Education would like to thank all those that contributed to the call for evidence activities either as part of our Advisory Group or through chairing, arranging or attending one of our nine workshops, completing our online surveys or responding to one of our Twitter polls.

We have not named individual respondents or attendees.

A list of organisations that contributed are as follows:

| | |
|--|--|
| Adoption UK | Northumberland Domestic Abuse Services |
| Al-Anon/Alateen | Off the Record Croydon |
| Association of Colleges | Parenting UK |
| Association of Teachers and Lecturers | ParentsZone |
| Barnardo's | Place2Be |
| Beat | PSHE education |
| British Association Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) | Reach Feltham Academy |
| British Youth Council | Richmond Park Academy |
| CAMHS Solent NHS Trust | Riverside School, Bromley |
| Carers Trust | RLSB |
| Centre for Self Managed Learning | Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health |
| Changing Families Project | Salus Group |
| Charlie Waller Memorial Trust | Sandon School |
| Clifton with Rawcliffe Primary School | Scouts |
| Contact a Family | Sefton Council Well Young Person Team |
| Coram BAAF | Self Esteem Team |
| Diana Award | Self Management UK |
| Dorset County Council | SEND Consultancy |
| Dove Bereavement Service | Silent Secret |
| Duke of Edinburgh Awards | Somerset Young Mental Health Champions |
| East Leake Academy | South Cheshire College |
| EHCAP Ltd | South West London and St. George's NHS Mental Health Trust |
| Family Action | Southampton City Council |
| Family Links and the Nurturing Schools Network | St Helens RC Primary School |
| Family Matters | St Wilfred's RC College |
| Girl Guiding UK | Star Bereavement Support Service (Charity) |
| HeadStart Newham | StreetGames |
| HeadStart Wolverhampton | Student Minds |

| | |
|---|--|
| Healthwatch, Wokingham Borough | The Cheadle and Marple College Network |
| Healthy Minds | The Children's Sleep Charity |
| Hector's House | The CLD Trust |
| Highgate Secondary School | The Diana Award |
| Holy Trinity VA CofE Primary School | The Magna Carta school |
| Hull City Council | The Prince's Trust |
| Huntingdonshire Regional College | The Priory School |
| IMAGO | The Project |
| Institute of Group Analysis | Thorns Community College |
| Kids | Timbercroft Primary School |
| Kidscape | Time to Change |
| KindleCo specialist Consultancy | TimeBank |
| Leek Federation Churnet View Middle School | Turning Point |
| London Borough Lewisham | University of Surrey |
| MCMA | Wellington College |
| Me2 | West Sussex County Council |
| Mental Health Foundation | Weston College |
| METRO Charity | Wider Learning |
| Mind | YMCA England |
| National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS) | Young Minds |
| National Children's Bureau | Young NCB |
| National Citizen Service | Youth Net |
| NCVO Mentoring and Befriending | Youth Sport Trust |
| North Oxfordshire Academy | Youthworks Consulting Ltd |
| North Yorkshire Police | |

Annex B – Questions from the children and young people’s survey

Peer support – your opinions:

1. Have you ever been involved in peer support (tick all that apply)?
 - a. Yes – as a peer supporter
 - b. Yes – receiving support
 - c. No

2. If you have been involved in peer support, please tell us about it. For example, what do you think was good about it, and what could have been better?

[Free text box]

If answered 1b or c, move to 3; else move to 5

3. If training were available, would you be interested in being a peer supporter?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

If answered 3b, go to 4; else go to 5

4. If not, why not (tick all that apply)?
 - a. I don’t know enough about emotional wellbeing
 - b. I don’t feel confident supporting my peers
 - c. I’m just not interested/it’s not for me
 - d. I’m worried about what my friends might say
 - e. I’m dealing with my own issues around wellbeing
 - f. I’m not interested now, but might be in the future
 - g. I don’t have the time
 - h. Any other reasons (please specify)

If answered 1a or c; go to 5; else go to 7

5. If it were available to you, would you be interested in having a peer supporter to talk to?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

If answered 5b, go to 6; else go to 7

6. If not, why not (tick all that apply)?
 - a. I don’t think peer support would help me
 - b. I don’t need peer support

- c. I don't feel confident that anything I might say during peer support would be kept confidential
 - d. I'm worried about what my friends might say
 - e. I don't have time
 - f. I'd prefer to be a peer supporter
 - g. I'm getting support somewhere else
 - h. Any other reasons (please specify)
7. What do you think the most important features of a peer support programme are? (select up to 5 features)
- a. The peer supporters are friendly and approachable
 - b. There is a choice of times to have peer support
 - c. Peer support is available in school
 - d. Peer support is available out of school
 - e. Peer support is available online
 - f. Peer supporters and those receiving support are part of the same friendship group
 - g. Peer supporters and those receiving support are of a different age/social group
 - h. Those giving peer support have personal experience of the difficulties of those receiving it
 - i. You can see your peer supporter every week
 - j. You can see your peer supporter as and when you need them or at a drop in session
 - k. There is an adult to talk to if there are any problems
 - l. There is information about peer support available
 - m. There is information about other support available, e.g. to access after peer support is finished
8. Are there any other features of peer support that you think are important?

[Free text box]

Online support:

9. What do you think the most important features of an online peer support programme are? (please select up to 3 features)
- a. How your friends and peers rated it
 - b. That it's a safe place to get advice
 - c. Whether it's anonymous
 - d. Who's providing the advice
 - e. How negative comments are managed
 - f. Whether it has a 'safe' kitemark

Support, training and accreditation:

10. What support or training do you think peer supporters should get? Tick as many as apply?

- Training before they begin
- Ongoing training
- Ongoing emotional support/opportunities to talk to an adult about any difficult issues that come up
- Rules on confidentiality etc.
- Training on safeguarding/keeping people safe
- Opportunity to talk to other people offering peer support
- Any other comments

11. What recognition do you think peer supporters should get?

- a. A badge or award from your school/college
- b. Be part of an existing award eg Duke or Edinburgh's Award
- c. Being able to put peer support on your CV/UCAS form
- d. An award from a recognised wellbeing organisation
- e. Anything else?

All about you:

12. How old are you?

- Up to 11
- 12-16
- 17 and over

13. How would you describe your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other/prefer not to say

14. Who do you live with?

- Parents/carers
- Other relatives
- In foster care
- Alone
- With friends
- Other

15. Are you in:

- School
- College
- Training
- College and training

- Work
- None of the above

16. Do you get 1-1 or small group support in school or college from a teaching assistant?

17. Do you have any further comments or views that you would like to share with us?

Annex C – Questions from the adults’ survey

Peer support – your views and experiences

1. What are your experiences, including any evidence that you can share, about:
 - a) What best practice in peer support across all types of issues looks like?
 - b) How this best practice can be translated into supporting children and young people’s mental wellbeing?
 - c) How good peer support approaches in community settings could be used to support programmes within schools and colleges? If any could you please give examples of how they operate and their impact.
 - d) Peer support for mental wellbeing or mental illness (eg. loneliness, depression, eating disorders etc)? If any could you please give examples of how they operate and their impact.
2. What in your experience do schools, colleges and community settings need to set up and facilitate peer support (e.g. advice on which models to use, training for young people, an external facilitator)?

Support, training and accreditation

3. In your experience what support or training for peer supporters is needed to make the support effective?
4. In your experience what recognition is effective in encouraging young people to take part in peer support activity (group or 1:1) and helping them to capitalise on it in the future?
5. In your experience what is effective in encouraging schools/colleges/ community groups to offer peer support?
6. In your experience what information or support do children and young people need before they start receiving peer support, or while they are having peer support?

Online support

7. What do you think the features of effective online support models for mental wellbeing are?
8. How do you think online support could be utilised effectively by schools, colleges and community settings?

9. What information and reassurance would you need to make a recommendation to a young person to use an online peer support app, as either a supporter or someone receiving support?

Peer support and linking with specialist services

10. What are your experiences, including any evidence that you can share, about:

- a) How peer support fits within the wider continuum of mental health support?
- b) How good peer support models can ensure appropriate referrals and a swift response to professional help when needed to prevent escalation and crisis of a mental health issue?

Risks

11. What are your experiences, including any evidence that you can share, about the risks of providing peer support, either through face-to-face or online support?

About you

12. Are you responding as or on behalf of :

- A parent/carer
- A school/college
- A community setting
- A voluntary organisation
- A mental health professional
- A provider of online support
- Other (please state)

Please let us have any other comments or thoughts that you would like to share.

Annex D – Twitter poll questions

- 1) If you had a serious problem such as a mental health issue, who in school would you talk to? (243 votes)
 - Teacher (30%)
 - Parent (10%)
 - **Friend (38%)**
 - School counsellor (22%)

- 2) What do you look for in websites/apps which provide emotional support? (78 votes)
 - Friends like it (4%)
 - Other's say it's good (8%)
 - Safe place to get advice (42%)
 - **Professionals give advice (48%)**

- 3) What support or training do you think people who provide emotional support should get? (145 votes)
 - **Formal training (34%)**
 - Ongoing emotional support (28%)
 - Training on safeguarding (8%)
 - Peer support themselves (30%)

- 4) When you are feeling down or worried who do you talk to first? (113 votes)
 - **Friends (face to face) (58%)**
 - Parents (20%)
 - Teachers (13%)
 - Online friends (9%)

- 5) What is most important to you when you are talking to someone about feeling down or worried? (162 votes)
 - That we are friends (33%)
 - That we **are not** friends (6%)
 - They've experienced this (22%)
 - **They are trained for this (39%)**



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