



Understanding peer support at York In Recovery

“York In Recovery is like a jazz band: different instruments, different tunes, [all] come together to make beautiful music”
(Recovery Café attendee).

“York In Recovery has to keep carrying the message that recovery is possible – you can get well from where you are”
(Analysis Day participant).

York In Recovery is more “personalised, meaningful, and authentic”
(Questionnaire Development Day participant).

Evaluation completed by The Converge Evaluation and Research Team, a group of researchers/evaluators with lived experience of mental health challenges and a research group at York St John University

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Plain English Summary

In peer support, people use their own lived experiences and knowledge to help each other. York In Recovery (YIR) is an informal, abstinence-based peer-support recovery group for people experiencing addiction in York. It offers a safe space, fun activities, companionship and in particular, Recovery Cafés three times a week and popular WhatsApp groups.

The Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT) examined peer support at YIR. Eighty-five people completed a questionnaire and the CERT team met with groups of YIR members four times. A YIR member explained: “Peer support is very simple really –the simple human value of another person having lived the horror of their addiction and knowing that the similarities are so very strong.” Members come to YIR for help with mental health; loneliness; trauma; and low confidence. Members made it clear that YIR is “not a service: we are a community;” where relationships are “based on friendship, not professional distance.” YIR members report that they feel “more connected” to others after sessions.

Members spoke of stigma they have experienced from services, colleagues and even their own families. It was clear that people feel safe at YIR and value its relaxed atmosphere – “no lanyards around people’s necks”. Some members contrasted YIR with the more formal atmosphere they experience in Twelve-Step Fellowship groups.

Collectively, YIR should carefully consider its emerging transition from a small group of ‘friends’ into a more formal organisation. If members do want YIR to change in this way, how can they transform from being a group of friends without “losing the magic”? Ambitious proposals suggested by members include establishing a Recovery House in York, perhaps with its own rehabilitation programme. Other members hoped for more Recovery Cafés and a greater range of activities, such as art, reading groups and sports.



Introduction

‘York in Recovery’ (YIR) is an informal peer-support and exclusively peer-led addiction recovery group in York. With its abstinence-based philosophy, YIR offers a safe space, fun activities and companionship for members of the York community who are either in recovery or who may not yet be in recovery but have an interest. Funded by York St John University’s Institute for Social Justice Community Research Grant, the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT) has investigated the nature of peer support at YIR. CERT is a research group at York St John University comprising of researchers with lived experience of mental health challenges. CERT evaluate community projects and conduct academic research.

Methods

CERT sought to participate with YIR members in this investigation to the greatest possible extent. We began by visiting all of the ‘Recovery Cafés’ – drop-in peer support sessions which take place three times a week. Following this, we hosted two full-day questionnaire development sessions at York St John University’s campus where we collaboratively designed a questionnaire. The questionnaire was then shared with all YIR members both online and in paper format. Key findings from the questionnaire and other project data were subsequently discussed in depth with YIR members during an Analysis Day. Lastly we attended a Recovery Café session and a breakfast session at the Recovery Hub to discuss the WhatsApp groups. This report covers data collected during each of these activity points.

Findings

Eighty-six YIR members completed the questionnaire, a mix of very new and longer-term members. Eighty-one percent identified as being ‘in recovery’. Most had found YIR through Oaktrees¹, Changing Lives², by word of mouth or online. The WhatsApp groups and Recovery Cafés are the most popular activities. The following section is organised according to sections of the questionnaire.

What does ‘peer support’ mean and why does it matter?

An analysis day attendee described peer support as “the innate understanding that exists between folk”. Several Recovery Café attendees made comments such as that the meetings are “at times the only thing in my day” or “90 per cent of me leaving the house”, emphasising their profound importance. Recovery Café attendees described meeting “beautiful” and “like-minded” people in a space where people safely share and learn things from one-another – and commented on how those at the beginning of their recovery journey as well as those in recovery for many years all get something out of the exchange. The sharing of hope among attendees seems to be deeply important for YIR members.

1) This is the 12-week, face-to-face, abstinence-based community rehabilitation day treatment programme offered to people with addiction in York. At the time of writing this report, this service is not currently on offer.

2) Changing Lives formerly led the drug and alcohol service for the City of York, in partnership with Spectrum Community Health CIC.

A safe environment?

That people experience YIR to be a safe environment came across clearly. An analysis day participant explained: “There are no immediate barriers confronting people, especially newcomers. No lanyards around people’s necks or policy statements being front and centre of what YIR do and offer”. A Recovery Café attendee explained that YIR “accepts people with all kinds of issues”.

Does the effect of York In Recovery activities last after the session, e.g. when you return home?

Respondents wrote that after attending a YIR session they “feel more connected”; “light, less troubled and stronger”; “and I “just feel happier.” We asked members for the reasons why they think YIR has a lasting impact. Most commonly, they described that the impact and success of YIR stems from relationships:

“Developing relationships with group and friends ... [you feel] less inclined to let them down. In isolation it’s easier to let yourself down” (Analysis Day participant).

Other reasons for attending York In Recovery

Our questionnaire asked whether people attended YIR for reasons other than addiction to alcohol or drugs. Many noted attending for a range of reasons including their mental health and social problems such as loneliness and isolation, trauma and low confidence:

“YIR is a broad church and people attend our sessions and talk of all sorts of problems. Invariably a Fellow [other YIR member] will have experience and advice to offer” (Analysis Day participant).

What is good about mental health support at York In Recovery now?

Analysis Day participants highlighted the importance of “mutual aid”, “signposting”, “options for people”, that they feel “listened to”, that there is useful “Information and literature” and crucially, no sanctions for non-attendance (a problem some members experience in other addiction services). This means that members can access YIR completely on their terms. Recently, YIR has been able to offer professional counselling to members – Coffee Shop Counselling – which is a partnership between Chocolate & Co, York In Recovery and York Drug and Alcohol Services. Chocolate & Co offer jobs and opportunities to ex-offenders and people experiencing addiction in York.



Other services in York for addiction support

Throughout our evaluation, YIR members spoke at length about services on offer in York for addiction support. There was a general sense that people tend to experience addiction services to be about ticking boxes to meet targets set for them rather than to care for the individual person, and that services are detached, risk averse and depersonalised. Analysis Day participants emphasised that “we [YIR] are not a service – we are a community”; that there are “no service users” and “no clients”; and that relationships are “based on friendship not professional distance.” A Recovery Café attendee highlighted the importance that there is “no referral needed; no waiting list. You can just turn up; you don’t have to say anything, but when you do, you are listened to.”

Contrasting York In Recovery with Twelve-Step Fellowships

Social interaction is seen as important across YIR and Recovery (Twelve-Step) Fellowships³, although YIR members view them as having very different formats. Recovery Café attendees frequently contrasted YIR with Twelve-Step Fellowships – e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Cocaine Anonymous (CA), and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) – and SMART⁴ meetings:

“YIR Cafés [are] far less intense and more casual and relaxing, which is what you need sometimes – just a place to be. You can engage and talk to others or not and others will respect that. So you are not compelled to speak⁵ as in the other AA, NA and SMART meetings” (Recovery Café attendee).

Stigma and feeling let down

Stigma is a well-recognised phenomenon experienced by those living with addiction. An Analysis Day participant noted that you “can be stigmatised by your own close family and even best friends and co-workers.” Analysis Day participants also talked of “a lack of empathy”; “time short services”; “not being welcomed”; and the “lack of education [about addiction] for [the] professional community.”

3) A commonly used approach to addiction recovery is attending Fellowship meetings. These are a type of community mutual help/peer support: people with addiction supporting each other. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was the first Fellowship, established in 1935, to support its Fellows (as attendees are known) to overcome alcoholism. The philosophical basis of AA is that addicts who no longer use have an exceptional aptitude for reaching to and helping an ‘uncontrolled’ user. There are no paid therapists at Fellowship meetings.

4) The SMART (Self-Management and Recovery Training) programme was released in 1992. It is a nonsecular, non-profit, science-based programme, developed to help people to recover from their addictive behaviour.

5) It should be noted that in theory people are generally not compelled to speak at Twelve-Step Fellowship meetings, but this comment is the stated experience of a YIR member.

Is York In Recovery different from other services/groups?

Comments across our evaluation included: “[at YIR] you are welcomed as an equal” and “you don’t feel like a drug addict”. Members found that YIR is “inclusive, unconditional”, a setting with “people who actually have lived experience... [and] know how you feel”, that it is “peer-led, not paternal” and “less judgemental”. A Recovery Café attendee observed: “[other members] have lived it and know what you’re feeling”. Another commented that it is “harder to pull the wool over people’s eyes when they have addiction too”.

What could York In Recovery do to make people feel safer?

At the Analysis Day, one participant commented that adding formal rules and procedures, for example to safeguard people, would be making YIR ‘professional’ and perhaps more like a Twelve-Step Fellowship. Related to this, an Analysis Day participant noted that “better reporting systems and ways to raise concerns need developing” to protect members from distress.

WhatsApp groups

Attendees of the Analysis Day discussed the WhatsApp support groups, and in particular whether a formal ‘acceptable use’ policy needs to be established. In response to this, two CERT researchers attended a Recovery Café and breakfast session to meet attendees and find out what they thought. Members told us that on occasion WhatsApp messages are sent to the group chat which may cause distress to other members, especially those who are new to recovery – for example about relapsing/using alcohol or substances or self-harm and suicide. However, in spite of these challenges, members overwhelmingly reported that they wanted the WhatsApp groups to stay as they are now. One member suggested introducing a ‘code’ or ‘safe’ word (which could be anything) to indicate to other users that they want help without exposing other members to potential distress.

The Recovery Hub

It is clearly important that YIR gets a stable and long-term base in order to develop what it offers, including providing a safe place where people can drop into when they need support. As this report is being written, the council recently obtained planning permission to create a Recovery Hub at no. 2 Wellington Row in central York. This guarantees a location for a Recovery Hub for at least the next five years. The building offers many opportunities to promote a healthy community within recovery in York. Existing activities such as the pool group, breakfast, art, boxing, book club, chess club and a fitness club will be maintained by YIR in the new hub premises. Additional recovery services (e.g. Coffee Shop Counselling) will be hosted at the hub.



The future of York In Recovery

Throughout our evaluation, the future of YIR was discussed. One Analysis Day participant commented that YIR must remain “responsive and nimble... [able to] move fast and act quick.” Another highlighted the importance of remaining “welcoming to anyone who wants to be a part of what we offer.” In transitioning from what began essentially as a group of friends who support each other into a more formal arrangement with policies and procedures, YIR must consider the implications carefully, particularly with regard to safeguarding and complaints. Greater connections with other Lived Experience Recovery Organisations (LEROs) were mentioned. Another Analysis Day participant described an ambition of creating a “thriving creative culture and community that is making plays, documentaries, music about all aspects of recovery in York” where “people [have] more choice – art, reading a book, rather than

attend a big café with lots of people” (Analysis Day participant). More ambitious plans proposed included a Recovery House with its own 30-week rehabilitation programme, and to establish YIR as a ‘Single Point of Access’ for help with addiction in York.

In terms of ‘future-proofing’ YIR, the “need to remain grass-roots and organised collectively” was discussed extensively in the Analysis Day. The founding principle that “nobody owns the Recovery Cafés” was emphasised – YIR must not be thought of as a “small number of people leading it – it must never become that way”. The question is – if YIR members choose for YIR to become more professional, how can the organisation transform from being a group of friends to a more formal service without “losing the magic” (questionnaire respondent)?



CERT's recommendations

- Explore establishing Recovery Cafés in new areas of the city. YIR members should consider whether this desirable for YIR and practicable.
- The consequences of adopting a more service delivery-based approach within YIR needs very careful consideration by members. For example, taking on more formal/statutory roles, policies and procedures – in particular safeguarding and complaints – may create conflict with YIR's original foundation as a non-hierarchical group of friends helping each other out. The implications of these changes need to be carefully and honestly considered by all members before being acted upon. As observed by the questionnaire respondent, YIR must not “lose the magic.”
- If a more service delivery-based approach is adopted, YIR should work on a formal long-term plan for the future, perhaps choosing to embrace the ambitions of establishing a Recovery House and Single Point of Access in York, and considering what steps are necessary to achieve them. This should be explored further with members.
- Expanding the range of activities on offer at the Recovery Hub, especially creative pursuits such as art, reading and drama may make YIR more accessible to some people.
- It is important that YIR maintains a stable and long-term base in order to develop what it offers, including providing a place where people can drop into anytime when they need support.
- Securing funding for outreach work and advertising of what is on offer at YIR, especially for people who are still experiencing active addiction, young people and professionals such as GPs would be particularly valuable.
- At the time of writing, the second year of Coffee Shop Counselling has just begun. CERT recognise its importance to the recovery community and recommend that it should continue.
- Greater connections with other Lived Experience Recovery Organisations (LEROs) may be valuable in terms of sharing learning and ideas about what is effective.
- Offering training opportunities – for example, Mental Health First Aid and Peer Mentor training – to members could be extremely helpful. Training in practical skills such as using computers, maths and English and offering work experience opportunities and careers advice may also be very beneficial for members.
- Inviting outside agencies such as housing services and Citizens Advice to attend Recovery Cafés on a regular basis could be valuable for members.
- We recommend introducing a ‘safe’ or ‘code’ word to the WhatsApp group to ensure that group users are protected from reading distressing content.



Conclusion

YIR is both unique in York and extremely valuable to those who access it. Greater funding would allow YIR to develop as an organisation – offering more Recovery Cafés in new areas of the city; expanding its new counselling provision; securing a long-term permanent home for the Recovery Hub; training for members; provisions such as art, reading clubs and drama; and sufficient resources to respond actively to the needs of members. YIR seems to be at a point of transition from what began essentially as a group of friends who support each other into a more formal arrangement in which YIR delivers services itself. This demands careful consideration by all parties concerned within YIR. We recognise the importance of YIR co-operating closely with statutory services and the council. However, it is crucial that YIR is able to maintain autonomy in its decision making and in what it offers to its members. If members choose to do so, YIR should be given the opportunity to develop and grow its service provision capacity in its own right, independently of other services offered in the city. If the members choose to do so, the more ambitious plans of a Recovery House and its own 30-week rehab programme, and for YIR as a ‘Single Point of Access’ for help in York with addiction are exciting propositions and could be pursued. However, in our view, choosing not to change and to stay as a group of friends without pursuing such development opportunities is a perfectly reasonable outcome.

