

Autistic Peer Workers: A New Path to Empowerment

<u>Organisation(s):</u>	Regional Government of Central Denmark	
<u>Country:</u>	Denmark	
<u>Contact:</u>	policy@esn-eu.org (we will function as an intermediary between you and interested organisations who want to learn more about the practice)	
<u>Theme:</u> <i>Choose at least one option</i>	☐ Ageing & Care ☐ Asylum & Migration ☐ Young People ☐ Support for Children & Families ☐ Community Care ☐ Integrated Care & Support ☐ Co-Production ☒ Disability ☐ Housing & Homelessness ☐ Artificial Intelligence ☐ Digitalisation ☐ Quality Care	☒ Labour Market Inclusion ☒ Social Inclusion ☐ Technology ☒ Workforce and Leadership ☐ Social Benefits ☐ EU Funding ☐ Social Services' Resilience ☐ Mental Health ☒ Person-Centred Care ☐ Research & Use of Evidence ☐ Management & Planning ☐ Other, please specify:
<u>Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights:</u> <i>Which principles does your practice cover? Check the 20 principles here.</i>	☒ 1. Education, training, life-long learning ☐ 2. Gender equality ☒ 3. Equal opportunities ☒ 4. Active support to employment ☒ 5. Secure and adaptable employment ☐ 6. Fair Wages ☐ 7. Transparent employment conditions ☐ 8. Social dialogue ☐ 9. Work-life balance ☐ 10. Healthy, safe work environment	☐ 11. Childcare and child support ☐ 12. Social protection ☐ 13. Unemployment benefits ☐ 14. Minimum income ☐ 15. Old age income and pensions ☐ 16. Health care ☒ 17. Inclusion of people with disabilities ☐ 18. Long-term care ☐ 19. Housing and assistance to homeless ☒ 20. Access to essential services
<u>Current status of the practice:</u>	☐ Concept and Design Phase ☐ Testing or pilot phase ☐ Temporary practice that has terminated ☒ Temporary practice that is ongoing and has a termination date ☐ Established and ongoing practice ☐ Scaling Up and Transformation Phase ☐ Other (please specify):	
<u>Summary:</u> <i>Please summarise the practice in maximum 3 sentences. This will be the disclaimer of your</i>	The Central Denmark Region has developed an innovative peer worker programme that trains and employs autistic adults to support other autistic people through peer support. The initiative promotes labour market inclusion, strengthens well-being and self-identity among both peer workers and the autistic individuals they support, and improves the quality of services. By turning lived experience into a professional competency through education and practical training, the project empowers autistic	

<i>project on our website. Example here.</i>	individuals to actively shape the services they are part of, contributing to person-centred and co-produced support, fostering more inclusive and accessible workplaces, and creating pathways to social inclusion for vulnerable groups.
<u>Context/ Social issues addressed</u> <i>Please explain the problem you attempt to solve with your practice.</i>	Many autistic adults experience poorer outcomes in employment, quality of life, social participation, and independent living than both the general population and other disability groups. Traditional support services often lack the lived-experience perspective that can help autistic people feel understood, safe, and empowered. At the same time, autistic people remain significantly underrepresented in the labour market despite possessing valuable skills and insights. The project addresses these challenges by creating formal employment opportunities for autistic adults as peer workers while enhancing social services through peer support. More broadly, the initiative explores how workplaces can become more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups who face barriers to labour market participation and social inclusion.
<u>Objectives:</u> <i>Please provide a maximum of three objectives in bullet points.</i>	1. Strengthen the social inclusion, well-being, and self-determination of autistic people through structured peer support delivered by trained and paid autistic peer workers. 2. Improve labour market participation by training and employing autistic adults in meaningful and professional peer worker roles. 3. Promote inclusive and accessible workplaces by integrating lived experience into social services and increasing awareness of inclusive employment practices.
<u>Activities:</u> <i>Please describe the activities put in place to achieve the objectives (maximum 400 words).</i>	The Central Denmark Region has established a five-month peer worker training programme for autistic adults. Between 2024 and 2028, the project will train and employ 24 autistic peer workers across 24 workplaces supporting autistic people, including residential services, supported employment services, primary schools, and secondary schools. Many of these services support autistic individuals with a high level of complexity in their needs. The training equips participants with the knowledge, skills, and professional competencies required to provide peer support based on their lived experience of being as autistic. Following the training, participants are employed as peer workers and work directly with autistic people, offering emotional, social, and practical support. A key component of the project is the integration of peer workers into multidisciplinary teams alongside social workers, teachers, occupational therapists, and managers. The initiative provides workplace mentoring, organisational support, and guidance to ensure that peer expertise is recognised as a professional role and valued alongside traditional professional disciplines. The project also focuses on organisational learning. Through continuous collaboration with managers and staff, workplaces identify measures that improve accessibility, inclusion, and participation for autistic employees. Lessons learned are intended to inform broader efforts to create inclusive workplaces that can support a wide range of vulnerable groups facing labour market exclusion. The practice combines training, employment, workplace development, and ongoing evaluation to demonstrate how lived experience can strengthen both service delivery and workforce inclusion.

Outcomes:

Please explain what the results were/are so far and how you evaluated this (i.e. statistics, a study, or feedback)

The project is currently being evaluated through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data are collected through ongoing interviews with peer workers, autistic people receiving peer support, workplace staff, and managers, while quantitative data are gathered through questionnaires completed by peer workers and workplace managers during the project.

So far, the evaluation shows that:

- There have been 60 applicants for 24 positions.
- Very high level of satisfaction with the training among the participants
- 100% completion rate of the five-month training programme, with no dropouts.
- 80% are employed after completing the programme. It is worth noting that all employed peer workers have previously faced significant barriers to entering the labour market.

Qualitatively, the evaluation so far indicates that:

- Becoming a trained peer worker has a significant impact on the peer workers themselves – helping others and being part of a workplace is highly meaningful.
- Peer support is highly valuable for some recipients. They feel understood, and peer workers offer something that traditional professionals cannot. Others are less certain about how to make use of a peer worker. Some feel uneasy receiving support from someone who may have challenges of their own, or they worry that introducing peer workers could reduce the presence of other professionals.
- Workplaces emphasize that peer workers bring perspectives that both challenge and enrich conventional professional thinking. As one of our partners expressed: “It’s a disruption, and we’ve invited it ourselves – so we are embracing it.”
- Peer expertise represents a new professional field within autism. Pioneering in this area can be demanding for both peer workers and workplace mentors. Therefore, comprehensive training and ongoing workplace support are essential for peer workers to succeed in their roles and are essential for the project to succeed.

Selected interview quotes from the evaluation:

- *“Peer work has been life-changing in many ways. For years I struggled to fit in and function in environments where I had to be ‘normal’ to cope. I experienced severe meltdowns because I simply couldn’t handle those settings or fit into them. So being able to take an education that is suddenly structured in a way where I can take part—where it’s completely normal to be like me—and then to get a workplace where I can be myself because there is room and space for it, has made an enormous difference for me personally. It has greatly improved my quality of life.” - Peer worker*
- *“By being present, the peer worker shows that it is possible to be part of the labour market in a way that suits an autistic person. And I think that is inspiring – for all of us.” - Social worker, colleague of a peer worker*

“The fact that peer support recipients can see themselves reflected in the peer worker... I truly believe that this kind of reflection is something we as

	<i>colleagues can never replicate in the same way. Because we don't have the same experiences, perceptions, or feelings tied to a given situation." - Social worker, colleague of a peer worker</i> Preliminary evaluation findings are expected to be published in 2026, with continued monitoring throughout the project period ending in 2028.
<u>Funding Source</u>	EU Funds: ESF+ ☐ INTERREG ☐ ERDF ☐ ERASMUS ☐ RRF ☐ other ☐ ☐ National Government Funds ☐ Regional Government Funds ☐ Local Government Funds ☐ Private Sponsorship / Public-Private Partnership ☐ Financial contribution of People using Services ☒ Other, please define: The project is funded by a Danish philanthropic foundation (TrygFonden). In addition, each of the participating workplaces contribute to co-financing. The project has a total budget of just under DKK 10 million (approx. EUR 1.34 million), of which TrygFonden has contributed DKK 6.4 million (approx. EUR 0.86 million).
<u>Links to supporting documents:</u> <i>e.g. project website or report of the practice, articles</i>	Peermedarbejdere på Autismeområdet - Autismeplatform About us - Specialområde Autisme
<u>Comments and tips</u> <i>i.e. for people willing to implement your Practice in their service</i>	The project highlights the importance of comprehensive training, mentoring, and workplace support to ensure the successful integration of peer expertise. The project is initiated in the Central Denmark Region but is transferable and scalable to other social services working within the field of autism. We are always happy to share more about the project and our experiences, so please feel free to get in touch.