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Evaluating “People Offering Parents Support” (POPS): A Qualitative Study of Peer Parental Advocacy in Welsh Child Welfare Services

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study evaluates the *People Offering Parents Support* (POPS) programme, a peer parental advocacy initiative within Welsh child welfare services. Aimed at empowering parents navigating complex child protection systems, POPS recruits mentors with lived experience of related challenges to provide guidance and advocacy. Through semi-structured interviews with parents, peer mentors, and professionals, the study examines the programme’s impact on parental engagement, system navigation, and emotional support. Findings reveal that peer mentoring enhances parents’ confidence, knowledge, and emotional resilience, enabling more effective participation in child welfare processes. However, challenges related to role boundaries, professional integration, and sustainability were identified. This study contributes to the growing body of research on peer parental advocacy and offers insights into the potential of such models to transform child welfare services by fostering more inclusive, supportive, and empowering environments for families.

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Introduction

Child welfare systems across the United Kingdom have increasingly recognised the importance of parental engagement, yet research consistently indicates that many parents experience interactions with these systems as disempowering, marginalising, and oppressive (Bekaert et al., 2021; Diaz, 2020). The context of statutory child protection proceedings presents substantial challenges for parents, often generating significant stress and limiting meaningful participation in decision-making processes (Appleton, 2016; Cossar et al., 2011; Corby et al., 1996). These experiences frequently create barriers to effective engagement and can undermine the collaborative relationships essential for

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positive outcomes. In response to these challenges, peer parental advocacy (PPA) has emerged as a promising approach to address longstanding issues of parental engagement within child protection systems. PPA involves parents with lived experience of navigating these systems providing support and advocacy to empower other parents currently facing similar circumstances (Tobis et al., 2020). Despite growing international interest, there remains limited empirical evidence regarding the implementation and impact of PPA models within the UK context.

Recent reviews have begun to map the landscape of peer parental support models internationally. Saar-Heiman et al. (2024), in a comprehensive scoping review spanning 25 years of empirical literature, identified 24 child protection-related parent peer advocacy and support programmes, revealing substantial variation in programme settings, target populations, aims, advocate roles, and underlying theoretical frameworks. Similarly, Acri et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of peer models for families involved in the child welfare system, finding that most interventions targeted birth parents to facilitate reunification and support the family, with outcomes being mainly favourable particularly for engagement in treatment and reunification. Saeteurn et al. (2022) additionally demonstrated that parents who participated in peer mentor programmes were more likely to reunify with their children when compared to non-participants. These reviews collectively underscore that while peer parent programmes represent a promising intervention within child welfare, the evidence base remains emergent, and few studies have employed rigorous research designs.

It is important to clarify the terminology used within this field, as the terms “peer advocacy”, “peer mentoring”, and “peer support” are often used interchangeably in both practice and literature, despite reflecting distinct though overlapping roles and functions (Saar-Heiman et al., 2024). Powell et al. (2024), in a scoping review of parental advocacy programmes supporting participation in child welfare decision-making, identified four broad advocacy models: peer advocacy delivered by parents with lived experience, professional advocacy provided by social workers or independent advocates, legal advocacy delivered by lawyers, and hybrid models combining elements of the preceding categories. Within this typology, peer mentoring, as delivered through programmes such as POPS, is best understood as a form of peer advocacy, in which the mentor’s lived experience of child welfare systems constitutes their primary qualification and the relational basis of their support. This distinction is significant because it situates mentoring within the broader advocacy landscape, while recognising its particular reliance on experiential knowledge rather than professional credentials.

A further important consideration concerns the structural positioning of advocacy services in relation to statutory child welfare systems. Advocacy for parents in child protection can be delivered through a range of organisational arrangements: independently, through services structurally separate from the statutory agencies that make decisions about families; or in embedded forms, where advocates operate within or alongside statutory systems (Saar-Heiman et al., 2024). Fitt et al. (2023), in their descriptive review of independent non-legal advocacy in child protection, found growing evidence that such provision holds significant benefits for families, service systems, and governments, though it remains an under-researched area. The independence of advocacy provision matters, because advocates who are not employed by or accountable to child protection services may be better positioned to represent parents’ interests without conflicts of

obligation. However, embedded models can offer advantages in terms of integration with existing service pathways and professional relationships. The POPS programme occupies an intermediate position in this regard: while operating in conjunction with Integrated Family Support Teams and funded through public sources, its peer mentors are community volunteers whose primary allegiance is to the families they support, rather than to the statutory system. This perceived independence was identified by participants as a particularly valued feature of the programme, as discussed in the findings below.

The People Offering Parents Support (POPS) programme represents Wales' first formal integration of peer mentoring within statutory children's services. Initiated in 2015, POPS recruits volunteer mentors with relevant lived experience relating to youth welfare systems, substance misuse, and justice involvement, providing advocacy to parents referred by Integrated Family Support Teams (IFST).

Berrick et al. (2011) provide a useful conceptual distinction between proximal and distal goals in peer advocacy programmes that helps frame the intended outcomes of POPS. Concerning proximal goals, the programme aims to mitigate isolation by advocating for and nurturing individuals' motivation and capacity to positively engage with available support services. Distal goals include family reunification and reducing child removal rates over time by challenging pervasive stigma surrounding child welfare involvement.

The timing of this study is particularly significant, as it coincides with recent policy developments following the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England (MacAlister, 2022), which specifically recommended expanding parental advocacy services. The review found that independent advocacy frequently provides "transformational help" enabling families to address challenges while remaining together. While focused on England, these findings have relevance across the UK, including Wales, where POPS operates. This policy context creates a crucial opportunity to develop an evidence base around peer parental advocacy initiatives that can inform future service development.

By gathering insights regarding perceived influences on decision-making, relationships, and parental engagement, this study contributes timely empirical evidence to a growing field. The findings offer understanding of participant experiences and implementation factors to guide the continued development of POPS and similar emerging initiatives. More broadly, this research represents an opportunity to develop an early UK evidence base around peer parental advocacy initiatives and to amplify the voices of parents within child welfare services, ultimately informing more responsive and empowering approaches to supporting vulnerable families.

Methodology

Research design

The study was conducted in North Wales, where POPS operates in conjunction with Integrated Family Support Teams (IFST) based in Gwynedd and Ynys Môn (Anglesey) county councils. The region faces significant challenges related to substance use and mental health, exacerbated by generational cycles of trauma and limited-service infrastructure (Gwynedd Council, 2018). The distinct Welsh language and cultural identity of the area also shape the population's needs and service engagement

patterns. Within this context, POPS recruits volunteer mentors with lived experience from backgrounds inclusive of children's services involvement, substance use disorders, and marginalisation. These mentors are matched with parents referred by IFSTs due to child welfare concerns such as domestic violence, addiction, and neglect linked to poverty.

This study employed a qualitative cross-sectional methodology to explore participant experiences within the POPS programme. As outlined above, POPS delivers peer parental advocacy through a mentoring model in which volunteer mentors with lived experience provide guidance, emotional support, and representation to parents involved with statutory child welfare services. While the programme is operationally described as “peer mentoring”, the support provided encompasses advocacy functions—including accompanying parents to meetings, helping them understand their rights, and representing their interests to professionals—consistent with the broader peer advocacy typology identified in the literature (Powell et al., 2024; Saar-Heiman et al., 2024). A qualitative approach was selected as most appropriate for capturing the nuanced, contextualised insights regarding how peer mentoring and advocacy influences families navigating complex child welfare systems (Patton, 1990), enabling the gathering of rich, experiential data reflecting multiple perspectives on the programme's implementation and perceived impacts.

The research was guided by an overarching evaluative question: “Can healthy community-led relationships influence positive experiences for vulnerable families?” While deliberately broad to reflect the exploratory nature of the commissioned evaluation from which this paper is drawn, the analysis presented here focuses specifically on how peer parental advocacy through the POPS programme supported parents' engagement and participation within statutory child welfare processes. Additional sub-questions explored:

1. What are the practical and therapeutic challenges and benefits of the project?
2. What are parents' and mentors' expectations, and do these align with experienced benefits?
3. Do the benefits conform to Integrated Family Support Team (IFST) aims and objectives?
4. Where do participants identify strengths that could be built upon?

This exploratory approach allowed for the emergence of unanticipated themes while focusing on key areas of interest regarding implementation and impact.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained through Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences research ethics procedures before data collection commenced (approval number 4058). Particular attention was paid to potential power dynamics, particularly when interviewing parents involved with statutory services, and to safeguarding vulnerable participants, ensuring that involvement in the research did not exacerbate existing stresses for families navigating child welfare processes. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised throughout recruitment and data collection, with clear explanation that decisions about

participation would not affect service provision. Confidentiality was maintained through careful anonymisation of data and secure storage of research materials in accordance with data protection regulations.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were selected using purposive sampling strategies appropriate for in-depth qualitative inquiry (Patton, 1990). This approach involves strategic recruitment based on subjective assessment of experiential relevance, emphasising information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness. County councils and IFSTs assisted recruitment as initial gatekeepers to families and mentors engaged in POPS, without active crises or acute safety concerns. To contextualise the sampling frame, POPS operated across two local authority areas, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn, with a small pool of active volunteer mentors. At the time of data collection, the programme had approximately five trained peer mentors available, of whom three participated in this study. Given the programme's small-scale, volunteer-based model operating in a rural context, the number of families referred and actively engaged at any one time was modest, typically involving a limited number of concurrent parent-mentor pairings. The two parent participants were drawn from those who had received or were currently receiving peer mentoring support during the data collection period. Although specific referral numbers for the entire data collection period are not provided, the small scale of the program is an important contextual factor. This highlights both the rural nature of the region and the resource challenges discussed in the findings.

Peer mentors were recruited from the community through the programme's existing volunteer infrastructure. All mentors had personal experience of involvement with child welfare or related systems, including children's services, substance use, and criminal justice. Mentors received initial training upon joining the programme, though as the findings below indicate, all three mentor participants identified a desire for additional and more specialised training, particularly in safeguarding and managing complex situations. The nature and extent of initial training provision is discussed as a key finding of this evaluation.

In total, 11 participants were interviewed:

1. 2 parents (with one follow-up interview each)
2. 3 peer mentors (with one follow-up interview each)
3. 5 IFST practitioners
4. 1 programme manager
5. 1 service manager

This sample size, while not intended to achieve thematic saturation, offered multiple perspectives encompassing the primary programme stakeholders, illustrating a range of experiences for this initial exploratory evaluation. The participant numbers allowed for meaningful analysis while preventing deductive disclosure to preserve anonymity.

Data collection

Individual interviews were conducted between January 2023 and January 2024. All participants received detailed information sheets explaining the research purpose, voluntary participation, benefits and risks, and ethical safeguards around confidentiality. Signed informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, with ongoing reconfirmation of willingness to participate throughout the process. The interview schedules were semi-structured, allowing for consistency across core topics while providing flexibility to explore individual experiences. Different schedules were developed for each stakeholder group to capture their unique perspectives, while maintaining alignment across common areas of interest, covering topics including expectations, perceived impacts on families, views of the programme, and overall lessons learned. All interviews were audio recorded with participant permission and subsequently transcribed anonymously.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews using NVivo20 software to facilitate data management and coding. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach to thematic analysis, selected for its systematic yet flexible approach to identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data. Inductive coding was conducted on the transcripts, identifying recurrent concepts, experiences, and perspectives within the narratives, applied consistently within transcripts and across the sample to facilitate recognition of common motifs within the dataset. These preliminary codes were subsequently grouped into potential themes which were reviewed for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Themes were refined through an iterative process of comparing coded data within and across themes, leading to the development of a thematic framework that captured key dimensions of participant experiences.

Findings

The findings from this qualitative evaluation reveal multifaceted experiences of the POPS programme across different stakeholder groups. Analysis of interview data yielded several key thematic areas that illuminate how peer parental advocacy operates in practice, its perceived impacts, and implementation challenges. This section presents these findings organised by stakeholder perspectives—parents, peer mentors, and professionals—while identifying cross-cutting themes that address the research questions regarding the influence of peer mentoring relationships on vulnerable families.

Parents' perspectives

Pathways to support and relationship development

Parents described entering the POPS programme through referrals from social services or Integrated Family Support Teams (IFST). Their accounts revealed varying durations of engagement with peer mentors, reflecting both consistent support and, in some cases, transitions between different mentors.

It was my worker from the independent team ... she's the one that arranged the whole thing ... she just went "I think you'd find it's very helpful." And then just pointed me towards it and it's been unbelievable since really. (Parent 1)

This parent developed a strong relationship with their mentor over several months, while Parent 2 experienced transitions between multiple mentors, accentuating how the personal qualities and commitment of individual mentors influenced the experience.

Both parents sought reliable sources of support where their personal challenges were addressed alongside their children's needs. The presence of a compassionate, non-judgemental advocate provided a sense of solidarity and understanding distinct from their experiences with statutory services.

Navigating power dynamics and professional systems

A dominant theme emerging from parents' accounts was the transformative impact of having an advocate present during challenging interactions with professionals. Parents described feeling dismissed, interrupted, or overshadowed in meetings when unaccompanied by their peer mentor. The peer mentors' presence altered this dynamic, ensuring parents' voices were acknowledged and respected. Parent 1 reported being "*heard more when she's around*," suggesting the advocate's presence had a legitimising effect that enhanced professionals' willingness to listen.

Parent 2 reported receiving valuable representation during school meetings, noting their mentor "*really stood up for me*", underscoring how the advocacy role extended beyond child welfare settings to educational contexts, reflecting the interconnected challenges parents face.

The non-statutory positioning of peer mentors was particularly valued by parents, who distinguished this relationship from other professional involvements: "Because she's not ... she's not with social services, she's not with anybody, she's just there for you and the kids" (Parent 1).

This perception of independence fostered trust and openness, creating a space where parents could express frustrations and seek guidance without fear of judgement or consequences.

Empowerment through knowledge and emotional support

Parents identified multiple dimensions of empowerment facilitated by peer mentors. Parent 1 emphasised how their mentor enhanced their capacity to advocate for themselves and understand the systems they were navigating: "She'll always point out things to me and she's like, "No look, there's research here about things and remember your rights."

The emotional support provided was equally significant, with Parent 1 noting: "She's kept me calm a lot," and describing the relationship as "amazing."

Both parents valued the mentors' lived experience as a foundation for authentic understanding, shared experiential knowledge, which created a unique connection that parents distinguished from professional support, regardless of how empathetic. The awareness that their mentor had survived similar challenges offered hope and reduced isolation.

Because I think that's ... that's the biggest thing is you know like the peer support I've got now okay we haven't got the same background but she's been to court, you know ... her children have gone into foster care, my little girl's gone into foster care but she knows that path I've been on. She knows how I feel because she knew how she felt. (Parent 2)

Practical support also featured prominently in parents' accounts. Parent 1 described assistance with daily logistics that reduced stress and created mental space to manage complex system interactions. These concrete forms of support addressed immediate needs while contributing to parents' overall capacity to engage with services and care for their children.

Peer mentors' perspectives

Motivations and role understanding

Peer mentors described deeply personal motivations for becoming advocates, rooted in their own experiences with systems and desire to provide the support they once needed. PM 1 stated simply: "Because my life experiences can help others ... And it's good to give back." PM 3 similarly explained: "Because I'd been through more or less the same stuff myself ... I think the families are able to relate to me."

These motivations reflect a desire to transform difficult personal histories into resources for others, creating meaning from challenging experiences. The mentors conceptualised their roles as multifaceted, encompassing emotional support, practical assistance, and system navigation. Accounts revealed a commitment to integrating into parents' lives and offering relaxed, holistic support adapted to individual journeys rather than following predetermined pathways or goals.

Navigating complex boundaries and professional relationships

Peer mentors described navigating challenging boundary issues while maintaining professional relationships with both families and statutory services. PM 1 reflected on witnessing difficult family dynamics and managing emotional responses: "I saw abuse between daughter and mum ... And mum just laughed it off and I found that quite difficult." This mentor also acknowledged personal limitations: "And plus I was having issues of my own so I had to pull back and say I can't." These reflections highlight the complex emotional terrain mentors navigate and the importance of self-awareness regarding personal capacity.

The mentors described mixed experiences with social work professionals, reflecting variation in how their roles were understood and valued within the broader system. PM 1 reported positive interactions: "I've never had any problems with any of the social workers ... I've found them all really nice and easy to get on with." However, PM 2 experienced role ambiguity which created tensions: "Again the incident of social services where they required that I report to them, that wasn't actually ... well I don't believe that was a part of my job role to report to them."

PM 3 offered a nuanced assessment of professional dynamics, highlighting considerable variation in social worker approaches: "I see some of them are punishing the parents instead of helping them ... Yeah, it ... it just depends on which social worker I think you get." This perceived inconsistency in professional practice created challenges for mentors attempting to maintain trusting relationships with families while collaborating effectively with statutory services.

Training needs and organisational support

All three mentors identified needs for enhanced training and organisational infrastructure to support their roles effectively. PM 1 expressed a desire for “more training in what to do in difficult situations” and “more training in safeguarding,” suggesting that the current preparation left gaps in handling complex scenarios. PM 3 similarly stated “I’d like a bit more training yeah,” while appreciating the challenges inherent in the role: “Oh the challenges, yeah I like the challenges.”

Mentors also identified needs for improved communication and networking opportunities with peers, as well as the need for clearer documentation and procedures, indicating a desire for more structured approaches to recording and validating their work.

These perspectives suggest that while mentors valued the flexibility and relational aspects of their roles, they also sought more robust frameworks to better navigate complex situations, and reveal tension between maintaining the authentic, non-bureaucratic nature of peer support while accessing sufficient structure and resources to operate confidently.

Professional perspectives

Understanding and valuing the advocacy role

Professionals articulated varied understandings of the peer mentor role, revealing both appreciation for its unique contribution and some conceptual ambiguity. The Project Manager emphasised the responsive, parent-led nature of the role: “Whatever parents think they need,” highlighting its fundamental orientation toward addressing parents’ self-defined priorities rather than externally imposed goals.

The Service Manager articulated a clear understanding of the advocacy role’s importance in guiding parents through complex systems:

Well I’ve always felt that having an advocate for parents is important. It’s a very complex world when parents come into contact with social services ... So having someone to guide them through that process is quite important.

However, Professional 1 noted confusion regarding terminology and role boundaries:

I’ve had to adjust my language and be specific and ask those questions, so is this peer mentoring or is this parent advocacy? ... I suppose they could be an advocate as well but I think an advocate is quite a specific trained role isn’t it?

This reflected broader systemic ambiguity regarding how peer mentoring and formal advocacy relate—an important distinction when coordinating support for families. Professional 1 also highlighted the scarcity of formal advocacy for parents: “There is a shortage of sort of advocacy for adults and parents here locally ... So that’s where peer mentors always come in handy.”

Professional 5 understood mentors as focused specifically on parental needs in contrast to child-centred professional roles: “They were there for the ... parents ... advocating on their behalf really.”

These varying interpretations suggest that while professionals valued the distinct contribution of peer mentors, operational clarity regarding role boundaries and relationships with other services remained a work in progress.

Perceived benefits and impact

Professionals identified multiple benefits of peer mentoring, particularly in enhancing parental engagement, confidence, and system navigation.

For my mum if I'd said a year ago that she was going to come into the council offices and speak with the director of social services and the councillors for Anglesey she would have run away and not spoken to me for weeks. So to actually see her working with a peer mentor for like six, seven weeks and be able to come into the offices very proud of the service that she's had ... the confidence that that peer mentor has given her is ... I don't think that'll ever go away now. (Professional 2)

This account illustrates how peer support contributed to substantial personal growth over relatively short timeframes, enabling participation that was previously unimaginable.

Professional 1 highlighted the distinct value of peer mentors' non-judgemental stance:

I can see that they play a really valuable role to parents that maybe need somebody that's around the same age that wants somebody that's perhaps impartial that's not their own family members or friends that isn't the professional that's going to perhaps be writing a report on everything.

The Project Manager emphasised how peer mentors helped parents articulate complex emotions that might otherwise manifest as resistance:

People are ... they might have a voice but they might come across as being angry, but people don't take into account it's that animal instinct—you're taking my child. I'm going to shout and swear at you because I can't articulate what's going on for me emotionally.

Another significant theme was the role of mentors in altering power dynamics between parents and professionals. Professional 2 described how a previously compliant parent developed authentic self-advocacy skills: "She kind of stands up for herself."

Professional 1 similarly observed that advocacy "empower[s] the parent so that the parent certainly feels that they have more power and control", suggesting that peer mentors facilitated not just superficial participation but genuine empowerment.

Implementation challenges and service development needs

Professionals identified several challenges affecting programme implementation, including staffing challenges and operational constraints exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and resource limitations. Geographic factors created additional barriers, particularly in rural North Wales:

You just can't build the same relationships online as you can face-to-face ... I've been to meetings that they've had in North Wales, I go to North Wales to have the meetings, but I still have the me ... I still go into a separate room on my own and have the meeting on Teams ... really is about building those relationships. (Project Manager)

Professional 1 raised concerns about risk assessment and management within the peer mentor role:

I wonder what they use as a measure as to when is it a concern, when is it not a concern ... I don't think as professionals we understood enough about what measures the peer mentor might use if they were going to gauge risk or what was okay, what was not okay.

This professional also highlighted safety considerations for mentors themselves, reflecting awareness of the complex, sometimes volatile situations mentors might encounter and the need for robust risk management protocols.

Professional 3 emphasised challenges in recruiting appropriate peer mentors:

I think it ... getting more peer mentors I think that's the thing now really ... you don't want to become ... have too many and just ... recruit loads of people who may not be appropriate ... need to be a really ... tight ... recruitment process.

Professional 4 noted similar recruitment limitations in a small rural county: "It's quite hard to identify a large number of people to put forward to become peer mentors because we're quite a small county, we only work with a certain number of families per year."

These professional perspectives highlighted operational constraints that limited the programme's reach and sustainability, despite recognition of its value. They suggested needs for enhanced infrastructure, clearer protocols, and strategic approaches to recruitment and retention of mentors with appropriate lived experience and skills.

Cross-cutting themes

Transforming power dynamics through advocacy

A recurring theme across all stakeholder groups was the potential for peer advocacy to alter traditional power imbalances between vulnerable parents and professional systems. Parents' experiences of being "talked over" or dismissed when unaccompanied contrasted sharply with being "heard more" when supported by mentors. The Project Manager described how child protection conferences leave parents feeling "really scared" and "judged" when facing the process alone, while advocates help them "feel confident" and provide an emotional "connection to make you feel safer."

The Service Manager acknowledged that trained advocates "can ... impact on the power dynamics between parents and professionals," despite potential challenges in implementation. These power shifts manifested in parents developing confidence to express opinions, ask questions, and contribute meaningfully to decisions affecting their families.

The unique value of experiential knowledge

All participant groups emphasised the distinctive contribution of shared experience in creating authentic connections and understanding. Parent 2 specifically valued their mentor's similar journey through court and child removal processes: "She knows how I feel because she knew how she felt."

This experiential knowledge enabled mentors to offer empathy and insights that professionals—regardless of training or intention—could not provide from the same perspective. "I don't think they should be qualified professionals as in like social workers or therapists or nurses. I think it's good for the families to know like they're just like me" (Professional 4).

This suggests that maintaining the distinctiveness of peer roles—rather than professionalising them to resemble existing services—preserves their most valued qualities.

Navigating complex role boundaries and integration

Tension between maintaining authentic peer relationships while operating effectively within formal systems emerged as a significant challenge across stakeholder accounts. Peer mentors described navigating dual loyalties—maintaining trusting relationships with families while collaborating appropriately with professionals. Professionals similarly identified boundary complexities, questioning where lines should be drawn between supportive mentoring and friendship. Professional 1 asked: “Where does the line between a professional befriender and then becoming friends and colluding in anything ... Are there clear guidelines around not maintaining friendships afterwards or is there not?”

The term “colluding” used by this professional suggests concern about potential over-identification with parents, while parent accounts emphasised the value of non-judgemental support. This tension reflects broader debates about whether formalising peer roles within professional hierarchies enhances or diminishes their core values.

Integration with existing systems also presented challenges: “It’s difficult because it’s kind of floating around. There’s no base, they don’t have an office so we don’t really see people.” (Professional 4)

Several professionals suggested improving system integration through more consistent inclusion of peer mentors in training, team meetings, and regular supervision structures. The Service Manager reflected:

But do we see them as part of the team? Maybe not. Maybe we should be having closer links with them actually and including them more in our training, maybe in our team meetings, our away days, that kind of stuff, you know?

These observations highlight organisational challenges in positioning peer mentors and the need for clearer operational frameworks which preserve contribution while ensuring coordination.

Balancing flexibility with consistency

Tension between the value of responsive, individualised support and the need for consistent service delivery appeared across accounts. Parents appreciated mentors’ adaptability to their specific needs, with Parent 2 valuing how support evolved as their relationship developed. Peer mentors similarly emphasised adapting to parents’ changing priorities. However, this flexibility contributed to variability in service experience, with Parent 2 noting significant differences between mentors: “With the one I’ve got now, very positive. Less so with previous.”

Professionals recognised challenges in maintaining quality while allowing for responsiveness. Professional 3 described how mentor relationships typically evolved: “Your observation is that it starts off as more practical and then when the ... relationship builds maybe it becomes a bit more ... not intimate but ... there’s a bit more of an emotional support thing.”

This organic development of mentoring relationships was valued but created challenges for defining consistent service parameters and ensuring equitable support across different parent-mentor pairings.

Perspectives on programme development

Training and professional development

All stakeholder groups identified opportunities to enhance mentor training and support structures. Parent 1 recognised the value of specialised knowledge, “Yeah it’d all just fold into place then really wouldn’t it?” when asked about additional training for mentors. Parent 2 articulated the delicate balance required:

For them to have training but then you know you do not want them ... because they’ve got the training you’re like they’re better than me kind of thing, whereas now you know you’ve ... you know you’ve walked my path, you know where I’m going, you’ve walked in my shoes.

This highlights the importance of training that enhances skills without diminishing the peer relationship’s equality and authenticity.

Peer mentors consistently expressed desire for additional training in specific areas, particularly managing challenging situations, with PM 1 specifically requesting “more training in what to do in difficult situations” and “more training in safeguarding.”

Professionals offered varied perspectives on training needs, with some advocating formal qualifications for mentors, while others emphasised maintaining the distinction between experiential knowledge and professional qualifications. These divergent views reflect broader questions about professionalisation versus maintaining authentic peer identities, suggesting need for training approaches that enhance skills while preserving the distinctive qualities of lived experience.

Resourcing and sustainability

Participants across groups identified resource limitations affecting programme sustainability, the Service Manager specifically noted staffing challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. Mentors described limited organisational infrastructure supporting their roles, with PM 1 requesting more regular meetings and improved documentation systems.

Parents observed variability in mentor availability and consistency, sometimes experiencing transitions between mentors that disrupted supportive relationships. Professional perspectives emphasised the need for dedicated coordination resources:

I think we could definitely improve it for the peer mentors by having that one person that they know is kind of their go-to in Anglesey that they can contact, that they can meet up with regularly, that they can go to with any worries or any questions especially if they’re new and they’ve just started supporting a family. (Professional 4)

The Service Manager proposed innovative approaches to sustainability, suggesting time-banking systems to motivate and recognise volunteers: “I would like to see a process where they can maybe bank time where there is a payment. Maybe not ... not directly to them but to some good cause or something. Something that would motivate them.”

These reflections highlight challenges in sustaining volunteer-based peer support and the need for structured organisational frameworks and resources to support mentors effectively.

Expanding reach and impact

Participants identified opportunities to extend the programme’s influence through enhanced visibility, broader geographical coverage, and specialised support for specific

populations. Professional 2 expressed desire to develop targeted peer support for care leavers. Parent 1 suggested increasing programme visibility, indicating limited awareness of the service among potential beneficiaries.

The Project Manager described barriers to building relationships in geographically dispersed areas like North Wales: “I think ... I don’t think they could do anything differently, I think they could be ... have more of ... maybe ... a network of support in North Wales and that’s the biggest barrier for me is the distance, it really is.”

These suggestions highlight the potential for expanding the programme’s reach while maintaining its core values of empowerment through shared experience and relational support.

Impact on decision-making processes

Participants offered mixed perspectives regarding the influence of peer advocacy on formal decision-making processes within child welfare systems. While parents and mentors described enhanced voice and confidence in meetings, Professional 4 noted limitations in affecting predetermined outcomes:

I know that one family whose children were removed and were living with other family members, I know that their peer mentor kind of wrote a letter or wrote an email to the social worker to kind of fight for the mum, to stick up for her ... But I know that that letter won’t have made a difference because they’d already decided the children are already going.

This suggests that while peer advocacy may enhance parental participation and voice, its influence on substantive decisions sometimes remains constrained by broader systemic factors and pre-existing professional judgements.

Nevertheless, the cumulative evidence across stakeholders indicates that peer advocacy can modify how decisions are reached, even when not altering ultimate outcomes. Enhanced parental understanding, emotional regulation, and articulation of perspectives contributes to more informed and inclusive processes, potentially improving both procedural justice and the quality of decision-making over time.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations warrant consideration when interpreting findings. The small sample size, while appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study, limits generalisability beyond the specific programme context. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures perspectives at a single point in time, without capacity to track changes longitudinally, limiting understanding of how peer mentoring relationships and impacts evolve over time. The recruitment process, relying on programme gatekeepers, introduces potential selection bias, as parents and mentors with more positive experiences may have been more willing to participate or more likely to be suggested by programme staff. The study’s focus on a specific geographical and cultural context—rural North Wales with its distinctive Welsh language and cultural identity—may limit transferability to other settings with different demographics, service structures, and cultural factors. Implementation challenges related to rurality and distance may be less relevant in urban contexts, while different cultural understandings of family, community, and professional intervention may influence how peer advocacy is experienced and valued.

Discussion

This study provides significant insights into the implementation and impact of peer parental advocacy within the POPS programme in North Wales, offering valuable understanding of both its potential and challenges. The findings reveal a complex picture of how relational support can influence family experiences of child welfare systems, with implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Theoretical connections

The experiences documented in this study align with and extend theoretical frameworks regarding peer support and its applications within statutory contexts. Consistent with Davidson et al.'s (2006) findings in mental health settings, the POPS programme demonstrates how shared experience creates distinctive relational qualities that facilitate trust, understanding, and hope. Participants' accounts reflect Beresford's (2013) conceptualisation of experiential knowledge as a unique form of expertise that complements, rather than replicates, professional knowledge. The transformative potential of this knowledge emerges particularly in how peer mentors translate complex system requirements into accessible language while simultaneously validating emotional responses—a bridging function identified by Lalayants (2017) in similar advocacy contexts. The peer advocacy relationship created spaces where typical dynamics could be challenged, supporting Morris et al.'s (2018) contention that meaningful participation requires attention to both procedural inclusion and substantive influence.

Power, participation, and voice

A central theme emerging from this evaluation concerns the potential for peer advocacy to alter power dynamics within child welfare interactions. Parents' experiences of being “talked over” or dismissed in professional contexts reflect the power imbalances that Diaz (2020) identifies as endemic within child protection systems. The finding that parents felt “heard more” when accompanied by mentors suggests that advocacy facilitated what Arnstein (1969) would characterise as a shift from tokenistic consultation toward more authentic partnership. However, the findings also reveal limitations regarding substantive influence on outcomes, particularly in cases where decisions about children's placements were effectively predetermined. This reflects Dickens et al.'s (2015) distinction between procedural participation (being present and heard) and substantive participation (meaningfully influencing decisions). While POPS clearly enhanced procedural participation, its impact on substantive decision-making appeared more variable and contingent on broader systemic receptiveness. However, as Thoburn (2010) argues, parents may value being heard and respected even when they disagree with ultimate decisions.

Role definition and boundaries

The findings highlight significant ambiguity regarding the conceptualisation and boundaries of peer advocacy roles. While Tobis et al. (2020) distinguishes between case

advocacy, programme advocacy, and policy advocacy, participants described fluid, evolving roles that blended elements of practical support, emotional companionship, and formal representation. This fluidity created both strengths—allowing responsive, individualised support—and challenges—generating confusion about expectations and responsibilities. Tension between maintaining authentic peer relationships while operating effectively within professional systems emerged as a significant implementation challenge. Professionals’ concerns about “collusion” and boundary maintenance reflect broader debates about whether formalising peer roles within service structures enhances their effectiveness or diminishes their distinctive qualities (Stratford et al., 2017). The mentors’ experiences of navigating dual loyalties—to both families and the broader child welfare system—illustrate what Scott et al. (2018) describe as the “borderland” position of peer workers. Clearer operational frameworks are needed to support these complex roles while preserving their authentic relational qualities, reflecting the arguments of Moran et al. (2017).

Systemic context and constraints

The findings must be understood within the broader systemic context of child welfare services. The POPS programme operated within resource-constrained environments characterised by what Featherstone et al. (2018) describe as increasing demand and diminishing capacity. The pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis, as mentioned by participants, further exacerbated these pressures. Within this context, the programme’s achievements in enhancing parental experiences are particularly notable. Nevertheless, the programme demonstrates the potential for what Needham and Carr (2009) characterise as transformative co-production, whereby service users’ active participation contributes to changing how services operate. The example of a parent confidently engaging with senior officials after peer support illustrates how individual empowerment can potentially contribute to organisational learning and cultural change over time.

Implications and recommendations for policy and practice

The evaluation findings support MacAlister’s (2022) call for expanded advocacy services within child welfare, demonstrating the potential of peer approaches to enhance parental engagement and wellbeing. However, they also highlight the need for sustainable funding models and organisational infrastructures to support these services effectively. Secondly, the findings underscore the importance of clear role definitions and boundaries while maintaining flexibility to respond to individual needs. As Diaz et al. (2023) argues in their evaluation of peer advocacy initiatives, formalisation without bureaucratisation represents a delicate but essential balance for effective implementation. Thirdly, the current study reveals a need for integrated approaches to training and supporting peer advocates which enhance mentors’ skills in specific areas such as safeguarding, while respecting parents’ appreciation of their non-professionalised identity. Finally, the findings indicate that peer advocacy is most effective when embedded within supportive organisational cultures that value experiential knowledge and recognise the legitimacy of parents’ perspectives, as supported by Forrester et al. (2019).

Regarding future practice, developing national standards and training frameworks for peer parental advocates would be recommended, particularly standards which establish core competencies while preserving the unique value of experiential knowledge, ideally co-produced with parents and peer advocates to ensure relevance and authenticity. Additionally, investigation into organisational factors which facilitate or inhibit effective integration of peer advocacy within statutory services would be useful. This should include examination of how professional cultures, leadership approaches, and structural arrangements influence implementation success.

Future research directions

This evaluation highlights several areas warranting further research. Longitudinal studies tracking outcomes for families receiving peer advocacy would provide valuable insights regarding sustained impacts over time, including examination of both proximal outcomes (engagement, knowledge, emotional wellbeing) and distal outcomes (family preservation, child welfare). Comparative studies examining different models of peer support implementation could clarify which operational approaches most effectively support both parents and mentors. Additionally, research exploring peer advocates' own trajectories and professional development would enhance understanding of how these roles can be sustainably supported. Further investigation into how peer advocacy influences formal decision-making processes would address a key question raised by this evaluation. While the findings suggest enhanced parental participation in meetings, questions remain about substantive influence on outcomes, particularly in high-stakes decisions regarding child placement. Finally, research examining how peer advocacy might be adapted for specific populations or contexts would build on this study's insights. Parents facing particular challenges—such as domestic violence, disabilities, or cultural and linguistic barriers—may benefit from tailored advocacy approaches that address their specific needs while maintaining core peer support principles.

Conclusion

This evaluation of the POPS programme provides important insights into the implementation and impact of peer parental advocacy within Welsh child welfare services. Findings demonstrate potential to empower families requiring additional advocacy and mentorship, effectively leveraging shared experience to foster personal agency, system navigation, emotional coping, and educational empowerment. The programme's impact operated across multiple dimensions: individual (parents reported reduced isolation and enhanced confidence and knowledge of their rights), interactional (presence of peer mentors altered dynamics in meetings with professionals, enabling parents to have their voices heard more effectively), and systemic (early indications that peer advocacy could contribute to attitudinal shifts among professionals). The programme demonstrated how community-led relationships can create spaces of dignity and respect within systems that parents often experience as dehumanising and dismissive. However, ad hoc and inconsistent resourcing created instability for this volunteer programme, highlighting the need for sustainable funding models to realise its full potential. While implementation challenges remain, the evaluation findings demonstrate the significant potential of

peer advocacy to enhance parental experiences and contribute to more inclusive practice. Realising this potential requires sustained commitment to elevating marginalised voices across all levels of policy and practice, transforming not only individual experiences but the broader systems within which families are supported.

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