Young people on the frontline: peer-to-peer delivery and decision making at OTR

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1. Acknowledgments

Huge gratitude and many thanks to the brilliant Peer Mentors/Peer Navs, Peer Reps and staff at OTR who gave their time, insights, expertise, extra nuggets and feedback to support the development of this case study. You were all super helpful and, whilst you were really busy delivering projects, you willingly shared your experience.

2. About asset-based Working

Asset-based working looks different in different contexts, but the core principle is that everyone has strengths, gifts or 'assets' that should be used as a starting point for service delivery, community development and/or organisational development. Asset-based approaches are often contrasted with 'deficit-based' work which focuses on needs, problems and issues rather than strengths. This case studies illustrates some examples of asset-based practice within OTR Bristol.

3. About OTR

OTR (which stands for Off the Record) are a Youth Social Movement, where young people play a central role. They focus on mental health using, taking a holistic approach, looking at what's happening around young people in order to support them and then bringing them together to participate in positive and constructive activities. They use a membership model into which young people can self-refer and then navigate their way through the service.

This case study looks at how OTR uses a peer-to-peer approach to deliver its mental health service to young people. It explores how this approach came about and how it has become essential to the way OTR works. It shares how OTR's peer-to-peer approach adapted and evolved during the Covid-19 pandemic. We highlight the many benefits young people who work to support others feel they derive from this experience and their contribution.

> *"We don't see young people as having needs, we see that they've got strengths and interests" (staff).*

4. About OTR's peer-to-peer service

The first person somebody will meet at OTR is a young person. Whether that be at the front door of the service, on the phone, face to face in the hubs, facilitating workshops and/or online. This is a function of the two distinct roles that OTR has established to make it peer led. These are the Peer Navigators (**Peer Navs**) which during Covid-19 became Peer

Mentors, and Peer Representatives (**Peer Reps**). In this case study, we will share examples from both peer-led services. They are both voluntary roles delivered by psychology students.

1. **Peer Navs –** are seen by OTR as the 'mental health tourist guides'. They are part of the Membership Team and are there to ensure young people access the right services from the get-go. Peer Navs give support at an individual level and don't work directly on projects.

When young people first come to drop-ins at the OTR hubs or phone up with enquiries, they meet the Peer Navs, who welcome them in and introduce them to the different opportunities. Peer Navs gently ask the young people how they would like to get involved so they can work out how to support them. Questions they may ask include, 'What interests you?', 'What do you like doing?', 'Is counselling what you want? What else is there?' After the young person has shared their thoughts, the Peer Navs respond with, 'Let's work it out together'. The Peer Navs then find ways for the young people to get involved in something that interests them from the range of projects at OTR, all of which also include gentle positive mental health messages. This approach focuses on the positive assets that young people bring with them when they come to OTR. It differentiates OTR from other mental health support services that can perceive the problem 'as being with the young person'.

Peer Navs have training in how to do this role. They are also given training in the ethos and services of OTR, opportunities for young people and gentle positive mental health messaging, such the importance of good sleep and relaxation.

Peer Navs are supported by adult staff members when they are in the hubs and on phone lines.

Since Covid-19 and through lockdowns, with hubs being closed, the Peer Navs' role has evolved into Peer Mentoring. Peer Mentors do not help with the phone lines and online referrals like Peer Navs, instead, they have one-to-one sessions online with young people which are focused on mutual points of interest and benefit. Young people are matched to their Peer Mentors based on what they are interested in or enjoy doing. Examples include making music, mindfulness, arts and crafts, confidence building – whatever they choose. Most Peer Mentors have three mentees, and they have tailor-made sessions with each of them. Young people who use the service said they wanted this role and other young people wanted to deliver it.

Peer Mentors receive regular supervisions with the Volunteer Co-ordinator and benefit from peer support and training. At the time of research, the role was new and still evolving with feedback that young people (Peer Mentors and mentees) would like it to continue once hubs re-open. This means there will be two roles: Peer Navs and Peer Mentors, one doing introductions and the other mentoring.

> *"Peer Mentors have supervision every three weeks, and they get to share what's happened with each other" (staff).*

2. **Peer Reps:** The Peer Rep is another essential peer role in the OTR offer. It picks up were the Peer Nav role ends. Peer Reps co-deliver projects with staff members, usually on a six-week basis. Peer Reps have the freedom to choose and design projects that interest them. Peer Reps are supported by staff to facilitate these sessions with young

people. Opportunities to get involved are as diverse as the projects within OTR and can include LGBTQ+ support, anti-bullying, positive relationships, body positivity and social media.

Before COVID, Peer Reps also delivered pop-up shops and taster sessions in schools, to reach a wider range of young people and to highlight to them that it OTR is youth-led and relevant to them.

Since COVID and through lockdown, all workshops and programmes which were face to face have been moved online in a workshop-type setting. Peer Reps have training before they get started, about OTR and the role of a Peer Rep. They also need to present an idea to the team to share thoughts or innovations they may have for one of the projects. This can be quite empowering, as it signals to those young people who are volunteering, that they are important to the project.

> *"I liked coming up with an idea for the project, knowing that I could be delivering it" (Peer Rep).*

5. The journey: how peer-to-peer delivery has evolved

OTR want to offer a distinctive and relevant service to young people. As such, it is important that OTR feels different from other mental health services and that young people know this from the moment they are connected (or referred). OTR wants to give a less clinical experience compared with other ways of accessing mental health support (e.g. via a G.P.) and for young people to be offered more choice and given more voice as part of the experience. This means that they offer a service where young people are encouraged to feel a sense of belonging from the start.

Central to this approach, is a collaborative feel between young people, young volunteers and OTR. Getting to this point has taken time, an openness to feedback about how the peer-to-peer role is working, and a willingness to make changes.

OTR are committed to participation being so much more than young people 'just turning up to meetings. As such, they have developed the service to be genuinely peer to peer, with young people building positive relationships with each-other:

> *"It has totally changed young people's experience; they are more embedded in the organisation and they get timely support" (staff).*

> *"Young people delivering the work makes it easier, more relatable, not hierarchical for other young people. It brings it closer and friendly" (young person).*

However, there was a mixed response from some external stakeholders to delivering in this way. Initially the idea of having young people at the front door, was met with some concern from external organisations, who perhaps thought that OTR were too maverick by placing young people so front and centre and questioned the appropriateness of their approach (e.g. in relation to safeguarding/training/professionalism). However, by developing the role and managing these concerns by ensuring safeguarding and training and support were in place,

the team overcame any barriers and young people continue to be referred and self-refer to the service.

During its first year, OTR tinkered with the role and what it would and could involve. Staff worked closely with young people, to shape, develop and establish the parameters of the roles. In the second year, they were still defining it. They had more young people on placement so worked out the necessary training, the roles, and realised that they needed a better balance between what OTR was giving and what young people were contributing. They had an enthusiastic group of volunteers so they were careful to help them manage their time with university and other commitments. The love of the role meant some young people would have over-delivered, but OTR wanted to protect them from that:

> *"We've reviewed it and changed it along the way. Now they're only doing three days, they can't do more, it allows them to earn money [elsewhere] and study. And makes sure we've got enough for them to do" (staff).*

In its second and third years, the peer-to-peer programme has further developed and had a more established format for working. In practice, this has involved a more diverse set of young people coming forward to volunteer who had found out about the project by word of mouth. In addition, young people wanting to use the service have been able to receive timely and relevant support. Outreach into schools was yielding positive results too, with more young people self-referring, and new programmes within OTR were developed with the support Peer Reps.

During COVID, the team quickly knew that the projects couldn't be delivered face to face, so rapidly pivoted their offer. With their core of committed volunteers, OTR came up with alternative ways of working online so that young people felt supported during lockdown. Projects continued throughout the year (2020-2021), albeit in a different format, with some positive impacts on loniness for young people supported by the project. Young people who carried on being Peer Reps and those who became Peer Mentors seemed to thrive in their roles and benefited from the peer-to-peer experience. They reported that the group check-ins and peer support were useful learning and sharing opportunities. They both delivered their roles online, in one-to-one sessions (Peer Mentors) and group sessions (Peer Reps). They also received their training and supervision with OTR, online.

> *"We set this up as a temporary solution to hubs not working, but it's going well, and young people are enjoying it so we're going to review it again" (staff).*

> *"I really liked delivering my Mentoring sessions online, it means people are less flaky and turn up. We also get to do things we both enjoy" (young person).*

> *"I think the skill-sharing element is really important to keep the sessions fun but also grounded and allows them to flow nicely from week-to-week and to give them a purpose that isn't directly linked with mental health" (staff).*

> *"After one year – these guys are leaders – interested and passionate" (staff).*

6. The practice: the building blocks of asset-based working

a. The first point of contact with the organisation

A successful and strategic decision that the first point of contact for any young person should be another young person, has meant that OTR are well positioned to deliver on its clear vision about being a young person-led movement. It also meant that young people were building relationships with each other from the outset. They can see that OTR is their space and they can choose how to get involved the wider service.

By being in this role, the Peer Navs, Peer Reps and Peer Mentors have a place in the bigger organisational story, by delivering in an asset-based way and sharing learnings with each other.

> *"Having a communication with the rest of the organisation makes the [Peer] Mentors feel a part of something bigger, generating a good community atmosphere which motivates people to perform better" (young person).*

b. Young people choose how they get involved, following areas of interest either as members or Peer Reps and Peer Navs/Peer Mentors

Young people have a clear purpose, sense of freedom and trust between each other and OTR as an organisation. This means they get to be involved in projects of their choosing and in so doing, build their self-confidence and efficacy through decision-making, participating and delivering support. Peer Reps and Peer Navs/Peer Mentors support this process.

> *"They're all in control of the situation and of their experiences. Back and forth process […] helps them develop as young people and it helps us develop as mentors who are young people" (staff).*

c. Ongoing training and support means people feel like they are learning all the time and that their skills are recognised as assets

The training for the different roles and about the wider organisation were greatly appreciated and seen as broadly useful by Peer Navs, Peer Mentors and Peer Reps. This training includes basic mental health training, boundary setting, safeguarding, how to do peer support and skills sharing.

In addition, the teams have regular meetings with each other and the Volunteer Co-ordinator as well as supervised sessions. While Peer Mentors noted that both were valuable, the supervisions were felt to be essential. The meetings are a chance to share what's working and what's challenging. The supervised sessions are an opportunity to learn from each other. Staff facilitate sessions and input when it is needed. At the time of writing, supervised sessions were taking place every three weeks.

> *"Although it's great to have support from my supervisors, a lot of the support and ideas for sessions come from fellow mentors in the supervision sessions we have" (young person).*

> *"Group supervision is also really important and has helped me develop my skills as a mentor and provided some sense of being part of a group of mentors rather than just working through cases independently"* (young person).

There is a clear sense of reciprocity between the Peer Reps, Peer Navs, Peer Mentors and OTR, as well as in the peer-to-peer relationships. Young people recognise that they are both contributing to the roles and benefitting from being involved. They also realise that everyone involved is likely to be getting something different out of it. The OTR team see themselves as leading from behind, with young people guiding the way.

> *"I loved working in the Resilience Labs. I got to co-facilitate and had great feedback"* (young person).

> *"This is led by young people, they shape it, it's their path. It takes it away from traditional therapy, which makes it very friendly and personal"* (young person).

d. The volunteers are given appropriate responsibility

Whilst there is much appreciation from OTR to their volunteers for their enthusiasm and offer of time, OTR know they have a responsibility to protect them from doing too much and help them to manage their other priorities. They are also aware that there is a need to provide training, support, and experiences so the role is beneficial to the young people delivering services and contributes to shaping their futures.

> *"young people are bringing a lot to us and we have to balance that and give a lot back"* (staff).

The skill set and expectation of OTR toward the Peer Reps, Peer Navs and Peer Mentors is different from that of staff members within OTR. This is checked-in with regularly, particularly around safeguarding. Everyone understands the parameters of their Peer Rep, Peer Nav and Peer Mentor roles and are clear as to when it is time to go to a member of staff, either for advice or to pass the baton. Guidelines like this are agreed and explored during their training and reinforced during meetings.

> *"Having access to the leader/organiser [phone] numbers to talk through any issues or concerns is very useful and comforting for the mentors. Full training and information/documents are very useful to refer back to whilst peer mentoring"* (young person).

The OTR team regularly evaluate the projects with all young people, seeing when it works and doesn't work so well. The feedback is taken on board and everyone feels heard. They create an open and comfortable space for sharing feedback, including suggestions for how to change things which can feel more difficult to feedback on.

> *"As time's gone on, it has become more specific, we've been able to refine the role. Leaning in and really listening to what's needed"* (staff).

> *"In these discussions we can bring up any issues we are facing or suggestions we have in the improvement of the programme. There is an open conversation about how to improve the services and our suggestions are often taken on board quickly,*

if they are not then the issues are discussed. All opinions are treated with equal value" (young person).

e. Some staff were once members, so their experiences matter and they are encouraged to follow their instincts

Having had previous experiences of being members of OTR themselves (lived experience) and growing up through accessing different projects within the organisation, staff are in a strong position to improve and enhance projects. They do this by following their instincts and feeling empowered by their knowledge and previous experiences to confidently suggest and passionately drive relevant, safe changes. For some, this may be risk taking, but for those driving the change, there is a greater risk associated with *not* evolving.

This is complemented by a belief in honest relationships and open communication with everyone.

> *"It's all about relationships: when you've got relationships from the beginning, you're delivering a great service" (staff).*

7. Questions for other organisations to consider based on OTR's peer-to-peer experiences

- How do you let young people know the service is theirs?
- Could you have young people welcoming others into the service?
- How do young people decide their journey as members?
- What would you need to do to adapt to a peer-to-peer approach?
- What challenges would you face?
- What would the benefits be?
- Are there ways for volunteers in your organisations to be given appropriate responsibility?
- Do you have any staff who were once part of your membership? What does this bring to your organisation?

8. Asset-based Framework highlight summary

The grid below serves to compare the tangible values and behaviours practiced at OTR, against the more theoretical asset-based Framework (Renaisi 2019[1]). We use this framework to exemplify how OTR's peer to-peer approach is asset-based. Looking at the grid, we can see there are many crossovers in the framework categories when we consider how asset-based working is played out in 'real life'. The peer-to-peer approach works because the whole organisation has embedded asset-based working. The case study illustrates why the peer-to-peer approach maps onto the framework with the aim of helping

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[1] Renaisi as part of the Youth Fund Evaluation for Paul Hamlyn, 2019

other organisations seeing themselves in this story and finding possibilities of working in similar ways.

	How OTR put asset-based principles into practice identified through research	Asset-based working framework blocks			
		Decision making	Delivery	Operations	Influence
Young people	✓ …first point of contact with whole organisation		■		
	✓ …choose how to get involved, following areas of interest	■	■	■	■
	✓ … ongoing training and support, including peer support	■		■	■
	✓ … given appropriate responsibility, buffered from taking on too much	■	■		
Staff	✓ …followed instincts and evolve		■		
	✓ …Lived experiences of some among the team		■		
	✓ …prioritise relationships with young people, valuing everything they bring as an asset		■	■	■
	✓ …clear about vision and reasons for making changes		■	■	
	✓ …lead from behind	■	■	■	■