

STARTING PEER NETWORKS

*Among people living in group homes,
boarding houses and similar types
of accommodation*

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This workbook has been co-produced in collaboration with a group of people passionate about peer networks and the benefits they bring. This work book complements and sits alongside existing online resources on the Peer Connect website www.peerconnect.org.au

This workbook is a companion guide to ***Strong Peer Networks: Connecting The Beads Together*** which has a range of ideas about how to get a peer network started, how to refresh your network when it hits a low point, and how to finish peer networks well.

This workbook is specifically for people wanting to start peer networks among people living in shared accommodation arrangements such as group homes and boarding houses. These are people who, for various reasons, may not hear about a peer network or decide to turn up to one. These people are often described as 'hard to reach', marginalised or isolated but they are also people who might have the most to gain from peer networks.

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PeerConnect respectfully acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands and waters of Australia. We are committed to inclusive communities.

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WELCOME



Welcome to this workbook. It has been created by people running peer networks or organisations around Australia.

This workbook has been designed for:

1. People who are interested in setting up a peer network for people living in group homes, boarding houses or other congregate living spaces
2. People already involved in peer networks for people living in group homes, boarding houses or other congregate living spaces, looking for ways to keep their peer network active.

The workbook is a companion piece to the ***Strong Peer Networks: Connecting The Beads Together*** workbook.

It is not a recipe book; it is a guide to help you get started, and to help you think through what you might need to start a peer network, and what some of the barriers or challenges might be.

This document provides hints and tips to connecting into people living in group homes, boarding houses or other congregate living spaces.

With these thoughts in mind, and to help you find your way around, this workbook is organised into three parts:

1. Starting a peer network
2. Checking your peer network's purpose
3. Responding to tricky situations.

THIS IS A START...

Arguably there is less experience of peer networks for people living in places like group homes and supported residential facilities compared to the development of peer networks in other areas, especially for people who have been identified as somehow 'hard-to-reach'.

Because of that, this workbook has much less of a connected storyline compared to the main peer networks workbook in this series. We have tried to capture some insights and ideas that we hope can be a useful resource to people involved in developing networks for people living in these types of accommodation. Therefore, we hope that you the reader can see this as a 'living document' that can be updated and developed further as new experiences emerge.

If you have any information or ideas that can help improve this workbook, please contact us at Peer Connect on admin@purpleorange.org.au or call **08 8373 8333**.

STRINGING THE BEADS TOGETHER

The Peer Connect website currently has lots of QuickGuides on setting up and running peer networks. These are stored as a browsable library resource. The challenge is that these QuickGuides are like the beads sitting in a bowl – you have to rummage through the bowl to find the one you want!

To resolve this, we built a workbook, *Strong Peer Networks: Connecting The Beads Together*, that takes the reader through the life cycle of peer networks.

However, we recognise that starting peer networks for people in group homes and boarding houses is a more complex and difficult undertaking. This is for a number of reasons, including:

1. Group homes and boarding houses are known as ‘closed systems’, where their daily routines don’t bring their residents into natural daily contact with people in the neighbourhood. Because of this, it can be much harder to communicate with and connect to people living in these settings
2. Residents in group homes and boarding houses will include people who might be regarded as the most vulnerable within the disability community, and who may carry a great many wounds from their life and service experiences. These experiences may have resulted in very low self-esteem, suppressed capacity, and very low personal networks, if any. Because of this, they may be uninterested in, or ambivalent about, peer networks, even though peer support networks can help with these issues.

Because of these circumstances, the primary and ongoing challenge is how to support people to get along to a peer network or otherwise to connect to its benefits.



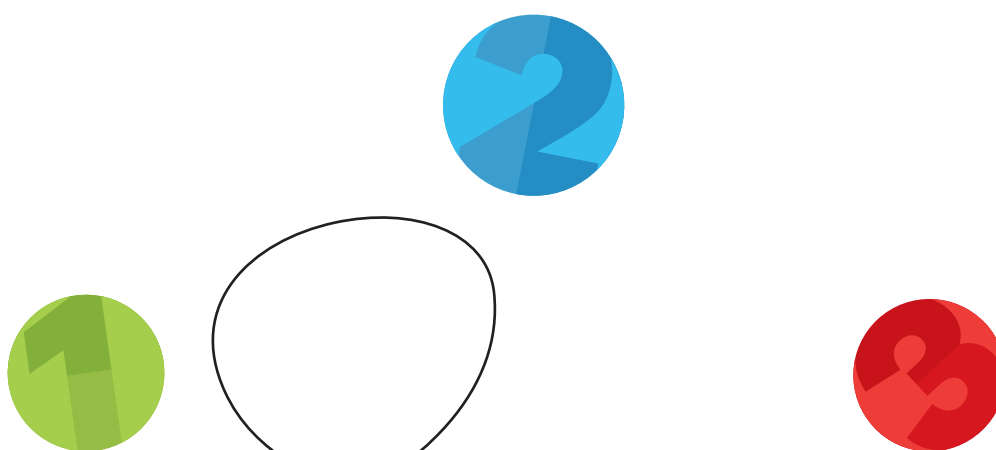
This workbook therefore focuses on the first part of the life cycle of peer support networks, exploring ways to navigate the difficult task of connecting to people and increasing the chances of them attending a peer network event.

Just like the main workbook, ***Strong Peer Networks: Connecting The Beads Together***, this workbook arranges beads of knowledge into a string, making it easier to move from one to the next. But this workbook mainly focuses on two beads at the front end of the life cycle of the peer network, because that's where the facilitator's energy may need to be focused for a long time, and a third bead: responding to tricky situations.

Three beads are covered:

1. Starting a peer network
2. Checking your peer network's purpose
3. Responding to tricky situations.

Where a peer network for people living in group homes or boarding houses develops stronger momentum and identity, the other beads in the main workbook may then be more relevant.





STARTING A PEER NETWORK

What is a peer network?

A useful place to start would be to think about how you will explain to people what a peer network is. People living in shared accommodation arrangements may not be familiar with the term peer or peer network. It is worth having a short simple description to hand:

“A peer is another person like you who shares some of the same experiences.”

People can be peers by the very fact that they live in the same type of accommodation.

A network is really another name for a meeting or gathering.

Peer networks are where people with something in common meet up to make something good happen. They are not segregated day programs or special groups. And they support, and do not replace, the roles and relationships a person may have in other parts of their life.

Peer networks come in all shapes and sizes. A peer network might be a group that meets regularly at a community centre. It might be a facebook group – sharing information and providing online support. It might be three people catching up regularly to talk about things.

It doesn't matter what your peer network looks like; what matters is that the peer network is clear about how it is helping its members. This might be by assisting people to get new connections, and to learn from each other so that each member is better able to deal with issues or goals they have.

Evidence shows that people who are members of peer support networks gain friendships, information, increased confidence, social connections and leadership skills. Peers say that one of the best things about peer support is that people with similar experiences help each other and provide each other with support.

Peer networks can also help people to have a shared voice about common concerns. They can influence disability services and systems (such as the NDIS). Peer networks can also influence mainstream services like health and education, and help local communities be more welcoming and accessible.

These benefits might be particularly important for people living with others in group homes and boarding houses where it may be harder to make connections with people they don't live with because of the way shared living operates. Sometimes, people living in these types of shared living arrangements are less aware of their rights, have less access to help with having their voice heard, and might be particularly vulnerable to the decisions and actions of others.

It will be important to bear this in mind when looking at starting a peer network for people in shared living arrangements. Starting a network is likely to require significant time and effort to convince people to come along. It will likely require long term investment and significant relationship-building skills.

Arguably though, people in shared living arrangements such as group homes or boarding houses have the most to gain from peer networks, and this is why it is worth investing the effort in making this opportunity available.

Some key principles to think about when building a peer network for people in group homes and boarding houses

Building trust

There are some underlying principles which should be considered as part of engagement.

The first is that it will take time to earn trust through partnership. Do not expect trust to be there simply because you turned up. It is important to acknowledge the experience of people living in shared accommodation such as group homes and boarding houses. It is important to be sensitive when asking for some types of information. The concept of community engagement may be unfamiliar to some people who may not trust the process. They may be cautious in providing information or expressing a personal viewpoint.

Accessible and varied communication

The second important thing is that the peer network must be accessible and communication multi-faceted and engaging. Two components of communication particularly relevant to engaging marginalised populations are *images* and *similarity*. Images are often used to convey ideas across language barriers while perceived similarity between two communicators leads to more effective communication.¹

Thinking about people's world

The third element is to consider why a particular person or group has been labelled as 'hard to reach'. It is not that they are hard to reach but that it may be hard for them to reach out and the way you are going about setting up the peer network makes it hard for them to reach you. People reject the label of 'hard to reach':

"it makes it sound like the fault of the non service-user – "you are hard to reach" – like they are sat up on a shelf and we have got to lure them down with biscuits, or something.... actually if you just got a ladder and sat next to them that would be fine. (R1)"²

1 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1541931213601516>
2 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2856561/>

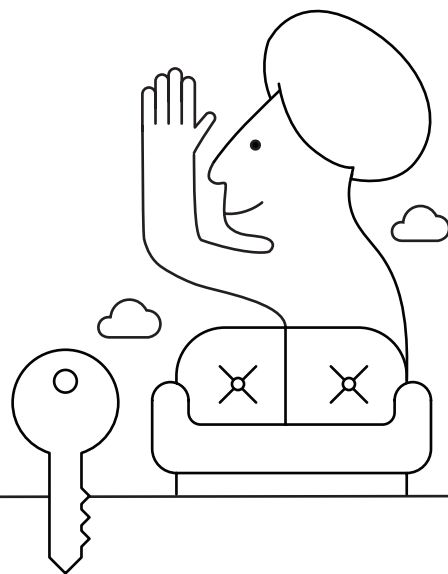


Peer networks may not always be about peer ownership

A community development approach, which aims to strengthen the community's capacity for ownership in planning and decision making and gives ownership of the peer network to the group, can be a good starting point for developing effective peer networks. But it is important to recognise that it may not be an effective approach for some people.

"The challenge for community development is to both enable marginalized populations to have a voice and influence, and help provide whatever support is needed—capacity building, self-esteem and building relationships—while also acknowledging the different underlying values that marginalized populations hold toward participation in health service planning and decision making."³

Some people living in group homes and boarding houses may not have any interest in messages of connection, empowerment or ownership that often attract other people to peer networks. So a peer network aimed at people living in group homes and boarding houses may need different levers to try and connect people to a peer network event.



What is the purpose of your new peer network?

Peer networks work better when the network has a clear purpose. It also makes it easier to attract members. People are more likely to come if they know the network is about things they care about.

This doesn't mean you have to write up a big document. Just think through what you want the peer network to do.

This is particularly important when thinking about a peer network for people living in a group home or boarding house. Clarity about the goals will help the facilitator to creatively explore the different ways those goals can be advanced.

Here are some examples of reasons why different peer networks might start for people in shared living like group homes and boarding houses:

- To talk about how to make the group home or boarding house better
- To share food
- To talk about the importance of feeling safe
- To talk about how to ask for help when it's needed
- To learn how to ask questions of service providers
- To learn about the NDIS
- To have something tangible, meaningful and personal to take into an NDIS planning meeting
- To talk about how to make the place where you live more homely, or how to move to a new place
- To learn about new things, like learning about rights, decision-making, self-advocacy
- To make new connections, like meeting people with similar experiences and learning from each other.



Where can you get help with resources and save money?

Most peer networks need help with at least some things, like a place to meet, transport, refreshments, sending out reminders, and so on.

This is particularly important when trying to build a peer network for people living in group homes and boarding houses. This is because they may be on a very low income, and may have access to far fewer resources compared to people in other settings.

It is important to think about what help the peer network members might need to be able to get to the meeting, especially if they live in a group home or a boarding house. This might include help with remembering, help to get ready, and help to travel to and from the venue. Sometimes a group home or boarding house agency might be able to help with this, so it is worth asking them once you know who your peer network members are. Check with the person first that they're okay with you approaching the group home or boarding house.

Most Australian communities have resources available to local people, like council-run community centres, meeting rooms at local clubs, or free Wi-Fi at local cafes. While these can be a valuable starting point, the facilitator will need to think about how to approach the people in charge of these types of venue. This isn't just about permission, it's about support. Talking to venue holders about the network goals, and also about the importance of building connections for vulnerable people with many wounds in their lives, may help to build genuine supporters, who can bring valuable resources to the peer network, and also compassion and understanding when unexpected or unwelcome things happen.

Take a moment to think about what types of resources your new peer network might need, and how you can find those resources.

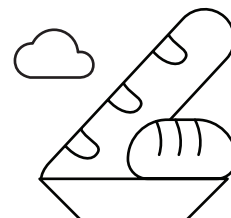
Here's a link to something called '*the Art of Asking*', which could help you think about how to approach people for help.

<https://www.family-advocacy.com/resources/the-art-of-asking/>

If you think of yourself as the key resource you may find that starting a peer network presents a number of different challenges. You may find it helpful if you have a co-facilitator such as a peer mentor, family member or staff member who you know and trust and can assist.



Go to the link wherever you see this symbol

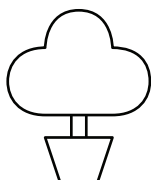


How do you invite people to your first peer network meeting?

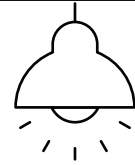
First, think about how people living in group homes and boarding houses get information. Possibilities include:

- a conversation with accommodation support staff
- a conversation with other support services who might be connecting to group home and boarding house residents to provide practical supports in health etc.
- building on the previous point, attending service centres where people might go, and to try and get introduced to the person by a member of staff there who knows them
- a notice on the local shopping mall notice board
- a community advert in the local free paper
- drop-in centres, community centres, GP surgeries, and other public places where people living in group homes and boarding houses might visit
- NDIS LACs
- NDIA
- boarding house lobbies, if they have them (check with the owner that this is okay)
- contacting the group home operator or boarding house operator and asking them to circulate the information to their residents
- word-of-mouth: telling your friends and other people in your network, who tell their friends, who tell their friends, and so on, to increase the chances the information reaches someone connected with residents in group homes and boarding houses
- local library
- tenant newsletters
- talking to people in local retail outlets, for example those selling tobacco products etc., and whose counter staff might have regular connection with people living in local group homes and boarding houses. If a person often shows up there at a fairly predictable time, it may be possible for the facilitator to be at the retail venue around the same time, and for the counter staff to help strike up an introduction.

You could try making an invitation that just talks about what will happen at the first meeting. Remember that people may not know much about peer networks and may not know you. They might be unsure about committing to meeting regularly with someone they don't know.



WELCOME



Think about the difference between these two sample invitations:

INVITATION TO JOIN A PEER NETWORK

We are setting up a peer network where people living in group homes and boarding houses can talk together and share ideas.

We are going to meet on the first Monday night every month. The first meeting is 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.

We hope you can be a regular; we can all help each other.

DO YOU LIVE IN A GROUP HOME OR A BOARDING HOUSE?

Join us for a feed

We would love to share some food and talk with you about your experiences and what you think is important.

We are having a meeting at 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.

For some people, the first invitation where people are asked to make a regular commitment may not be attractive, particularly for people living in group homes or boarding houses. In the second type of invitation, people are invited to have some food and talk about their experience. They are not being asked to commit beyond one meeting, and the focus is on a meal, which may be more attractive for first-timers. This may be more appealing to people who aren't interested in commitment or membership, but who may be interested in a feed.

Don't be discouraged if you don't get many people coming to the peer network at first. Indeed, it is entirely possible no one shows up at first. This will take time, so stay with it. If one person shows up, that's a start. To help make it a positive experience, make the space as welcoming as possible; have comfortable furniture and avoid setting it up in a way, such as a semi-circle, that some people might find a bit confronting. As well as some food, it might help to have a radio on, or a TV, or something that provides an anchor point for someone in the room, to help them feel welcome and comfortable.

It doesn't matter hugely if the people who turn up are there for the food rather than peer support. The important thing is that a connection has been made. Be prepared for this to be a long process – a trickle effect where hopefully people gain trust, have a positive experience and turn up regularly.



How do you make the first meeting a success?

However you invite people to your new peer network, it is important the first meeting is a success. You might think about success in these ways:

- everyone in the room was welcomed
- everyone in the room had something to eat
- everyone in the room had the chance to have their say and to be respected
- everyone in the room felt like they learnt something
- everyone in the room got the chance to meet someone new
- the conversation finished in a way that led to people want to come back for more.

Have a look at the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: How to make sure the first meeting is a success*** here:



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/how-make-sure-first-meeting-success/>

Growing a peer network for people in shared living might involve tiny steps. At the first gathering, the main focus may be on the food, and there may only be a few minutes of time sharing information, and it may be that the facilitator does this one on one, by 'working the room'.

To prepare for this, the facilitator might gather some basic information to give to people, including their own contact details, perhaps information about local advocacy services, or information about when the next gathering will happen and what food will be there.

A great meeting happens when people join a conversation about something really important to them. It may be to hear a guest speaker, to hear from others about their views and experiences or to voice their concerns about an issue that impacts on them. For this group, a 'guest speaker' might be someone who also comes and 'works the room' with some basic information while people have food.

An art activity might be a way of easing into more difficult conversations and giving people an outlet for expressing what they wish to say.

Some members might enjoy a raffle where they get the chance to win a prize and take home something meaningful to them. The raffle doesn't need to involve expensive prizes, maybe just small inexpensive food items that people will find immediate value in.

The Peer Connect website has a section called '*Stuff Peer Networks talk about*' and it might be one of these topics that forms the first topic for a meeting and builds the passion for a peer network. For people living in group homes or boarding houses, the topics include things like rights, feeling safe, help with making decisions, help with advocacy, employment, meeting new people, and so on.

You can find the topics on the website here:

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/stuff-peer-networks-talk-about/life-issues/>



As your peer network gets going, the network can encourage its members to take turns at doing the different jobs. People living in group homes and boarding houses may find it harder to share jobs that involve catering, venue-organising and so, but there are other ways peer network members can help, like coming early to help set up the room, staying back to help put things away, taking a turn in chairing the meetings, and so on. This helps all members share the ownership of the peer network. This makes the network stronger, and helps it last longer.

Case study – PWDA

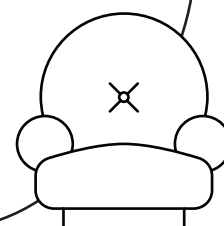
PWDA facilitated an arts-based program for a group of people with disability living in boarding houses.

The arts program was the hook to get this group participating in the community, and peer conversations were secondary to this focus. The focus of the PWDA program was to build self-advocacy and decision making skills, using drawing as the medium. For instance, the facilitator initiated a conversation about 'home' while participants were drawing and asked them to draw and reflect on what was most important to them as individuals when considering their future housing plans.

Service providers of group homes and boarding houses: are they willing?

It is important for a peer network to expect support from the providers of group homes and boarding houses. There will be service providers out there who are interested in how they can help their residents find their voice and build capacity.

However, it is also possible that some service providers are less interested in this, or are conflicted because if their residents use a peer support network and become more empowered, knowledgeable and connected, then one of the consequences of this might be that some may then decide to change their service provider. Fears about service sustainability or loss of income might result in some service providers being less willing to assist, or even presenting barriers to residents' participation in a peer network.



Ways to approach this situation include:

- Talking with the service provider about the general benefits of peer networks for their members, and therefore why it is valuable for the service provider to be supportive
- Identifying the benefits to the service provider itself of residents being more informed and empowered. These benefits might include greater participation in the running of the household, greater participation in any consultation processes the service provider runs with its residents, or the resident adding their voice to local community issues the service provider is also concerned about, such as traffic and mobility issues, community amenities, etc.
- Identifying the very specific ways the service provider can help, so that it looks achievable without undue hassle
- Identifying other people among local community leaders, community members or service providers who know the service providers in question and who may be able to help bring them on board
- In the absence of the above points being enough, exploring the availability of resources that make a resident's attendance at a peer network event less dependent on the practice support and goodwill of their service provider.



For more information

Department of Human Services – Victoria, Australia Peer Support Guide

The guide explains what peer support is and provides ideas about how to do it.



<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/policies,-guidelines-and-legislation/peer-support-guide>

The **Centre of Excellence in Peer Support** has great resources about Peer Support. There is a document about setting up a peer support group which you can find in the resources section here:



<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/>

Checklist for starting a peer network

- Think about why you are starting a peer network

- Think about who you could ask to help you

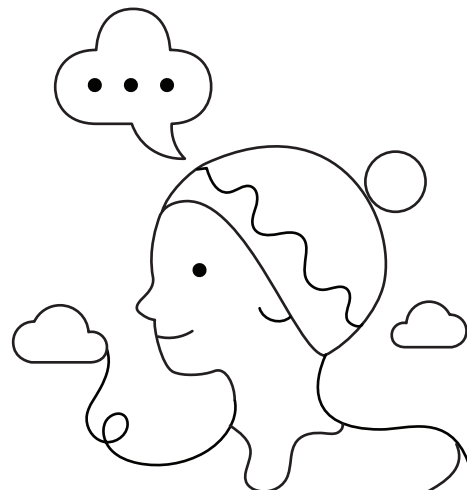
- Think about what people living in group homes and boarding houses might get from the network

- Think about how you can get low or no cost resources


- Think about how the group is welcoming and accessible for all

- Think about a place to meet

- Think about the invitation to the first meeting



Hopefully, this section has given you some useful ideas about setting up a peer network aimed at people living in group homes and boarding houses. We have used the green bead to represent this first stage of a peer network. It is seen as the first connecting thread: the bringing of people together.



In the next sections we look at the importance of long term relationship building and commitment once the initial invitation and connections have been made. Because of the particular vulnerability of people living in group homes or boarding houses, there may be a heightened risk of people dropping off, either because they aren't remembering to attend, or can't make it to the meeting because they are not getting support from their group home provider, their boarding house operator, or others.

This brings us to the next bead in our 3 connecting threads: going back and thinking about why the peer network is there.

While the experiences might be different there was always a connecting thread. It's always coming back to finding what we have in common.

Cath Mahony CDAH

www.teamup.org.au/resources/





CHECKING YOUR PEER NETWORK'S PURPOSE

If your peer network never quite gains momentum, it might be worth checking in on the purpose of the peer network.

This is particularly important for people who are living in group homes or boarding houses. It may take a lot more for them to connect to the network, so having a strong statement of purpose could help people remember how the meeting can help them. It doesn't have to be long winded and convoluted but must have meaning to those who attend. It could be something as simple as, 'we meet to share a meal together, and talk about what's happening'.

Start with your own thinking

Why was this work started in the first place?

What value does it currently bring to those people who live in shared accommodation arrangements?

Could the network offer something else, something new or different to peers who are already coming or to new peers?

Are there practical issues at a network member's group home or boarding house that are stopping the person from attending? Could you or the network help with that?

Talk with the peers in the network and peers in your community

Start by asking some of these questions:

- "Why do we have this peer network?" (What are WE all about?)
- "Why are we here?" (What's our purpose?)
- "What do we value as a group?" (What's important to us?)
- "What do we offer each other?" (How can we best help each other?)
- "Are there things happening for you at you group home or boarding house that make it harder for you to attend the peer network?"

Some of the issues may be very practical. For example, the peer network meeting may be scheduled at the same time as when meals are served at the person's group home or boarding house. Two ways to fix that are (1) change the time of the meeting so it doesn't clash with people's meal times, or (2) find a way to offer people dinner at the meeting. There may be other ways too.



Talk with people around your community

Contact community organisations, community development officers, community groups, and any others you can think of.

Think about gaps

What is missing in your community for people living in group homes or boarding houses?
What could really help them to connect to valued opportunities in the local community?
What could the peer network do to help?

Recruit a peer mentor who has experience of living in shared accommodation arrangements

One way to hear from the potential peer members is through a trained peer mentor who has experience living in shared accommodation arrangements but no longer does so. They will be aware of the barriers and challenges that exist and will be able to build rapport.

Be open to ideas and really listen to what people want

For the peer network to have deeper and longer impact, it's important that its members have a say about how it works and what it does. So find as many different ways as you can to get people's ideas about the peer network and what they want from it.



Case Study: Our Voice SA and Balyana

Balyana is an accommodation setting for people who live with intellectual disability.

It has 2 types of accommodation:

- Houses situated on the property each accommodating up to 5 people, and
- Motel style accommodation where people have their own room with en suite in the main building.

Balyana is situated on a large property close to public transport and to its service provider's venue for supported employment. There are 62 people currently living at Balyana, most of whom also use this service provider for their supported employment or day options.

Our Voice SA, a peer-led membership organisation for South Australians living with intellectual disability, initiated discussions with Balyana about setting up a peer network.

It works as a partnership:

- An Our Voice SA Committee Member had previously lived at Balyana and suggested that this might be a great place to reach others and provide support for this community
- Our Voice started by offering a peer-led training course in self-advocacy as a way of connecting in
- It was hoped that a peer network would emerge from the training
- Balyana agreed to provide the venue
- Our Voice would provide food and refreshments.

This network commenced in 2019, with 26 people attending the first meeting.

Case study: PWDA

PWDA based the success of their peer networks of people living in assisted accommodation on the fact that the facilitator was willing to listen and accept choices made by residents that were outside the orthodox disability support response. PWDA heard from the residents that they were:

- Bored on the weekends
- Bored with group outings with accommodation staff
- Tired of being asked to plan ahead when they wanted to make decisions on the day

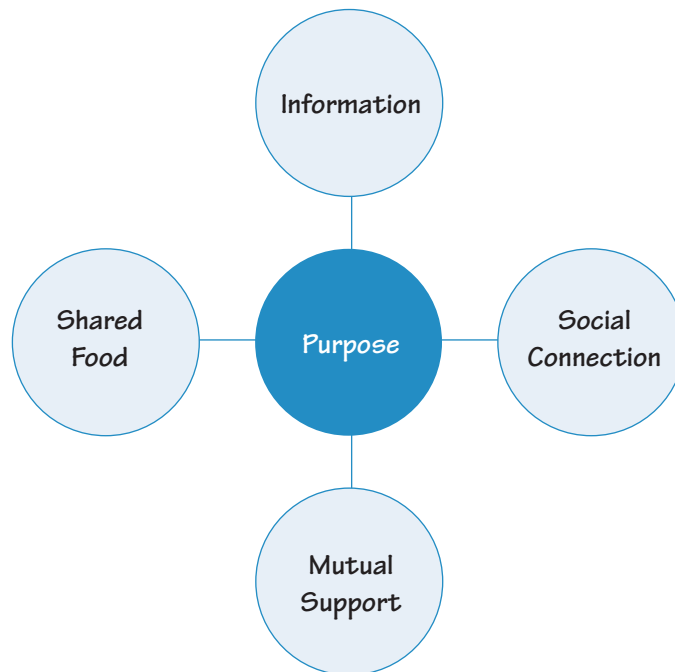
In response to listening, PWDA changed things so that peer groups were:

- Held on the weekends
- Run by and for peers rather than staff
- Held at or near the house so that residents could decide whether to attend or not 'at the last minute'.



When you have gathered all your information, sit down ideally with the peers in the group or other supporters in their lives, and look it over and see if there are things that keep coming up – what is MOST wanted from a group homes or boarding house peer network in this community?

You could use a drawing, or sticky notes, or coasters, to brainstorm these ideas. It might be a concept map such as this:



<https://getting-it-together.moadoph.gov.au/images/graphic-organisers/pdf/concept-map.pdf>



Maybe there are several answers to this and perhaps your network is offering lots of good things, not just one.



Some ideas for why peer networks meet and what they might offer are outlined below:

WHY	A PEER NETWORK MIGHT OFFER
<p>Talk about what it's like to live in a group home or a boarding house</p>	<p>Time to talk with each other</p> <p>Peer guest speakers who can talk about group homes or boarding houses, and how they can best support people</p>
<p>Learn about things that could help me, like the NDIS</p>	<p>Information about the NDIS, written in a way that helps people to understand their choices and if they are eligible</p> <p>Peer guest speakers who can talk about how they use the NDIS</p>
<p>Learn together from my peers</p>	<p>Shared meetings on topics ranging from housing service rights and advocacy, through to how to use the local library</p>
<p>Provide mutual support</p>	<p>Have regular meetings</p> <p>Share contact details for support in-between meetings</p> <p>Have a buddy system</p> <p>Develop peer mentoring opportunities</p>
<p>Work together for change</p>	<p>Identify a shared passion and organise a campaign around it (e.g. talking about what's important about having a place to call your home)</p>
<p>Deal with challenges and plan to make things better</p>	<p>A conversation with peers can uncover a whole array of different ways to solve a problem</p>

We have left some space above because your reasons why might be different. And, perhaps people are asking for all of these things – your statement of purpose could be a combination of some or all of these things.

An example of a statement of purpose

Disability Elders of All Ages is a peer network for people living with physical disability in South Australia.

Its purpose is 'to share experiences, tips and ways of managing our lives', and includes a focus on building knowledge and skills in self-managed support.

Getting your message out

Once the statement of purpose has been developed or updated, you have to get your message out.

A few sentences that clearly and simply state the why and what of the network are really useful. You can pin them up at every network meeting, you can have them printed on your flyers, send them to the group home providers and boarding house operators, and so on. Everyone can practice saying them and then everyone talks the same ways about the network, whether you are inviting new members or trying to get some resources from your local council.

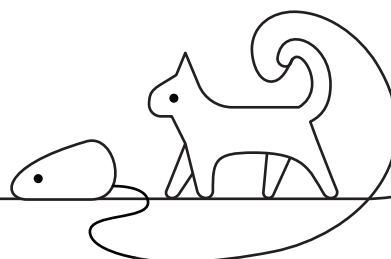
Defining and acknowledging success

It is likely that different group members will get different things from attending a peer group. It can be useful to capture these experiences from the group members.

In the case study above, PWDAs peer groups were well attended and members were encouraged to talk about what made the group valuable to them. This is an example of a peer network acknowledging success.

One peer member stated that he had got 3 big things from the peer meetings:

- "The peer connector has taught me to ask questions of my service provider.
- I was able to negotiate a less time for notifying the service of my not being able to go out for the day due to my mental health. I now only have to give 24 hours' notice which is much better. I got this from our second meeting.
- I cannot use a computer or read very well and did not know how to get the information I wanted and our peer connector got the information and he put it into easier language for me and explained it and I went away and got what I wanted myself. Now I know where my NDIS money is being spent."



The SA Our Voice Peer Group came up with this list of key things that they think are important for a good peer network:

- People being nice and kind to each other
- We get things done
- Great bunch of friendly people
- Everyone does what THEY can do
- People listening to each other
- Everyone works together
- Everyone gets a say
- Being fair to one another
- Friends coming together
- Mixing with other people
- We are gentle and kind to each other
- We watch out for each other
- Kindly manners
- No bullying, bossing or upsetting.



For more information

Read more about this in the *Peer Connect Quick Guide: Developing a value proposition*:



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/establishment/why-would-you-set-one/>

Templates for creating a value proposition:



<http://torgronsund.com/2011/11/29/7-proven-templates-for-creating-value-propositions-that-work/>

An infographic which captures what makes a great value proposition:



<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/write-value-proposition#sm.0000011mn7ov3vf9lwsjkh5a7wvt>

Checklist for our statement of purpose

- It's easy to understand

- Every person knows about it

- Every person knows how they will benefit

- Unique to our network



Hopefully this exercise means that you have checked in on the purpose of the peer network and why it is so important and thought about ways you can tell people about it. The second blue bead can be threaded onto the string.

A strong peer network will be a network that works well together. Individuals will get along well together and explore different ideas and views in a constructive way. This will make the network most effective for everyone.

People will have different views and ideas. Sometimes people will disagree with each other. Having disagreements is normal. People living in group homes or boarding houses may have had life experiences that are very painful. Some group members may act in ways that disrupt group effectiveness, and this can create challenging situations. These members may need more support.

This is where the facilitator role comes into play. The main aim is to foster communication among the group and to model effective interaction that members can emulate. We look at this in the next section: what to do if someone is creating a tricky situation.



RESPONDING TO TRICKY SITUATIONS

A great peer support network is one that works well together. Members get along well together and explore different ideas and views in a constructive way. People will have different views and ideas and sometimes people will disagree with each other. Having disagreements is normal. Healthy disagreements and different points of view will make the network most effective for everyone.

But sometimes the disagreements are not healthy and sometimes people act in ways that disrupt the network and what it aims to achieve. This can create tricky situations.

What kind of tricky situations are we talking about?

The Community Toolbox identifies a number of behaviours that can be disruptive to the network. These include:

- Often being late to meetings
- Talking too much, taking up more than a fair share of the time
- Dismissing every idea that other network members bring
- Often bringing problems to the network that are bigger than the network can handle.
- Often interrupting others, changing to inappropriate or irrelevant subjects
- Just coming for the food then wanting to leave
- Bringing in topics or problems that have nothing to do with the purpose of the network.
- Using language that is outdated or offensive
- Behaving in ways that others find unsettling or frightening.

When this happens, it is important the other members have their views heard, and in a way that re-establishes the focus of the meeting and the purpose of the group.

Often, this means that the person who is running the meeting needs to help this to happen.

By 'running' the meeting, we don't mean that the person is the boss. They might be the meeting's chairperson or facilitator (where their role is to help make sure the meeting stays on track and is a success). Depending on what a peer network prefers, the facilitator role might be shared amongst all members, or it might be done by just a few members within the network, or the same person each time.

It is in tricky situations that the facilitator role becomes really important.

The main role of any facilitator is to make sure there is good communication between the members, in support of the meeting's goals.

Community Toolbox

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>



Before a tricky situation even emerges, a facilitator should know that they can help improve communication in the peer network by simply being a clear and respectful communicator and listener themselves, so that all members can see those behaviours and copy them.

You can also refer to the peer network's rules that may have been set up at the beginning of the network, or take the time now to establish some.

Have a look at the **Peer Connect Quick Guide: Agreeing a set of rules for how people behave at a meeting** here:



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/agreeing-set-rules-how-people-behave-peer-meeting/>

Particular challenges for peer networks for people living in group homes or boarding houses

People living in group homes or boarding houses may have had life experiences that are very painful. It is possible that a peer network conversation touches on a very painful issue for a person, which can result in tears, an angry exchange, or behaviour that makes other members feel uncomfortable. Or the person may simply say nothing and not come to the meeting again.

The facilitator needs to be ready for these possibilities. For people who have very painful life experiences, a peer network can be an important part of their healing, but there will be limits on what a peer network is able or qualified to do.

Assertive Caring

One strategy all good facilitators should practise is something called 'assertive caring'. Being assertive doesn't mean being aggressive or impolite, but it means that when you recognise something isn't right you speak up and do something about it. Assertive individuals are able to get their point across without upsetting others, or becoming upset themselves.

In dealing with difficult group members, support group facilitators must learn a delicate combination of control mixed with kindness. This sort of assertive caring directly addresses problems with the group without insulting or offending members. You may use assertive caring during a meeting to get the discussion back on track, or you may wish to speak to the member in private after the meeting.

Chris Hampton, Community Tool Box

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>



Things to say

The Psychology Today blog gives some examples of assertive phrases. These are words that you can memorise and resort to when the occasion arises. You can pick the ones that feel most natural to you:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/changepower/201210/speak-18-all-purpose-assertive-phrases>



For people whose *tears* in the meeting might be because of something painful that they are carrying, the facilitator might call a break to the meeting and spend one-on-one time with the person to check they're okay and pass on information about where they could get help to talk about that pain.

For people who show anger rather than tears, the facilitator might acknowledge the person's anger and move the meeting forward by saying something:

"I can see you're feeling angry about this. I don't think the meeting today can help with it, and we need to make sure everyone feels the conversation is safe and positive. We can talk together after the meeting and I can see if I know anyone who can help you with that. Let's keep this meeting going and put these feelings to one side."

Be ready to pause the meeting and refer someone to the right authorities such as the police if they share something in the meeting that is very troubling about their group home or boarding house.

Things to do

With a mindset of caring assertively for any member of a network that might have caused some tricky situations, the Community Toolbox website and other resources suggest these ways to approach the situation:

Speak to the individual in private: If you consider that one member's way of doing things is impacting on the effectiveness of the peer network, it is a good idea to say something early on. Do this in private and suggest ways and possibilities to make positive changes. You could send out a reminder of the conversation to the member by email.

Respect the member's position or dilemma: State that you understand the reason(s) behind the member's negative behaviour. Use "I" or "we" statements, which show how his behaviour affects you and the whole network

Set limits: Gently but firmly correct the behaviour. Explain your reasons, letting the member know why the situation needs to change and what can be done to change the situation. It may be helpful to refer to the group rules. **Peer Connect Quick Guide: Agreeing a set of rules for how people behave at a meeting** here:

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/agreeing-set-rules-how-people-behave-peer-meeting/>



Suggest an alternative: Explain what you'd like to see the member do instead of the negative behaviour

Get the member's agreement on the alternative: Make sure the member understands what is being asked of him/her and agrees to do it.

Give the member the opportunity to be heard: If a member is constantly interrupting, let the member know that they will have an opportunity to be heard and refer to the agreed meeting rules. Make sure you then return to the member later in the discussion and honour your agreement.

Peer groups provide an independent space for people to voice their concerns and share ideas with others in similar situations, which can support safety and confidence in speaking up.

Rhianwen Beresford, CoMHWA

<http://www.comhwa.org.au/>



For more information

See the **Peer Connect Quick Guide: Managing Conflict in the Group:**

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/maintaining-network/managing-conflict-group/>



This guide by **Cancer Australia** for Cancer Support groups provides a summary of competencies for effective facilitators (page 3):

<http://www.healthissuescentre.org.au/images/uploads/resources/A-guide-for-peer-facilitators.pdf>



The **Community Tool Box** website has great tips on running a peer network conversation and addressing conflict:

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>



About Leaders is a general website about good leadership that has an article on conflict resolution:

<https://aboutleaders.com/5-keys-to-conflict-resolution/#gs.69VXa0Y>



The **Better Believe It** blog gives some assertive communication examples:

<https://betterbelieveit.net/9-helpful-assertive-communication-examples/>



Checklist for approaching a disruptive peer group member

- Speak to the individual in private

- Respect the member's position or dilemma

- Set limits

- Suggest an alternative

- Get the member's agreement on the alternative

- Take a break

- Give the member the opportunity to be heard

Hopefully following these ideas means the peer network is going well and is feeling supported and able to function in a really good way. Your red bead has been threaded onto the string.



GOOD LUCK

We hope this workbook has helped you to think about the connecting threads of a peer network for people living in shared accommodation arrangements and how to tackle some of the challenges that can come with running a peer network.

We have made a string of beads to show the three main stages of setting up and running a peer network.

If we put the 3 beads together they look like this:



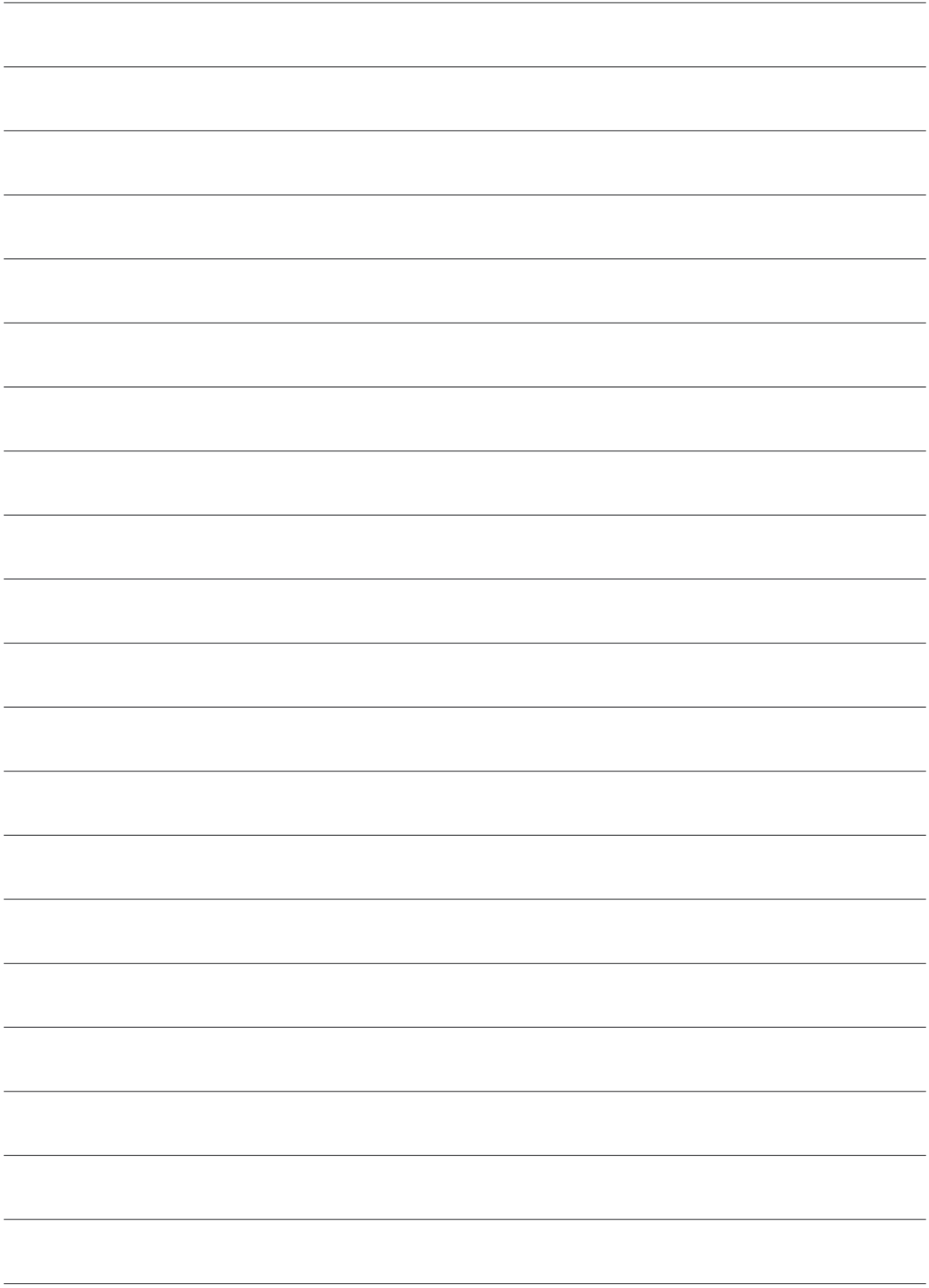
You can find the companion guide: ***Strong Peer Networks: Connecting The Beads Together*** here:

➤ <https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/strong-networks-connecting-beads/>

We have also made a short animation film about the life of a peer network which can help explain some of the ideas in this workbook. You can watch it here on the Peer Connect website:

➤ <http://www.peerconnect.org.au/>

The Peer Connect website has lots of other Quick Guides about how to run a peer network and some of the stuff a peer network might talk about. We see this as a browsable library that you can dip into to get more information about what you need.



A large rounded rectangular frame containing 20 horizontal lines for writing.



peerconnect.org.au