Ministry of Justice

Education, Skills, and Work Peer Mentoring in Men's Prisons

Research to explore perceptions of what contributes to the effective delivery of Education, Skills, and Work peer mentoring in men's prisons in England

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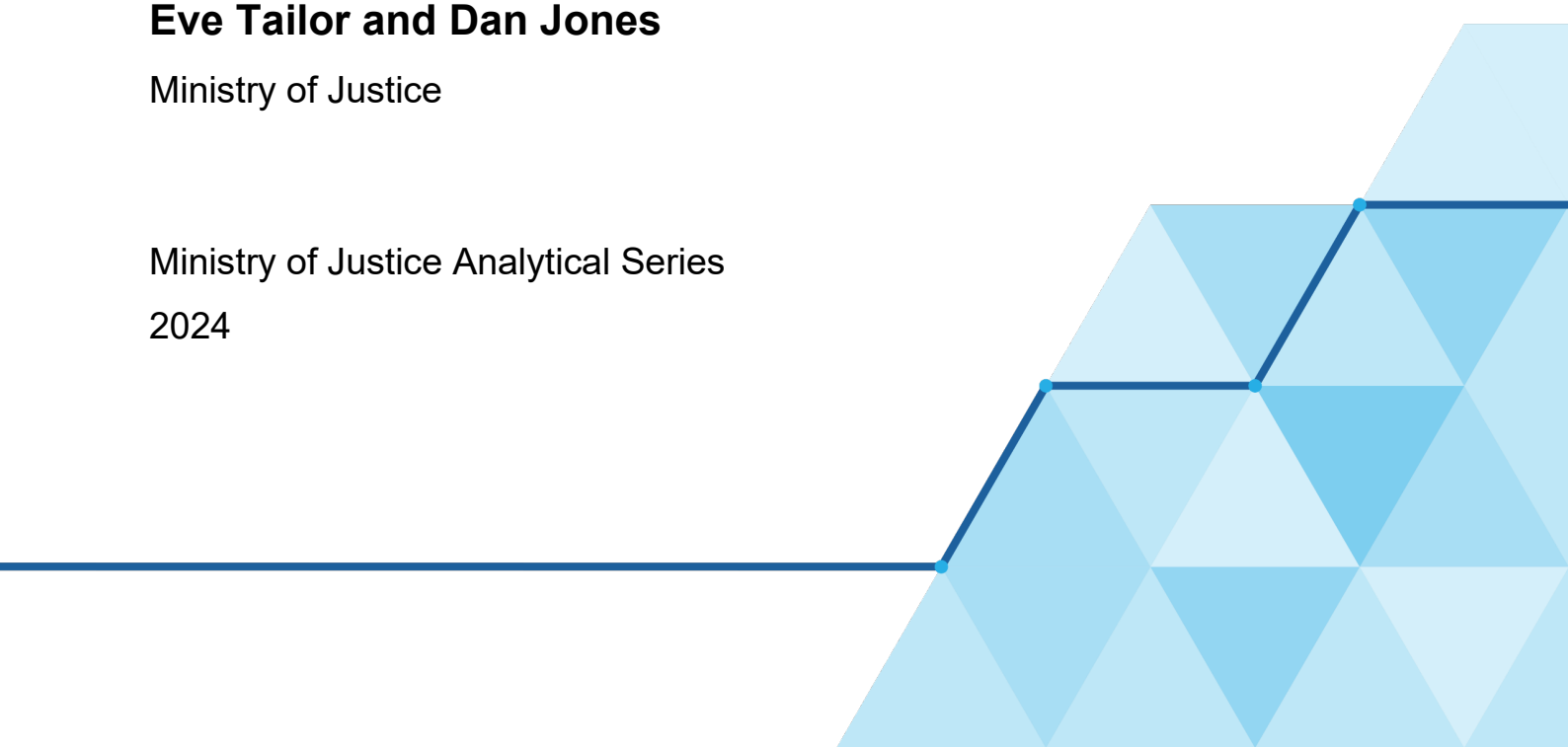

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Background and methodological approach

Numerous prisons, charities, and prison education providers deliver peer mentoring schemes relating to education, skills, and work (ESW). Where successful, these schemes are viewed as significant in the delivery of ESW and have been highly praised by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Ofsted. However, practice is inconsistent and there is limited evidence about which delivery models are most successful. The rationale for undertaking this research was to understand effective practice in ESW peer mentoring in more detail, including the functioning of these schemes. The findings from this study will be used by the HMPPS Prisoner Education Service team to inform ESW peer mentoring policy development.

Findings are based on 48 qualitative interviews with mentees, mentors and ESW staff members across 5 male prisons in England in April and May 2023.

1.2 Key Findings

A variety of mentoring schemes operate in ESW within men's prisons. The setting, structure, purpose, and formality of schemes explored in this study vary significantly. For example, formalised schemes had structured mentor/mentee relationships and clear staff oversight. These schemes tended to focus on skill development, such as reading. Less formalised schemes often had flexible and less structured operation, with mentors supporting multiple mentees. These less formalised schemes often involved supporting staff to deliver ESW services. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to peer mentoring in ESW, allowing individual sites to tailor their provision to the learners at their site.

Some of the enablers of effective practice identified by participants in this study included:

- mentors having previous experience as a mentee or mentor in other custodial and non-custodial settings,[1]
- approachable mentors helping to facilitate mentee recruitment and effective running of schemes,
- privileges and low-risk status enabling greater access to the prison site and recognition of the hard work of mentors.

Some of the barriers to effective practice identified by participants in this study included**:**

- regime and restricted movement preventing access to mentoring**,**
- limited awareness from operational staff about the purpose of peer mentoring,
- lack of appropriate space on wings to provide support,
- recruitment issues arising from stigma and lack of awareness, and
- a lack of a 'pipeline' for new mentors which made some schemes unsustainable.

Participants identified a range of benefits and drawbacks associated with ESW peer mentoring. Benefits included improved staff-prisoner relationships and the development of soft skills such as communication and learning new skills.

Drawbacks identified by participants included mentors having to deliver mentoring during association and losing their 'down time', becoming demoralised by the lack of engagement, and previous poor experiences of mentoring being "off-putting" for future participation in schemes.

[1] In this study most of the mentors stated they had previous mentoring experience (custodial and/or non-custodial). It was not possible to definitively report how many mentors had this experience as quantitative data on previous experiences of mentoring was not available.

1.3 Operational implications

The research found that there was a lack of coordination between operational and non-operational staff. Participants suggested that this could be improved by having an operational member of staff who is responsible for liaising with ESW staff who run peer mentoring schemes. Their responsibilities would be to join monthly ESW staff meetings to discuss any issues and bring an operational perspective. They could also assist with signposting prisoners towards peer mentoring schemes if they notice a need on the wings, outside of key work and induction.

Lack of appropriate space on wings to provide support was mentioned by participants as a barrier to providing support. Introducing quiet, distraction-free spaces for peer mentoring to take place and ensuring this is signposted to mentors and mentees was considered one way to overcome this barrier.

Mentors and staff suggested that peer mentoring worked best when it was standardised and accredited to level 2.[2] This was associated with enabling participants to use their qualifications upon release and minimise the likelihood of them having to re-take qualifications if they moved prisons.

Most prisons had informal or formal mechanisms in place to understand the needs of mentees and mentors in prisons. Regular engagement opportunities through meetings and/or prisoner surveys were suggested as useful mechanisms to support needs analyses. Participants thought these would help to adapt the delivery of peer mentoring schemes and make them flexible enough to meet the needs of those taking part in them. It would also prevent duplication with multiple schemes targeting similar mentee cohorts running on the same site.

There appeared to be a lack of opportunities for prisons who are setting up and delivering schemes to come together and share best practice. Prisons with similar cohorts e.g., those on longer sentences could be matched together to enable this.

[2] Level 2 qualifications are equivalent to achieving GCSE grades 5-9 or grades A*, A, B, C. More information can be found at: What qualification levels mean: England, Wales and Northern Ireland - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Peer Mentoring in Prisons

Peer mentoring involves interactions between two individuals, where a mentor shares knowledge/skills and provides support to mentee(s). Mentoring may involve providing practical advice, emotional support, signposting services, facilitating learning and coaching (South et al, 2017).

Peer mentoring is used frequently across the prison estate. Most prisons have some form of peer mentoring, ranging from informal arrangements on wings to formalised roles with the opportunity to gain qualifications (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016). Mentoring is used to support offenders with education and training courses in prisons, improve wellbeing and reduce reoffending (South et al, 2017). Peer mentoring is also used by third-sector organisations to improve life in and out of prison (Hunter and Boyce, 2009).

The evidence is inconclusive about whether peer mentoring leads to reduced reoffending. There is some evidence that peer mentoring may contribute to improvements in 'intermediate outcomes' which are linked to reducing reoffending, sometimes in combination with other interventions (Taylor et. al., 2013; Joliffe and Farrington, 2008). A rapid evidence assessment in 2013 found limited statistical evidence (Taylor et. al., 2013), and an 'Academic Insights' paper from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation highlighted several studies which indicated that a variety of peer mentoring schemes may lead to reduced reoffending (Buck, 2021). However, none of the studies referenced focused specifically on ESW.

More ESW specific research includes a study in 2009 looking at the perceptions of those who took part in a peer mentoring and employment project where mentors were trained to provide housing advice for prisoners prior to release. The scheme intended to provide work experience and skills to increase employment upon release (Hunter and Boyce, 2009). The study found an increase in soft skills for participants, however warned that the project risked setting high expectations for employment upon release (Hunter and Boyce,

2009). A report from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, focusing on Young Offender Institutions, referenced effective 'peer learning' schemes surrounding basic literacy skills among other wider instances of peer mentoring (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016).

Evidence suggests that peer mentoring may be successful in supporting individuals because peer mentors are perceived to have greater credibility with offenders and can provide a sense of hope in those they mentor (Buck, 2021; Matthews, 2021). Some research studies have found that peer mentoring can have a positive effect on desistance through the development of reciprocal relationships and feelings of mutual support between mentor and mentee (Nixon, 2019). There is also some tentative evidence that the support provided through mentoring influences reoffending outcomes by acting as a 'bridge' to enable access to other services (Taylor et al, 2013). Factors associated with successful peer mentoring schemes include having a defined role and job description, providing accredited training to mentors and frequent in-depth meetings between mentors and mentees (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016; Nixon, 2019).

Existing literature has also mostly focused on peer mentoring (sometimes referred to as 'peer support') broadly or on a specific programme or scheme and has been small-scale, for example taking place in one-prison or with only peer mentors. Most research has focused on community-based peer mentoring rather than exploring prison-based peer mentoring or specifically ESW peer mentoring. Please refer to Annex A for a list of published evidence on peer mentoring.

2.2 Prisoner Education Service

The Prisoner Education Service (PES) is working to design and implement improvements to the educational offering across the prison estate. PES focuses on utilising education as a route to reducing reoffending, through a focus on equipping prisoners with skills and qualifications which will increase their ability to get paid employment upon release.

3. Research questions

Part I: Practice on the ground (Section 4)

1) Are there factors when setting up schemes that are perceived to contribute to their effective delivery?
2) How do schemes effectively recruit mentees and mentors from the perspective of mentees, mentors, and staff?
3) How do ESW peer mentoring schemes operate day to day?

Part II: Enablers and barriers for effective Peer Mentoring Schemes (Section 5)

4) What are the perceived enablers to the effective delivery of educational mentoring schemes?
5) What are the perceived barriers to the effective delivery of educational mentoring schemes?

Part III: Benefits and drawbacks from Peer Mentoring Schemes (Section 6)

6) What are the perceived benefits to educational peer mentoring in a prison setting?

4. Methodology

4.1 Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to conduct this research. As an exploratory project, interviews were considered the most appropriate method to answer the key research questions because of the flexibility they afford in collecting in-depth insights into the nuanced and varied ways in which peer mentoring schemes are set up and operate. 48 interviews were conducted onsite with mentees, mentors and ESW staff across 5 prisons throughout April and May of 2023. Interviews with staff were conducted either online or onsite depending on availability. Some staff also provided written evidence.

Interviews were conducted by two researchers, with one leading the interview asking the questions and the second researcher taking notes. Note takers were briefed to record as detailed and verbatim notes as possible. Interviews were not recorded and transcribed due to time and practical constraints and to encourage more open and detailed conversations. The location of interviews varied from prison to prison but were usually conducted in private, in unused classrooms and other training facilities.

4.2 Sample and recruitment of participants

Prison sites were selected to capture a variety of prison categories and mentoring schemes. The categories of the prisons visited can be found in Annex B. HMIP reports and engagement with Regional Educational, Skills and Work Leads or Heads of Reducing Reoffending were used in considering site suitability. Participants were not recruited based on, or asked about, their previous experiences in custody, however many participants voluntarily shared experience of peer mentoring in other prisons or establishments.

Table 1: Number of participants per group

Participant Group	Number
Mentees	12
Mentors	30
Education, Skills, and Work Staff[3]	6

The individual participants were selected by the prisons themselves using criteria provided by the research team to minimise bias and ensure a range of perspectives were heard. Recruitment decisions were also based on an individual taking part in a relevant scheme and their availability on the day of the visit. Prisons were fully briefed on recruitment procedures and provided with the recruitment materials to enable them to do this.

While it was intended that this research would look at both the men's and women's estates, recruiting sufficient women's prisons proved challenging given the limited timeframe. As a result, capturing a greater variety of men's prisons was prioritised over trying to facilitate a single visit to a women's prison which would have provided a limited understanding of peer mentoring across the women's estate.

4.3 Analysis Approach

The notes from interviews were thematically analysed. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was used to pull out the key messages from each element of the research. This involved each researcher independently coding notes from the interviews to identify the re-occurring themes. Researchers then compared and brought together the key themes into the narrative for the report. This approach was chosen due to the timeframe of the research, and the breadth of insights collected.

[3] Examples of staff interviewed as part of this study include Tutors, Prison Employment Leads, and Heads of Education, Skills, and Work.

4.4 Ethics

Internal ethical approval was sought before this research commenced and the National Research Council (NRC) were notified of the research plans.[4] During recruitment, participants were provided with a short-form summary of the key ethics and data protections policies in place for this research. Once participants had indicated their willingness to take part, they were provided with a long-form version re-stating the purpose of the research and providing the ethical protocols in full. This included a consent form which they were asked to sign before participating in the research. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions or raise any concerns before starting the interview.

The main ethical considerations of this research were:

- **Right to withdraw** – due to the nature of conducting research within a prison environment, researchers reminded participants that they were there voluntarily, and the interview could be paused or terminated at any point.
- **Protection from harm** – although the topics discussed in interviews did not directly ask about distressing topics, measures were implemented to ensure participants were comfortable during the interview, such as offering to take breaks, skip questions and sign-posting support through staff after the interviews. Participants were informed in advance and reminded on the day that researchers have a duty to raise safeguarding concerns with staff.
- **Informed consent** – some participants had lower literacy skills: to ensure they were able to provide informed consent they had the opportunity for the consent materials to be read to them by a member of staff in the prison and for questions to be sent to the research team ahead of the visit. Before the interviews commenced, researchers verbally re-confirmed the details of the consent form with participants to ensure they were fully informed and understood the research before taking part. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions or raise any concerns.

[4] More information can be found here – Research at HMPPS - HM Prison and Probation Service - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

4.5 Limitations of the research

The main limitation of this research is the sample size. The research was dependent on access to participants and was limited by the capacity of prison sites to facilitate visits and the research team capacity. The research is small scale and exploratory and does not give an assessment of the effectiveness or impact of peer mentoring schemes in prisons. The findings from this research can be used by prison staff and policy makers to inform the development of ESW peer mentoring related work but should not be used in isolation. Other literature on peer mentoring in prisons can be found in Annex A.

The research is also not representative of all prison peer mentoring schemes. A variety of sites and individuals were selected to take part in the research to capture a range of views and experiences. However, these prison sites and individuals will not represent all prisons or all peer mentoring schemes (including those who take part in the schemes). Sites and individuals with capacity to take part were selected, which could have introduced some self-selection bias into this study. Recall bias may be present in the study's findings as participants may have confused previous experiences with current experiences of ESW peer mentoring. The prison population sample for this study only included mentors and mentees. Future research may benefit from speaking to other sentenced men who are not part of the schemes to gather their perspectives on peer mentoring. The research is also limited by only being able to visit men's prisons which means the findings can only be applied to male prisons. Researchers were only able to speak to ESW staff involved in peer mentoring schemes. Operational staff may view schemes differently and provide a different perspective. The staff who were interviewed were also part of established peer mentoring schemes. As a result, this research was unable to collect rich insight on research question 1 (setting up of peer mentoring schemes). Further research would need to be carried out with sites who are revamping or setting up their ESW peer mentoring provision to understand the factors that contribute to the effective delivery of setting up schemes.

Findings

5. Part I: Day to Day Operations

Peer mentoring can take many forms, both in the way that schemes are run and the roles and responsibilities of participants. This section outlines the differences identified in the 'recruitment' for peer mentoring schemes, in terms of both mentors and mentees, and the 'operation' of schemes in practice.

5.1 Recruitment onto peer mentoring schemes

Awareness – most mentors reported becoming aware of mentoring opportunities through education or library staff members. Mentees also reported being sign posted towards schemes through induction activities or by education or library staff members.

Recruitment – recruitment of mentors varied across the prisons researchers visited. In most prisons, mentors were either selected by staff members, through word of mouth, or they applied to be a mentor through an application process. The formality of this varied by prison and scheme. Mentees were recruited mainly through the induction process or through assessments conducted when they first came to prison.

Selection criteria – the criteria for an individual to become a mentor varied by prison. The most common criteria included a good behaviour record, appropriate level 2 qualifications, and enhanced Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) status. The criteria to become a mentee also varied, with motivation being a key factor to be accepted as a mentee.

Awareness of schemes

There were many factors which contributed to mentors and mentees awareness of ESW peer mentoring in the prisons researchers visited. Awareness of the mentoring schemes available varied based on participants' previous experiences in custody.[5]

Both those who had and had not been in custody before reported becoming aware of peer mentoring schemes through their prison induction. This was through either peer mentoring schemes being mentioned by staff, including the eligibility criteria and how to sign up, or through peer mentors being present during the induction for the men to go and speak to. As part of this, participants also mentioned library and education inductions as being important in raising awareness of peer mentoring schemes. This was particularly important for mentees, as these were often opportunities for them to be assessed and be signposted through staff to schemes.

For those who had been in custody before, education and library staff were brought up as being important in the awareness-raising of schemes. Participants often noted becoming aware of peer mentoring through staff signposting, as this helped them to understand how peer mentoring worked in the institution they were currently in. This included education and library staff offering open forums or drop-ins on the wings, being visited by staff on the wing, or being noticed and signposted through educational activities towards peer mentoring. For example, one mentee was signposted to the Shannon Trust mentor via the library staff.

For participants who had not been in custody before, they mentioned that other men on the wing were important in becoming aware of schemes. If their cell mate or others on the wing had taken part in a peer mentoring scheme or were a peer mentor, participants told researchers that made them more aware of schemes and how to be a part of a scheme.

[5] Researchers did not ask mentors and mentees to reflect on previous experiences of custody or past sentences, however, many did discuss their experiences of becoming aware of mentoring schemes in previous sentences and prisons.

Recruitment onto schemes

The experiences of mentors in terms of recruitment onto schemes centred around two key themes: staff signposting and applications. There was not a consensus across participants on the perceived effectiveness of these two methods, views varied across sites and individual participants. The perceived fairness of the process and being able to find those with the required skills required for the job were brought up as two important factors when recruiting for ESW peer mentoring schemes.

Some mentors indicated they had been signposted or recruited through staff. This included wing staff, library staff, and ESW staff. They felt they had been chosen for their roles based on their educational background, status on their wing, or because staff felt they would be a good mentor, mainly related to the skillset they had. Staff echoed this view, emphasising the importance of having mentors with the relevant skills or qualifications. Good communication skills were given as an example of what staff looked for when recruiting mentors. Some staff and mentors felt this system could have been fairer as individuals were chosen based on their proximity to staff, rather than through an assessment of their skills and suitability for the role.

In some sites all mentoring posts were advertised, and individuals needed to apply for these in a more formal way. Applications were often submitted through the kiosk located on wings or through the Education Department.[6] Some of these application processes included an informal interview with relevant staff to assess suitability, background checks, such as security information, and shadowing of current mentors to get more information on the role. This method of recruitment tended to be used when the schemes were more formalised i.e., had a clear end goal and set structure across all sites and where advertising for these roles was prominent in the site, for example, through posters on the wings.

One of the sites researchers visited operated a formalised model for this application system, where potential mentors had to undertake formalised peer mentoring training

[6] A kiosk is an electronic system where prisoners will make requests, apply for schemes/jobs and order their canteen.

first,[7] which then created a 'pool' of potential trained mentors. Once roles came up, they were advertised to the pool and prisoners were able to apply for peer mentor roles. Many staff and mentors on this site felt this was a fair and effective system which enabled everyone to have the same foundation to peer mentoring. However, this was dependent on their ability to access the training and there being enough places available, which wasn't always the case.

Most mentees researchers interviewed were recruited through staff or current mentors. Staff or mentors would help them to sign up to schemes, based on their assessments when they first came into prison or through staff or mentor awareness of individual needs. For example, mentees may be identified if they had a neurodiversity need or if a mentor noticed that they may need help on the wing. A small number of mentees researchers spoke to had referred themselves to ESW staff to get a mentor. In general, the mentees interviewed in this research appreciated being signposted in this way as it avoided some of the stigma of asking for help (please see section 6.2.3 for more insight on this).

Selection and eligibility criteria

Selection criteria for peer mentoring schemes varied across the sites researchers visited and across the schemes offered. The below table summarises examples of selection and eligibility criteria staff and prisoners spoke to researchers about; not all these criteria were used in every site and across every scheme:

Table *2*: Example recruitment requirements encountered for various formalised schemes

Mentors	Mentees
• Positive behaviour record including not having open adjudications. • Relevant level 1 or 2 qualification. • Enhanced IEP status. • No security issues. • Having at least 6 months –12 months left to serve at that site. • Required skillset e.g., good communicator, construction knowledge (for those supporting with construction courses).	• Not having level 1 or 2 in Maths and English. • Unable to read or write independently. • Willingness and ability to engage with the scheme. • Having at least 6 months – 12 months left to serve at that site. • Acceptable behaviour record.

[7] This was unaccredited training designed and delivered by the education provider.

The stricter behavioural and security criteria applied to mentors were explained partially by the fact that mentors were often asked to move between wings to carry out their duties. Staff reported that the criteria for mentees was not designed to be a barrier to participation.

5.2 Structure and running of schemes

There was a high level of variation in the structure and formality of ESW peer mentoring across the prisons researchers visited.

- **Examples of structured practice –** examples of structured practice for ESW peer mentoring across the prisons visited included: reflection logs, regular meetings with staff, one to one meeting between mentors and mentees, feedback opportunities, classroom mentoring and structured booklets.
- **Structure** – The structure of the schemes depended on the nature of the peer mentoring, those schemes with a clear end goal e.g., to enable someone to read independently, were the most structured. Those providing ongoing support without clear intended outcomes were often less structured.
- **Frequency –** most mentors worked as peer mentors as a full-time job, 5 days a week. Some schemes were more ad-hoc or had frequent shorter sessions. However, mentees were more likely to take part in their mentoring part time, this was either due to capacity of the mentors or to allow them to have breaks between their sessions.
- **Staff oversight –** all peer mentoring schemes covered in this study were overseen by a member of ESW staff. In most of the prisons researchers visited there was limited or no wing staff oversight or involvement in these schemes. The limited involvement wing staff had included helping with the logistics of moving prisoners or unlocking mentors or mentees for their sessions.
- **Training –** peer mentors were mainly trained through standardised generic peer mentoring training. Some received scheme specific training. Others were able to shadow other peer mentors as part of their training for the role.

Once mentors and mentees were chosen and a scheme was up and running, the structure and day to day operations often varied, both across sites and schemes.

Peer mentoring with greater structure

There were structured schemes across the sites researchers visited. The schemes with a clear end goal or time limited involvement, for example, enabling a prisoner to read independently were the most structured. For these schemes, they were structured through a one-to-one relationship between a mentor and mentee. These mentors and mentees were matched through a mentor coordinator, sometimes based on their house block or their specific needs. They would then meet at scheduled times to go through pre-set material for a specified amount of time. Mentors on these kinds of schemes could have multiple mentees, and mentees often had only one mentor, unless their mentor moved on.

In terms of the frequency of this type of peer mentoring, the one-to-one work happened every day and often took up about half of peer mentors' time, the rest of the time they spent raising awareness for schemes. In some cases, this also included completing administrative work, for example, scheduling appointments.

These structured schemes had scheme-specific training materials already available to sites and models of staff support which were consistent across sites researchers visited. The training materials were often structured booklets that mentors were required to go through themselves. Staff support was structured through having a member of staff who was responsible for running the scheme. In some sites, they had a member of staff in education who took up this role, who was then also supported by an operational member of staff to help with the logistics. For example, the operational member of staff would ensure the men involved were unlocked when required.

Peer mentoring with less structure

The schemes with less clear end goals or time limited involvement, for example, peer mentors who provided ongoing support in a classroom or workshop setting, were less structured. In these schemes, peer mentors would often work as a classroom or workshop assistant, circulating through the space to help those who needed it. They would often not have an exclusive one to one mentoring relationship with an individual in the classroom or workshop and would be on hand for ad hoc help. This is a similar set up for those who were involved in mentoring other prisoners on career and employment options after release, however, they usually worked in induction or on the wings.

This type of peer mentoring tended to be fulltime in the classrooms or during induction activities. It often involved a morning and afternoon session. When the classes and workshops ran, peer mentors would work alongside the tutors. Generally, in this type of peer mentoring, the mentors researchers spoke to didn't tend to formally carry out additional work on the wings, like awareness raising, unless they were a career mentor or a 'Red Band'.[8] However, some mentees and mentors did mention mentors carrying out informal work such as building relationships on their wing, especially if they had a pre-existing mentoring relationship with another prisoner.

Staffing structures for less structured schemes looked like that of the structured schemes discussed above. However, staff talked about having unclear lines of accountability when it came to overseeing the schemes as there were lots of staff members involved. Some were employed directly by the education provider, others by the prison itself. They felt having a single point of oversight for these more informal schemes would improve their operation.

For these types of schemes, training tended to vary significantly depending on the site. Staff in some sites reported developing their own unaccredited peer mentoring training, which was tailored to the needs of the men on their site and to the schemes available. Staff in other sites reported using general unaccredited peer mentoring training from an education provider, whilst some used accredited qualifications where mentors were able to gain up to a level 2 qualification in peer mentoring. Some staff discussed introducing a level 3 qualification to allow peer mentors to use this to gain employment or training on release, but this had not been implemented when researchers visited. The mentors' researchers spoke to preferred accredited training as it allowed them to have proof of their qualifications which they felt would contribute to them gaining employment and being able to prove their skills on release from prison. Other forms of training staff and mentors mentioned included shadowing current mentors, which was viewed positively by those who were currently being trained to be peer mentors as it allowed them to see first-hand the realities of the role.

[8] Prisoners identified to be low risk and granted additional movement privileges. This term is not universal across all prisons, but most prisons have some form of enhanced privileges.

6. Part II: Enablers & barriers for effective Peer Mentoring Schemes

'Enablers' are features or contexts within the prison which were considered to contribute to the effective delivery of peer mentoring schemes. This contrasts with 'barriers' which are features or contexts which made the effective delivery of peer mentoring schemes more challenging. Questions on the enablers and barriers were as open as possible in the topic guide, so participants were able to bring up and discuss the most relevant barriers and enablers to them.

6.1 Enablers of effective schemes

Key enablers for effective schemes identified by participants included:

- **Previous experience as a mentee or being a mentor in other custodial and non-custodial settings can facilitate more effective schemes** – Experience of mentoring in different circumstances allowed greater knowledge sharing and application.
- **Approachable mentors facilitated mentee recruitment and effective running of schemes** – This was particularly true for mentees who were reluctant to join schemes.
- **Flexibility in delivery** – 'Red Bands' were able to conduct mentoring more flexibly across the prison site, which gave more prisoners access to mentoring schemes.
- **Recognition of hard work** – Mentees and mentors discussed how recognising achievements and contributions helps keep those involved motivated.

Previous experience of mentoring

Most mentors, mentees, and staff discussed their experiences of mentoring in previous settings, whether in other prisons or through their professional lives. This previous experience meant that some mentors felt they had already had the skill set and qualifications to be a mentor, with others understanding the role and position of being a

mentor through their experience of being a mentee. Many mentors discussed how their experiences of being mentees encouraged them to be mentors as they saw the benefits of mentoring. This was particularly true in workshop and classroom-based mentoring, where mentors were often former mentees. Some mentees and mentors discussed that when moving to a new prison there was an expectation that there would be mentoring of some kind. When this mentoring did not exist, some mentors took the initiative to set up schemes.

Many staff had an education background and had encountered peer mentoring in many forms. This experience was perceived to be an influential enabler. Within prisons, staff discussed the various mentoring schemes they had been involved with, although few had set up new schemes. Many who inherited schemes did discuss how they introduced changes, with some adopting incremental approaches and others making more significant changes. Staff and mentors felt that having staff introduce reflective practice and regularly discussing the operation of schemes with mentors helped make the schemes run effectively.

Mentor ability and profile

Most mentees and mentors discussed how peer mentors were more approachable than prison officers and staff in many situations. This was often discussed in the context of the perceived power imbalance between prisoners and staff. Others also discussed how the shared experiences of custody between mentors and mentees made mentors more trustworthy. This perception mirrors the motivation of some mentors who wanted to provide support and advice which they lacked in similar situations, such as those with neurodiversity needs or those entering prison for the first time. Some mentors discussed the need for mentors from a variety of backgrounds to broaden the amount of lived experience that mentors can provide to mentees.

When discussing the need to be approachable, many mentors discussed the need to be 'known' or 'be liked'. For some, this came through their peer mentoring work as word of mouth spread the benefits and assistance it could provide others. In contrast, some mentors discussed how it was their 'status' in prison which encouraged them to be a mentor, as they were able to help.

For some education and skills courses, there was a requirement that mentors be sufficiently skilled in the subject they were mentoring in. Beyond these 'hard skills', mentors also discussed the need to be motivated, empathetic, and non-judgemental. Some mentors leaned into being a 'role model', particularly for the skills-based programmes and those in workshops. Many discussed the need for such role models in prisons. Researchers heard examples of how workshop mentors guided individuals into positive behaviours and further opportunities, outside of the workshop.

Flexibility in delivery

One key enabler discussed by mentors and staff was the ability for 'Red Bands' to move relatively freely around the prison site. This often meant they could provide a more flexible mentoring service, particularly in terms of skills and work. Staff also recognised the benefits of flexible mentoring work, particularly for potential mentees who have limited association time and who would be nervous coming into the Education Department to ask for help. While some staff felt their ability to conduct 'clinics' on wings was limited by the working day, their workload and the regime, they felt mentors were able to sign post more easily and act as a conduit between staff and prisoners.

Some staff discussed how having a 'Red Band' able to move throughout the prison meant they were able to take on a 'supervisory' role as they could go out onto wings to complete inductions onto the course, check in with mentees and mentors to gauge how the relationship is working providing oversight. Mentors felt being a 'Red Band' carried prestige and a level of trust, meaning staff and officers are less likely, although not always, as discussed in section 6.2.1, to restrict access for mentors.

Recognition and motivation of staff to support.

Some mentors and mentees discussed the need for positive encouragement by staff, and some staff also discussed the need to provide feedback. Some schemes mimicked professional roles with performance reviews, whereas others encouraged fewer formal methods of feedback such as keeping logs of progress and activities. Mentors discussed that, in prison, they lose interest in things if they do not receive recognition for it. Schemes that mentors were developing all included some aspect of 'reward' either as a certificate or a ceremony to recognise their accomplishments. Skills-based schemes had regular

achievement milestones built in. Mentors discussed how this aided with their sense of achievement, kept engagement high, and acted as a reminder of what they had learnt on the schemes.

Mentors and staff also stressed the importance of ensuring that the benefits of schemes are recognised by operational and senior staff. Some mentees also raised this, discussing how they do not believe that mentors received enough recognition, particularly those who help 'off their own back' in association time or through volunteer roles.

6.2 Perceived barriers to effective peer mentoring

Key barriers identified by participants included:

- **Regime and restricted movement can prevent access to mentoring** – Incidents on wings, lockdowns, and lack of operational staff awareness of schemes can prevent effective delivery.
- **Lack of appropriate space on wings to provide support** – Wings often cannot accommodate one-to-one mentoring in appropriate, 'neutral', and private settings, as well as settings appropriate for those with neurodiverse needs.
- **Recruitment of mentees and mentors face difficulties due to stigma, awareness, and attitudes –** Although there are methods of addressing these issues, they often take significant time and commitment.
- **The lack of a 'pipeline' for new mentors makes some schemes unsustainable –** Some schemes were heavily reliant on a handful of motivated individuals or those with significant training and experience. Transfer or release of these individuals would make the schemes less effective.

Security, regime, and movement

As discussed in section 6.1.3, the ability of Red Bands to move throughout the prison with relative ease is an enabler of effective peer mentoring. However, even Red Bands were found to face barriers due to the prison regime, security requirements, and restrictions on movement. Mentors and staff recalled how Red Bands had been refused entry to some wings because operational staff were not aware of their role or why they were requesting

access. Staff outlined that this barrier could be overcome by having a clear job description which Red Bands can present when requesting access and having discussions with operational staff after incidents occurred to outline the legitimacy of the prisoner's access request.

In some prisons researchers visited, education and support services were located on the wings. While some prisons were able to escort prisoners between wings to access these services, others had significant restrictions on access to other wings. This meant that prisoners' access to services off their wing was limited, including certain types of peer mentoring. Where peer mentoring provision was low, this left mentees without access. There were also concerns raised that this reduced engagement, as the dispersed educational provision and limited offering on individual wings reduced the willingness and ability to enrol on courses. In other prisons, the general lack of education provision, in terms of the variety of courses and levels within specific courses, was also highlighted as a barrier by participants which limited engagement and the ability of mentors to guide mentees.

Some mentors also raised concerns about the actions of their cellmates or other peers putting their mentoring role in jeopardy. Mentors felt sharing cells could implicate them in the actions of their cellmates – which can directly jeopardise their 'Red Band' or 'low risk' status or interfere with their duties because of searches and other security protocols. Similarly, instability on wings and 'lockdowns' was reported to cause mentors or mentees to miss appointments or restrict access for Red Bands. Some prisons visited also had a limited regime with mentors and mentees remaining in their cell for 23 hours a day. Mentors and mentees reported that this meant that peer mentoring had to be deprioritised so that other activities such as association, hygiene, and phoning their family could be prioritised.

Security, regime, and movement were found to be significant barriers to the effective running of peer mentoring schemes. Some of these barriers are unavoidable in terms of prison safety and stability. However, from the perspective of participants, others, such as the lack of awareness of operational staff restricting access, could be overcome with

greater communication and engagement between staff involved in schemes and operational colleagues.

Space and environment

As discussed in section 5.2, many schemes operated on a one-to-one basis. Mentors on these schemes highlighted the importance, and often lack, of appropriate space in which to support mentees. In some sites, participants reported that whilst some wings had space available to conduct mentoring meetings, such as meeting rooms on wings or 'association rooms', others did not have suitable space. Also, mentors discussed being unable to access those spaces or those spaces being used for other activities, which meant they were unable to use them for mentoring purposes. Mentors often mentioned the preference for meeting on 'neutral ground', however, this was not always possible and so either the mentee or mentor's cell would be used instead. This presented difficulties when mentees or mentors had cellmates.

Mentors often discussed the need for privacy when conducting their mentoring, particularly those involved in skills-based schemes. If there was not appropriate space to facilitate this on the wings, mentors felt they could not be as effective as they wanted to be, due to interruptions and distractions. Neurodiversity mentors also discussed the need for spaces specifically designed with neurodiverse mentee's needs in mind.

Enrolling mentees and mentors on schemes

There were several barriers identified with recruiting participants onto schemes. Staff and mentors often discussed difficulty finding motivated prisoners to enrol as mentors. Mentors often mentioned how some enrol simply as part of a "box ticking exercise" for their progression instead of "actually wanting to help people". Similarly, staff and mentors in some sites discussed difficulties encouraging enrolment on mentoring schemes as the wage was typically lower than other jobs available.

When it came to recruiting mentees, participants identified two significant stigmas associated with joining a mentoring programme, particularly those which were formalised and operated on a one-to-one basis. The stigma of needing support was raised by mentors, mentees, and staff involved in skills-based schemes. Some mentors and mentees discussed the stigma associated with low literacy skills as being significant,

in some cases leading to vulnerability and poor treatment from other prisoners on the wing. Mentors and mentees felt this discouraged involvement with schemes. Staff and mentors involved with more established skills-based schemes discussed effective ways to overcome this stigma. This included a 'soft' approach by mentors, where they offered to help with on-the-wing tasks (such as ordering on the electronic kiosk system) to build rapport before discussing the scheme in a more private setting. Approaches such as this were said to require mentors who have patience and a willingness to commit long-term, with staff often citing a need to have over 6 months left of their sentence to help provide long-term support and build rapport.

Those involved in less established schemes also discussed perceived stigma associated with asking for help. They discussed this from a position of 'learning from experience' of negative reactions when they had approached potential mentees. Whilst they witnessed a decrease in the stigma associated with approaching the scheme for help, once the scheme's benefits were better understood by potential mentees through word-of-month, they felt that the stigma of taking part never diminished entirely. To try and mitigate this, staff and mentors reported being conscious when discussing the schemes around other prisoners.

The other stigma identified, particularly by mentors and mentees, centred around the involvement of schemes as being a complicit part of 'the system'. Many mentors discussed how those who had a negative view of mentoring often associated it with being 'too close' to officers and other staff, with this perception being most prominent in those who felt they had 'issues with authority'. Some mentors discussed how for some people the stigma associated with being part of the scheme decreases over time, once people realise mentors are "there to help", whilst for others their views do not change.

General awareness of schemes and support available was also raised as a barrier by participants. Some educational and skills schemes were integrated into the induction process, although sometimes informally. Mentors involved with induction cited that engagement with induction can be low. Many also raised concerns that the systems for finding out about mentoring schemes are complex and information dense, meaning it can be difficult to access or find relevant information about peer mentoring. Another method of

generating awareness was through posters and other physical advertising. However, mentors and staff felt these are not suitable for every scheme, particularly skills-based schemes where individuals may struggle to read.

Relying on motivated individuals

There was some discussion amongst staff and mentors about the need to generate a 'pipeline' of mentors to replace those who move to other prisons, otherwise schemes lacked sustainability. This was particularly true for smaller, newer schemes and those which are pushed forward by mentors. While many prisons offered a peer mentoring qualification, uptake on these courses was mixed and some described them as low quality as there was not enough practical assessment. As discussed above, staff and mentors reported having difficulties finding individuals with the 'right mindset' to help others. Participants also highlighted the limited number of mentoring positions on some schemes, particularly those based in workshops. This means that prospective mentors might not have the opportunity to take up the position if they are transferred or released before a role becomes available. In some prisons, mentors said they had taken part in courses and gained relevant qualifications, only for there to be no or limited opportunities to apply what they learnt in a peer mentoring role. This was despite these mentors pointing out the variety of instances where peer mentoring would be beneficial and have high demand.

Staff motivation, buy-in, and awareness

As briefly discussed above, operational staff can play a significant role in the success of peer mentoring schemes. Mentors provided examples of operational staff utilising mentors to assist in their duties on the wings. However, some mentors felt that operational staff did not fully understand or value the contribution that their mentoring could have. This perception also extended to other staff in the prison, particularly senior management. Mentors who were pushing forward their own initiatives often discussed how senior leadership were aware of and agreed in principle to the benefits of the schemes, but often felt that senior leadership did not fully support the progression of setting up schemes. One mentor discussed how there is a perceived expectation that prisoner-led initiatives fail. Overcoming this requires dedication and, as another mentor discussed, can help encourage buy-in.

7. Part III: Perceived benefits & drawbacks of Peer Mentoring Schemes

Participants shared a variety of nuanced perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of peer mentoring schemes. This section outlines the key findings in terms of perceived 'operational'[9] and staff benefits and drawbacks. This section also outlines the perceived 'personal' benefits and drawbacks for mentees and mentors who are part of peer mentoring schemes.

7.1 Operational and staff benefits and drawbacks

Key perceived benefits and drawbacks for prison operation and staff:

- **Increased capacity of service providers** – Participants felt mentoring made it easy to provide services, with examples including reduced administrative burden of staff, greater flexibility in the delivery of services, and more opportunities to receive support in classroom and workshop environments.
- **Improvements to the relationship between staff and prisoners** – Mentors discussed how they felt their contributions through mentoring improved relationships with staff. Examples included providing support on the wings with interactions with operational staff as well as providing a 'bridge' to raise issues or achievements with staff.
- **Anecdotal evidence from mentors suggests mentoring increases engagement with ESW** – Examples included mentors discussing available courses in particular skills and acting as role models to show what it is possible to achieve.

[9] This includes the day to day running of the prison, for example the delivery of education and the prison regime.

Increased capacity of service providers

Many staff and mentees discussed how mentors increased the ability and capacity of service providers, such as educational staff in classrooms, instructors in workshops, or those working in careers services. This was because staff could delegate some administrative tasks and use mentors to get messages or paperwork to prisoners throughout the estate, enabling staff to focus more on their day-to-day work. Staff involved in schemes which were not formally part of their job role, such as volunteers running skills-based schemes, discussed how having a trusted and motivated mentor allowed them to focus on their primary role far more and spend their time better engaging with the scheme.

In a classroom or workshop setting, mentees discussed how they found it much easier to ask mentors for help rather than the tutors or instructors. Many mentees said they felt that staff were too busy or had other things that they needed to do rather than answering their questions. Some mentees seemed to suggest that they were often seeking reassurance which they did not want to burden staff with. Mentors felt they filled this space, as their role is to support mentees and learners in the classroom or workshop setting, as well as being perceived to be on the same level of mentees with less power imbalance. Some mentees discussed how, through previous negative education experiences, it was difficult for them to participate in a classroom environment or seek help from authority figures. Mentors, they reported, were a way for them to receive help and support and improve the educational attainment of classes.[10]

Improved staff and prisoner relationships

There was some anecdotal evidence provided by mentees and mentors about how peer mentoring schemes can improve the relationship between operational or other staff and prisoners. For example, neurodiversity mentors discussed how they have been able to deescalate or explain behaviour to operational staff who were unaware of a particular individual's needs or behaviour. Mentors emphasised that some of their mentees can find it difficult to understand what is being asked of them, and that frustrations on both sides can exacerbate issues. Mentors discussed how they can intervene in such situations,

[10] This claim has not been verified by looking at educational attainment data, but rather based on the perception of mentees, mentors, and staff.

by providing support to those with neurodiverse needs by explaining things in a way they are more likely to understand.

Less specifically, some mentors and mentees discussed how mentoring has reshaped their relationship with authority. Mentoring schemes, they argue, allow for a more structured and formalised way of communicating with staff, and help to build more trusting relationships. In some prisons, especially those with fewer schemes or unestablished schemes, many mentors discussed the need for better prisoner and operational staff relations and saw mentoring as a way to achieve this. Participants often reported using mentoring as a 'bridge' or 'middle layer' between the general prison population and staff, allowing for a better dialogue to raise concerns or highlight areas of progress and achievement.

Increased engagement with education, skills, and work

Mentors often discussed examples of how mentees they have worked with showed greater enthusiasm and engagement with ESW. As discussed in section 6.1.2, mentees often felt mentors, particularly those in workshops, were role models and examples of the possible routes for education and work. Mentees felt this was particularly relevant for more technical skills where there were avenues for further development in higher or further education. Mentees often discussed mentors as 'examples' or 'showing what is possible', which mentors sometimes mirrored in their motivations for being a mentor. Some participants discussed difficulties in knowing what educational and skills courses were on offer, what they were eligible for, and what funding was available, and how mentors helped them to find this information.

7.2 Mentor and mentee benefits and drawbacks

Key perceived mentor and mentee benefits and drawbacks

- **Both mentees and mentors discussed improvements to their 'soft-skills'** – Mentors tended to focus on the improved patience and communication skills they developed, whereas mentees discussed how mentoring improved their trust, confidence, and independence.
- **Impact on association time was a key drawback** – Mentors and mentees both raised that they disliked having to give up association time to take part in voluntary schemes.
- **Mentors could be demoralised by barriers** – Some mentors discussed how repeatedly being faced with barriers can lead to them to lose motivation to pursue schemes or set up their own.

Mentor Benefits

Mentors held relatively consistent views of the personal benefits of taking part in mentoring schemes. The most prominent was the sense of fulfilment given by helping people, which often stemmed from their own experience of the prison system and the lack of support they received. Those who had mentoring experience or experience leading and developing others prior to being in prison also discussed the fulfilment of being able to continue using their skills to contribute to life in prison.

Mentors also discussed how their 'soft skills' have developed because of being a mentor. Communication came up frequently, with mentors describing how they have got better at talking with other inmates and communicating their own needs and issues with staff. Some mentors described that, since being a mentor, they have a greater understanding and ability to communicate with officers. Patience was also discussed frequently by mentors, particularly those who had been mentors a while. Many were self-reflective, discussing how their improved patience has benefited them in prison life and reduced incidences of conflict. Many mentors felt they already had high levels of confidence before taking part in peer mentoring schemes. Those who stated they lacked confidence to begin with said that taking part in the scheme boosted their confidence. In one example, this development was

encouraged by the staff member responsible for the scheme aiming to 'stretch' the mentors and push them to develop skills outside of their comfort zone. The staff member caveated this with the need to be cautious in this approach, and not push too hard too soon.

Mentors on schemes run through workshops discussed how their mentoring role contributed to opportunities to take additional advanced courses, as well as make connections with businesses and organisations outside of prison. Their skillsets developed through mentoring, as well as the responsibilities and trusted positions they held, were cited as reasons for being given opportunities for additional training and potential employment on release. Other mentors discussed how they planned to use the skills developed on release, such as going on to study more advanced courses or apply for jobs which would utilise and further develop their skills.

Mentor Drawbacks

Mentors discussed several drawbacks of being part of mentoring schemes, although it is important to note that some mentors acknowledged that they are perceived drawbacks which they had not directly experienced. One drawback mentioned by volunteer mentors[11] was that they were often required to do work during association time after a mentor's job or education had finished. Mentors highlighted that this reduced the amount of 'downtime' that mentors have. Other mentors described a similar feeling, despite conducting most of their mentoring during their working hours. For example, one mentor, when discussing their involvement with a volunteer scheme where they met mentees on wings, said:

> "It can be high pressure compared to other roles; you do carry the pressure with you." – Mentor

Others discussed the potential emotional toll that mentoring can have. One mentor suggested that to alleviate this, there should be more regular meetings between mentors to discuss and share their experiences which would help reduce the pressure experienced.

[11] Those were mentors who undertook mentoring duties on a voluntary basis and were not paid for their mentoring work.

Most mentors, however, found significantly more fulfilment in their roles than negative experiences.

Some mentors discussed becoming demoralised through the reluctance and resistance of those who would benefit from mentoring. One of the key pieces of advice mentors would give to prospective mentors is linked to the barrier of low motivation from prospective mentees to engage with schemes. Many mentors would suggest the need for patience, and that it takes time to accept that not all prisoners want your help. Discussing these issues with staff also helped some mentors. One mentor summarised the issue as:

> "You can lead a horse to water, you know? You can only do so much." – Mentor

Mentee benefits & drawbacks

One predominant benefit raised by mentees was their increased confidence. This was particularly reported by those who took part in skills-based schemes. Those taking part in schemes which improve literacy often reported gaining a sense of greater independence and improved relations with loved ones as they were able to write to their families. Mentees often discussed difficulties in schooling, as well as a reluctance to seek help. Mentoring, they argued, helped them overcome these struggles and improved their ability to learn and seek help. Some mentees also discussed how taking part in mentoring schemes helped them to develop greater trust in other prisoners, with some reporting it helped them trust 'authority' more too. This was particularly discussed by those who had moved into a prison which had more established peer mentoring schemes.

Mentees did not discuss many drawbacks, with on the whole positive views of mentoring.[12] Those who did discuss drawbacks tended to discuss them in relation to previous schemes. Being part of a poorly run mentoring scheme was identified as a significant drawback and many felt this would make enrolment in future schemes in the same or different prisons unlikely. Other drawbacks mentioned were similar to those of mentors, including a lack of time to conduct schemes during association and a lack of appropriate space.

[12] This could be because those not engaged in peer mentoring could not participate, it also could be because mentees found it difficult to reflect on and communicate their perceived drawbacks of the scheme.

8. Conclusion

To summarise, participants in this study identified the following characteristics as being important for the set up and operation of effective ESW peer mentoring schemes in men's prisons:

- **Staff buy in and involvement** – this includes ESW staff and operational staff, to ensure schemes are logistically viable and have the necessary support structures in place.
- **Physical resources** – the appropriate space and materials were identified as important for the day-to-day operations of ESW peer mentoring schemes.
- **Accredited training** – was identified as enabling all peer mentors to have the same skill development opportunities. Accredited training was emphasised by mentors, as it enabled them to use their qualifications on release.
- **Flexibility in the delivery of ESW peer mentoring** – participants raised that the ability to flexibly deliver peer mentoring was important, including the location and format of peer mentoring activities. This was thought to help when building relationships between mentors and mentees.

This research shows these are the key factors which should be considered and prioritised when operating ESW peer mentoring schemes in a prison environment. This also highlights the importance of joined up working across different departments within a prison site to allow ESW to function effectively.

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Annex A
Existing literature on peer mentoring in prisons

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Annex B
Categories of prisons visited

Five prisons were visited for this research comprising of:

- 1 Long Term High Secure Training Prison
- 1 Category B prisons, one a Resettlement Prison
- 1 Category B Reception and Resettlement Prison
- 1 Category C Training and Resettlement Prison
- 1 Category C Training Prison