Background to the project: Peer support in mental health has been acknowledged since the provision of services in the 18th century and has more recently become a service in its own right being considered an important source of empowerment (Jackson; 2010; Faulkner & Basset 2010; Davidson 2012; Faulkner & Kalathil 2012). Peer support has been shown to be of great importance with regards to a healthy life, a recovery approach and a critical component of the service user movement (Watts 2014). Evidence has suggested that recovery based approaches to mental health are beneficial for service users in achieving an optimum state of mental health and also for peers providing the service (Watts et al. 2014).

Peer support refers to an individual using their personal experiences of mental health challenges to support others with similar problems (Salzer 2010). The formalisation of the PSW role in mental health has been welcomed (Skills for Health, 2011; Basset et al. 2010) and it has been noted as the fastest growing occupation within mental health (Doughty and Tse 2011). Evidence shows that by involving people with lived experience of mental health disorders in supporting others it can enhance their own recovery journey increasing self-confidence, income and contribution (Mc Clean et al. 2009; Pratt et al. 2012). The employment of peer support workers has improved service delivery by bridging the gap between the mental health system and service users (Chinman et al. 2010) and a reduction in psychiatric admissions has also been identified through the employment of PSWs, leading to cost savings (Trachenberg et al. 2013).

England (DH 2011), Scotland (Scottish Government 2012), Wales (Welsh Government 2012) and Northern Ireland (DHSSPS 2012) have each put forward their own mental health strategies and all recognise the importance of peer support as a means to support recovery. In the recent Northern Ireland Report ‘Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together’ (DoH 2016) the Health Minister referred to an example of co-production being evident in Mental Health Recovery Colleges. She stated that this was an “innovative model that assists individuals in their personal and collective journey of recovery” (p.20). She also stated that “This recovery focussed approach creates opportunities for those with lived experience to contribute as volunteers and in paid roles. These
Peer educators assist those with mental health problems to discover personal talents and develop life skills which can help them enter the labour market. A number of people with lived experience have and continue to be developed to become peer educators and are now making a contribution to care delivery. Over 236 sessions of peer education have been delivered” (p.20).

To date, a limited body of research exists on the experiences of peer support workers and the experiences of the service users that they work with.

**Methods to be used:** A qualitative approach will be used for this study. Semi-structured interviews will be undertaken with (1) peer support workers employed in a range of mental health settings and organisations and (2) service users receiving support from peer support workers. It is anticipated that 20 interviews will be undertaken with each group, resulting in a total of 40 interviews. Recruitment will be through a range of mental health organisations and Health and Social Care Trusts.

**Objectives of the research are:**
- to explore the views of peer support workers regarding their role to include:
  - Challenges
  - Benefits for them
  - Benefits for service users
  - Integration into the mental health team within the setting in which they work
  - Views on recovery
- to explore the view of service users receiving support from a peer support worker to include:
  - Benefits to them
  - Challenges/difficulties
  - Differences to support received from other mental health workers/professionals
- to make recommendations based on the findings of the study.

**Skills required of applicant:**
- Knowledge of qualitative research methods
- Experience or knowledge of working/researching in the area of mental health/health research
- Evidence of excellent oral and written communication skills
- Evidence of excellent computer literacy.

**Desirable skills:** Mental health background in research or health service

**References:**


