

## About us – Peer Support Plus®



### Peer Support Plus C.I.O.

We are a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered with the [Charity Commission](#) in England on 12 August 2020, Registered Number 1190818.

You will find our *Constitution*<sup>1</sup>, which includes our charitable **Objects**, on the [Documents](#) page of our website <http://www.peersupportplus.org/>

Peer Support Plus is a Charity with Voting Members other than its Trustees. Our *Membership Policy*<sup>1</sup> including our form **Application to become a voting Member of Peer Support Plus** can also be found on the [Documents](#) page of our website. We have set and will aim to maintain our annual Membership Fee at £0 so cost will not deter you from become a voting Member of the Charity. Membership enables you to help other Members democratically appoint or remove Trustees, hold them to account, and influence the policies and future direction of Peer Support Plus.

You can get in touch with us as described on the [Contact us](#) page of our website.

### Roots and Branch

Our roots lie with a group of pioneers who met at [Leeds Mind](#) about twenty years before the seeds of Peer Support Plus were first sown.

These people:

- Considered themselves ordinary.
- Did not wish to be defined by their mental health diagnoses, or 'labelled' by anyone.
- Considered themselves 'experts in their own distress'.
- Wished to take back control over managing their own 'recovery' from mental ill health.
- Felt they could gain insight from sharing each other's first-hand 'lived experiences' and working together individuals would learn to better manage their mental health.
- Decided to meet and talk as equals, without a trained professional in the room to judge them, steer the conversation, or hand down second-hand beliefs or judgments that are not necessarily rooted in lived experience.

In a bold move, Leeds Mind's Board of Trustees agreed to risk trusting these people to meet weekly as a Group without an 'expert professional' in control. Each individual group member undertook to take responsibility for their own wellbeing and behaviour, respect *Safeguarding*<sup>1</sup> and *Health and Safety*<sup>1</sup> policies, and aspire to agreed *Guidelines for Behaviour*<sup>1</sup>. Some participants volunteered to Facilitate the group, which meant looking after process, timekeeping and domestic matters.

Facilitators are not 'leaders' or 'experts' but equal participants in the group who continue to share their feelings and lived experience while learning to better manage their own mental health. In practice, every group member helps to facilitate 'Group Work' by speaking from the 'I' sharing thoughts and feelings arising from their own lived experience; and speaking up if they feel uncomfortable with the process or think the conversation may be straying from agreed guidelines.

As time went on, more weekly Support Groups were established. Particular tools, techniques and awareness that individuals had discussed and found helpful were noted and eventually shaped into bespoke Workshops and Courses conducted using the same Group Work practices and in the same safe environment.

This model of Peer Support Group Work, hosted by Leeds Mind, proved so valued by and beneficial to group members that for more than a decade it was funded by the NHS and Leeds Adult Social Care, enabling Leeds Mind to employ two or three people (often existing Volunteers) to administer and facilitate a substantial ongoing core programme of Support Groups, bespoke Workshops and Courses.

By 2012, NHS funding cuts had focused Commissioners priorities on other interventions, principally those which evolved into the present [Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service](#) offering. Consequently, NHS and Leeds Adult Social Care withdrew funding from Peer Support at Leeds Mind. Peer Support Volunteers campaigned vigorously and in March 2013 won a one-off grant sufficient to support one part-time administrator through one more financial year.

From April 2013, Volunteers delivered all Support Groups, Workshops and Courses. To radically reduce Facilitator preparation time and increase Peer benefit, Volunteers completely redesigned, re-wrote and enhanced bespoke core Courses and popular Workshops using consistent language, content, presentation, process and document control, so they all follow a familiar format, pre-packaged, off-the-shelf and session-ready.

As time passed Leeds Mind sought and won new Commissions to shape and take this proven Peer Support material and Group Work practice into a wide variety of environments such as Asian Women's group, Prison, Community, University and even NHS settings. Employed Peer Support workers now worked alongside Volunteers to co-Facilitate Leeds Mind's 'traditional' Programme of (free at the point of delivery) Support Groups, Workshops and Courses.

In 2018, Commissioners demanded the formation of a consortium of third sector providers, including Leeds Mind, to contract collectively and supply a package of services. Funding for 'traditional' Peer Support was left out of this contract. From April 2019 Leeds Mind generously continued to employ Peer Support workers and support Peer Support Volunteers using 'internally generated' funds.

In October 2019 with demand and waiting lists for membership of Peer Support Groups far exceeding its capacity to supply, Leeds Mind's decided upon a radical change of Operational direction. It was announced that on 31 March 2020 the two existing open-ended Support Groups would close and scarce resources would be diverted to offer time-limited (six months duration) membership of a Support Group, and a reduced programme of Workshops and Courses. It expected short run interventions would bring limited benefit to a larger number of people but at the cost of abandoning the open-ended principal and current Support Groups members.

We believe open-ended Support Group membership is the foundation stone of Peer Support as practiced at Peer Support Plus. People learning elsewhere to take responsibility for and manage their mental health continually suffer a lack of continuity and stability to help them tackle deep seated issues or maintain their present level of 'recovery'. They often experience long waits for NHS support and feeling 'passed from pillar to post'. They feel rejected when services close or therapists move during constant NHS staffing changes and reorganisations; and feel abandoned when strictly time limited interventions stop. This fear of being left 'high and dry' while they are attempting challenging steps undermines people's commitment to tackle difficult issues or embark on major life or behavioural changes.

Open-ended Support Group members and Volunteers vigorously protested Leeds Mind's decision to branch from what we believe is a fundamental principle. The promise of open-ended membership is the very thing that fosters commitment and enables some group members to make real headway with their own issues. It ultimately sustains the group because individuals grow in confidence and become Volunteer Facilitators. Another of the founding principles that it is 'O.K. to leave and O.K. to come back' actually helps people have confidence to leave their Support Group and continue self-managing their 'recovery' unsupported, rather than clinging to their places or seeking support elsewhere.

### **Our History**

On 19 March 2020, existing members of the Leeds Mind open-ended Wednesday afternoon Peer Support Group formally established themselves as a Community Association they named Peer Support Plus, and contracted to meet weekly from 1 April 2020 at Leeds City Council's Lovell Park Mental Health Hub.

On 23 March 2020, Covid 19 lock-down prevented a final celebratory face-to-face meeting on 25 March at Leeds Mind's building in Horsforth. Instead, group members (we call Peer Support Plus beneficiaries 'Peers') immediately met online by Zoom as Peer Support Plus and continue to meet weekly.

In April 2020:

- Leeds Mind awarded Peer Support Plus a one-off 'Side-by-Side' nationally funded grant of £310 to help us re-establish independently. (Peer Support Plus continues to maintain good relations with Leeds Mind and some of our Volunteers still co-Facilitate Workshops and Courses there.)
- Peer Support Plus joined the [Leeds Peer Support Network](#).
- Our Trustees decided to:
  - Implement a sustainable very low-cost 'paperless' model of open-ended Peer Support, avoiding as far as proves practicable the acquisition of assets such as premises, employees and equipment; by mostly administering our activities online.
  - Wherever possible 'Simplify and add lightness' to Peer Support Plus's policies and practice.
  - Apply to the Charity Commission to become a C.I.O. because charitable status enables us to access practical support such as free or reduced-price training, banking, web hosting, mainstream software, technical support, etc.

On 10 August 2020 five of our Volunteers were trained by [100% Digital Leeds](#) and became certified Digital Champions.

On 12 August 2020 Peer Support Plus was Registered with the Charity Commission as a C.I.O.

On 16 December 2020 [NHS West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health Care Partnership](#) Awarded Peer Support Plus the Targeted Prevention Grant of £5,000 we had applied for, to help those whose mental health has been disproportionately affected by the Covid 19 pandemic.

By 30 April 2021 we will:

- Re-open our Wednesday afternoon Peer Support Group to new members. It will revert to face-to-face meetings once Lovell Park Hub reopens.
- Launch a second weekly, online only, Tuesday evening Peer Support Group by Zoom, reaching out to those who are not able to attend face-to-face meetings; including providing Tablets and Data connectivity for at least three Peers who would otherwise be excluded simply because they were 'digitally excluded'.

**Notes** <sup>1</sup> available on our website [peersupportplus.org](https://peersupportplus.org)

END