

**Background:**

Peer-support helps people living with HIV improve their wellbeing and clinical outcomes and has been used within the voluntary sector since the epidemic began. However, despite a clear recommendation from the 2013 *British HIV Association (BHIVA) Standards of Care for People Living with HIV (PLHIV)*, there was no standardized approach to the training and delivery of peer-support, resulting in wide variability in the quality of support provided and a lack of referrals from clinics.

*“HIV services should seek to optimise the involvement of skilled peer workers with HIV in service delivery, thus optimising integral peer-to-peer self-management support. These skilled peer workers should have a recruitment and training process and have access to appropriate supervision and professional development”*

NHS England's 10-Year Plan also highlights the need for the clinical and voluntary sector to move towards more collaborative working across all health conditions and make better use of volunteers.

Positively UK, the UK's leading HIV peer-support agency, created Project 100 to address these gaps. The Monument Trust funded the project to deliver a national peer-mentor training program and develop *National Standards for Peer Support in HIV* (in collaboration with BHIVA, the Children's HIV Association (CHIVA) and six UK HIV community organizations).



Project 100's aim was to ensure that 100% of PLHIV in the UK had access to high quality peer support. This would be achieved by providing peer-led training to up to 1000 PLHIV, recruited via local HIV voluntary sector and clinical services, where their expertise could be utilised to improve holistic care.

**Methods:**

We aimed to evaluate how the 4-year national program impacted the health and well-being of volunteer peer-mentors and identify the barriers and facilitators of engagement in offering peer-support services.

'Project 100' delivered 80 three-day standardized peer-mentor training sessions to 704 adults living with HIV between 2015 and 2019, working with 104 clinical and voluntary sector partners.

Trainees were able to access accredited qualifications in peer-support and HIV treatment literacy (NVQ Level 2), as well as 3 annual national development workshops and ongoing supervision while volunteering.

The training topics included HIV basics and treatments, communication skills, goal setting, developing action plans, learning how to begin and end relationships with mentees and ways to maintain professional and personal boundaries, and provided participants with opportunities to reflect on their own HIV journeys. Participants described the training as “helpful”, “informative”, “inspirational”, “well-set” and “well-tailored”.

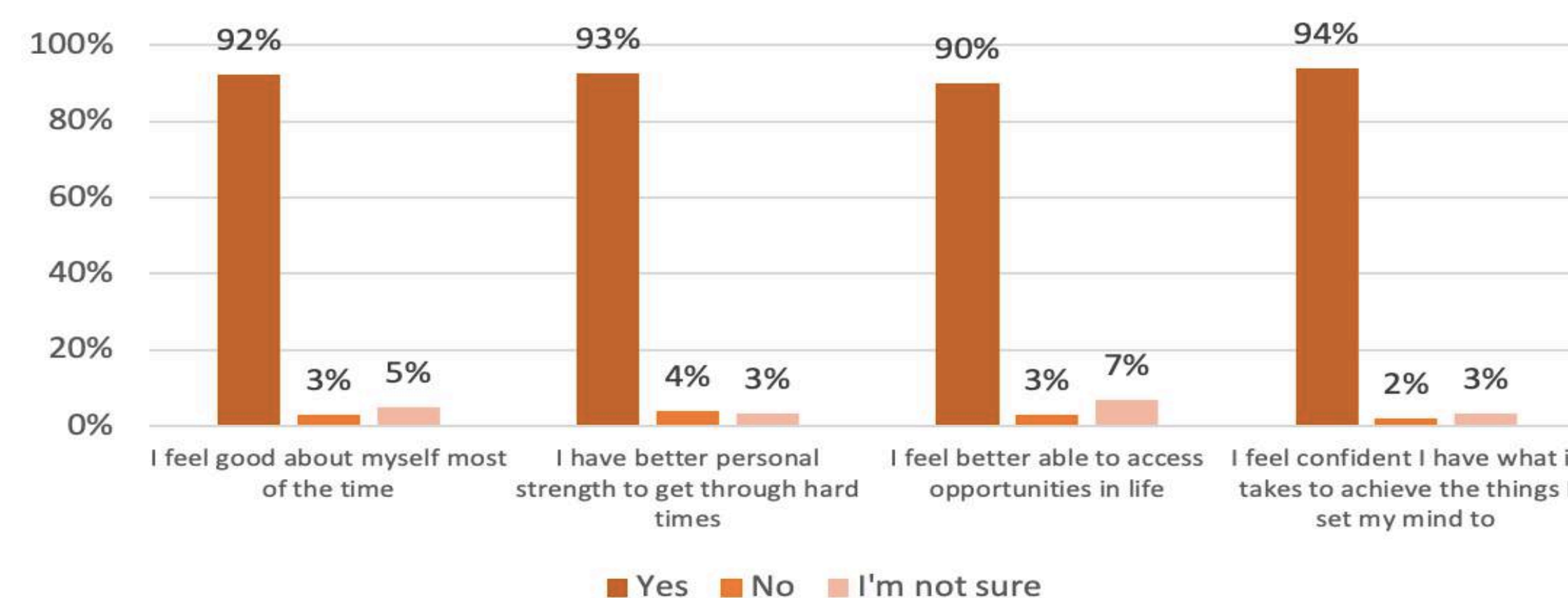
The Project 100 team offered partner agencies and their peer-support coordinators support with planning, recruitment, policies and networking, in order to implement HIV peer-support services in line with the new UK National Standards. It also delivered a 'Train the Trainer' package to enable partners to ensure sustainability for ongoing local training.

A mixed-method independent evaluation included programmatic and clinic questionnaires, an anonymous online survey, focus group discussions (FGDs) and separate semi-structured telephone interviews (TI) to collect qualitative and quantitative data on the experiences and achievements of peer-mentors and partner organizations. *Table of mentor experiences:*

Topic	# of participants (n=184)	Proportion of participants (%)
<b>Experience in peer-mentoring</b>		
<6 months	38	21
6 – 12 months	41	22
>12 months	101	55
<b>Project 100 training completion</b>	N=	
<6 months	36	20
6 – 12 months	41	22
>12 months	103	56
<b>Number of peer sessions delivered since training completion</b>		
None	53	29
<5 sessions	34	18
>6 sessions	90	49
<b>Number of mentees supported</b>		
None	53	29
1 – 3 mentees	72	39
>3 mentees	58	32
<b>Type of peer-sessions provided (n=181)</b>		
Face to face in the community	103	57
Face to face in clinics	37	20
Telephone support	54	30
Email support	26	14
Text message support	36	20
Video call (i.e. skype, facetime, WhatsApp, messenger) support	9	5
Not applicable	40	22

**Results:**

The survey was carried out over two months and captured the experiences of 184 (26%) of the 700 trained peer mentors, showing significant benefits. Since becoming peer mentors, >90% of the respondents reported feeling good about themselves, having increased personal strength, confidence in reaching their goals and access to opportunities in life.

**SELF-REPORTED OUTCOMES FOR PEER MENTORS**

- increased skills and confidence in providing peer support;
- better able to manage their health;
- improved personal, professional and organizational relationships;
- increased opportunities and better able to engage in services.

*“I gained confidence, self-esteem and improved mental health. [Peer-mentoring] has inspired me to do more, helping others is who I am ... It has given me drive and showed me that I am capable and good in something.”*

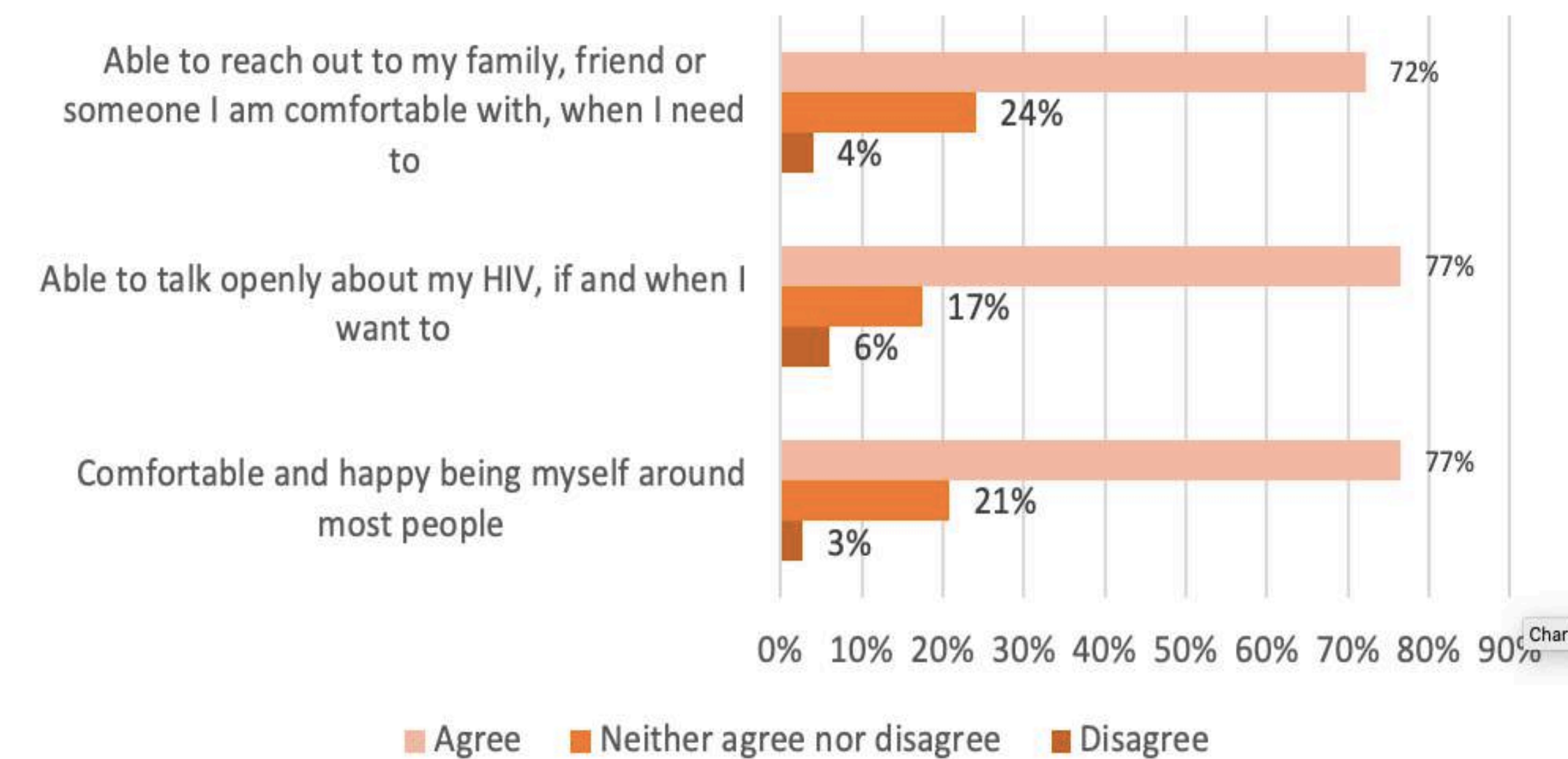
*"The training and talking to others gave me a sense of “I”, no longer living in shame and isolation.”*

**REPORTED OUTCOMES FOR PARTNER AGENCIES**

- increased capacity to deliver peer support services;
- improved collaboration between UK voluntary sector and clinical services.

*“Project 100 training as a ready-made package is well-structured which made it quite simple and easy to deliver. And a really good, in-depth training, bringing peer-mentors together, giving them the skills necessary to start”*

Since becoming a peer mentor, 87% and 74% reported being better informed and better able to manage their HIV, health and well-being, respectively. 77% were more open about their HIV status and >70% more comfortable seeking help and happier being themselves around most people.



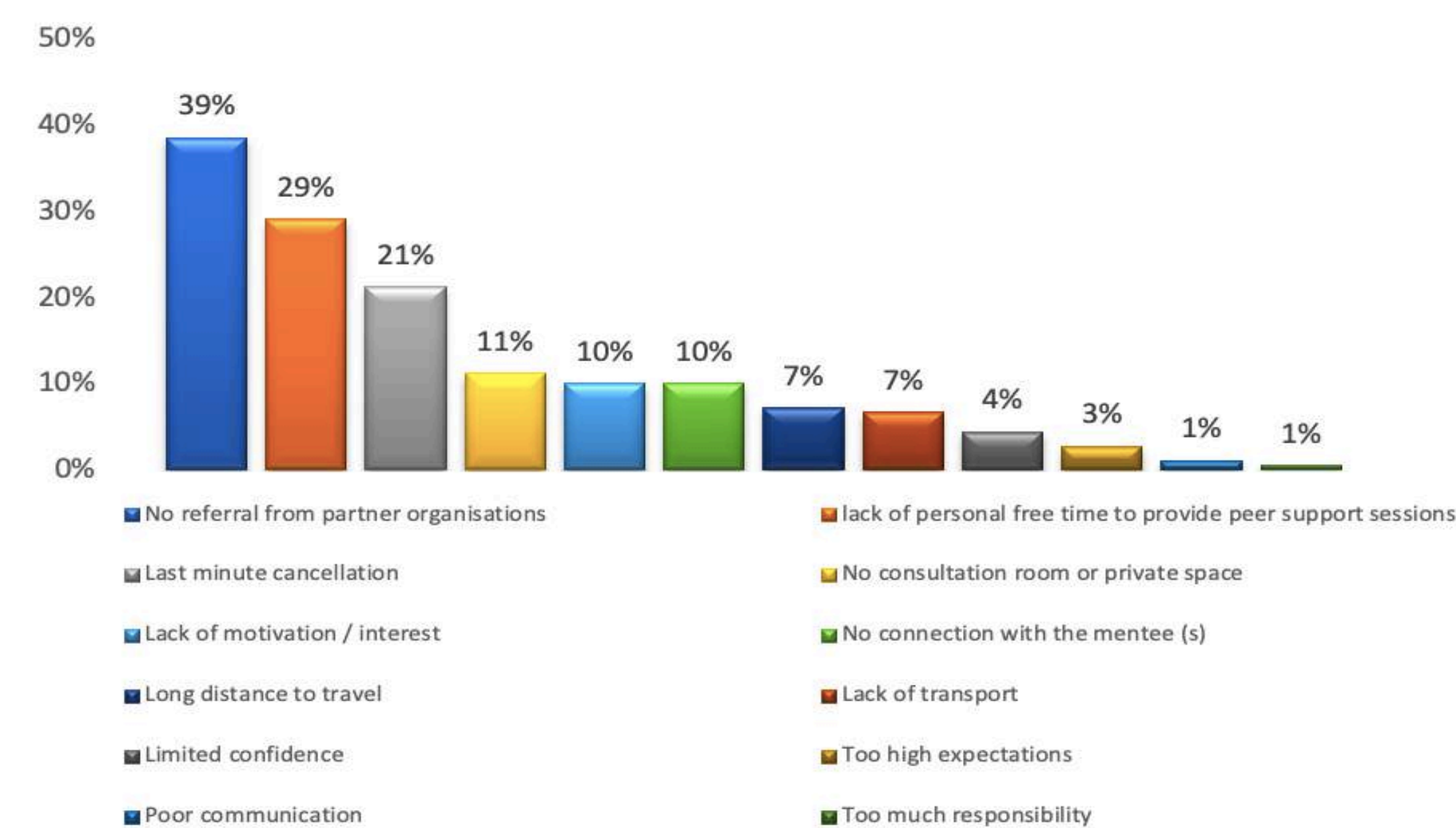
Participants in TI and FGDs also reported increased confidence and self-esteem, improved organizational, communication and mentoring skills, better knowledge and understanding of HIV and the HIV community and improved mental health, describing their experience as “inspirational” “empowering” and “life changing”. >93% would recommend peer mentoring as a peer-mentor or a mentee.

Maintaining accountability and ownership over their own volunteers was essential to regional partners with the training bringing structure and consistency to the delivery of peer-support nationally, as well as encouraging increased opportunities to collaborate with organizations in the same region.

*"We are looking to continue working with other third sector organizations to continue with Peer mentoring”*

**Limitations:**

The main limitations related to a lack of referrals, time to provide support and poor cancellations by mentees. Although engagement from HIV clinical services was perceived to be problematic, some clinics trained and supported their own volunteers where voluntary sector services were unavailable locally.



Although clinical providers were slower to engage than the voluntary sector, interest increased during the final months of the project, with a further six clinics getting in touch, resulting in more than 20 HIV services now having direct in-house access to peer-support volunteers and many others having direct referral pathways.

*“... an amazing initiative and a really important place within the care and treatment for people with HIV. Peer-mentors are in a better place to deal with sensitive issues and as a coordinator, it is rewarding seeing the difference it makes to patients”.*

Funding cuts to HIV support services was an ongoing problem, with several partner agencies closing during the course of the Project:

*“I worked as a peer support worker in Hertfordshire for over 2 years and saw the impact it had on my clients. It was overwhelming, but sadly this service no longer exists.”*

**Conclusions:**

Nationally delivered, standardized peer-support training resulted in transformative benefits for individuals, services and the HIV sector. Trained individuals saw improvements in wellbeing, knowledge, confidence, communication, relationships and self-management skills.

Regional voluntary sector partners now work more collaboratively than previously, coordinating training across different agencies and new partnerships with local clinical services have been initiated. Understanding of the value of peer support has increased considerably in clinical settings. The updated 2018 *BHIVA Standards of Care* reference the *National Standards in HIV Peer Support*, with recommendations and auditable outcomes in 6 out of 8 care areas.

**Evaluation Recommendations:***Project planning and preparedness*

- Ensure that participating agencies have a clear understanding of the project goals and expectations
- Agree beforehand on the use of existing documentation, procedures and pathways at a local level, especially for those agencies already well-established in providing a peer-mentoring service
- Help partner agencies secure longer-term funding to ensure continuity and sustainability of peer-support services

*Collaboration with HIV specialist clinics and the NHS*

- Utilise Positively UK well-recognised national status to solicit HIV specialist clinics and NHS leaders to collaborate with smaller local community organisations, allowing volunteer peer-mentors to intervene in hospital settings
- Engage with clinical teams by improving understanding of the role of peer-mentors, providing clarity to their remits and limitations
- Keep participating clinics engaged, encouraging patients' referrals to their local peer-mentors

*Maintain a pool of trained peer-mentors*

- Continue to deliver CPD training and refresher sessions to established peer-mentors
- Train sufficient peer-mentors as trainers to increase the pool of peer-mentors across the country
- Keep a standardised national training programme that allows peer-mentors to continue providing sessions regardless of their geographical location
- Keep peer-mentors engaged, ensuring instant matching with a mentee

*Maintain mentees engaged in peer-mentoring*

- Develop posters or leaflets available at partner agencies, explaining the role of the peer-mentor
- Assess the needs of PLHIV who are seeking peer-support in a more formalised manner based on a specific set of criteria

*“If you really want to offer something back to the community, it is an empowering tool, a life skill and I encourage you to do it”*

References:  
BHIVA Standards of Care 2013 : <https://www.bhiva.org/standards-of-care-2012>  
BHIVA Standards of Care 2018.: <https://www.bhiva.org/standards-of-care-2018>  
National Standards for Peer Support in HIV, 2017: [www.hivpeersupport.com](http://www.hivpeersupport.com)  
NHS Long Term Plan, 2019: <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/>