



social care
institute for excellence

Supporting Each Other Equals Power!

Evaluation report





About SCIE

The Social Care Institute for Excellence improves the lives of people of all ages by co-producing, sharing and supporting the use of the best available knowledge and evidence about what works in practice. We are a leading improvement support agency and an independent charity working with organisations that support adults, families and children across the UK. We also work closely with related services such as health care and housing.

We improve the quality of care and support services for adults and children by:

- identifying and sharing knowledge about what works and what's new
- supporting people who plan, commission, deliver and use services to put that knowledge into practice
- informing, influencing and inspiring the direction of future practice and policy.

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1. Executive summary

Supporting Each Other Equals Power! (SEOEP) was a project to empower people with learning difficulties to help other people with learning difficulties.

It was a partnership between the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), People First (Self Advocacy) (PFSA) and Breaking Out of the Bubble (BOB, formerly People First Lambeth).

The Big Lottery Fund funded the project, which ran for four years from January 2018 to December 2021. The project took place in Lambeth, south London.

The SEOEP project had two key elements:

- People with learning difficulties led and delivered it.
- It provided social, emotional and practical support, to help people with learning difficulties in all areas of their lives.

The project was co-produced. Staff with learning difficulties from BOB and PFSA steered and delivered the project. (People with learning difficulties run these two organisations.) SCIE provided support and advice throughout the project, and led this evaluation.

SEOEP supported clients with a wide range of issues, including benefits and welfare, hate crime, safeguarding, volunteering and finding work. Some of this support was one-off, around a single issue, but a significant number of clients went to SEOEP with multiple issues and their cases were complicated and often distressing. Some clients had been victims of abuse and exploitation, others had been accused of criminality and some were homeless or at risk of being made homeless, despite having serious health issues.

These complex cases needed regular, intensive and long-term support. No other services were available and suitable to support these clients.

Some examples of how SEOEP helped people include:

- getting a client housed after being homeless for more than a year
- helping a client who had an issue with their neighbour and mate crime – with SEOEP's help, the neighbour was evicted and is being prosecuted over the harassment
- supporting a client to deal with false allegations, arrests, police interviews and the dismissal of a case in court
- supporting a homeless woman to get housed, access a mental health lawyer, be taken seriously by the community mental health team and apply for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and housing benefit – SEOEP also supported the client to get the council to write off a £12,000 housing debt by showing that the property they had been charged with 'abandoning' had not been safe for them.

Clients overwhelmingly thought that SEOEP had assisted them with their problems, and helped them to be more in control of their lives, as illustrated in the table below.

The support has helped me to:	
Find out more about getting services I need	 90%
Do more things for myself	 81%
Make more of my own choices	 81%
Find out more about how to sort out my problems	 86%

'It's helped me a lot because a lot of the other services are not available to me. They ignore me, a lot ignore me, or they are closed. It's helped me have less isolation – to talk through emotions, or handle feelings to work it out and knowing there is a service around.'

Donna (client)

'You [member of SEOEP staff] have helped enormously even though I have violated your boundaries and been very disrespectful in the past. You have helped by ringing me and keeping me company. You also initiated my investigation with the police [about past abuse] and also liaising with [the name of the care coordinator in mental health services] and Holistic Community Care [who provide care in his home].'

Jake (client)





As well as case work and advocacy, SEOEP delivered a range of social activities and groups. BOB staff members with learning difficulties (referred to in the project as 'peer supporters') chose the activities listed below and decided how they should be delivered.

Some of the regular social activities included:

- **coffee mornings/afternoon tea**, held in Brixton Pound Café and then **Loughborough Farm Café** – people with learning difficulties brought cakes, shared these and chatted to people without learning difficulties in the café
- **Let's Dance**, an inclusive daytime disco held at Pop Brixton every month – between 30 and 50 people attended each month, a mix of people with learning difficulties, other disabled people and people who are not disabled
- **a monthly radio show** on Resonance FM – peer supporters talked about subjects that are important to people with learning difficulties, such as **having rights and power** and **supporting people in lockdown**
- a weekly **Art & Chat Group** in the 336 centre in Brixton for people with learning difficulties, including people with autism and high support needs
- a yoga class at the 336 centre, for anyone who works at the centre.

As well as regular group activities, SEOEP supported people to engage in the community or take part in activities that they otherwise wouldn't have, such as going to the ballet at Sadler's Wells Theatre, going out to pubs and gigs, or going to a football match for the first time.

Clients said that SEOEP helped them with a range of social outcomes, as shown in the table below.

The support has helped me to:	
Find out more about joining in with other people	 95%
Make more friends	 100%
Be happier	 100%
Be healthier	 95%

Clients also described how much they needed social support, and how SEOEP had helped them.

'I had nothing to do. I had nowhere to go. And I was just bored. ... It was horrible, I felt like committing suicide. ... You've helped me. You've given me the courage to go out and meet people, to talk to people.'

Emma (client)

'Without [SEOEP's] activities I would be extremely isolated ... A lot of people don't understand my needs as mild learning disability. I've got bipolar and [an] emotionally unstable personality disorder. I get anxious because services are not always there even though there's a wide range of services, or they find me too demanding. It's been helpful talking to you because I get on with you. It makes me feel calmer. Most of the wide range of services are not relevant so there's not that many services to meet my needs.'

Jane (client)

Many of the social activities were in the community and open to all. Clients described how taking part in these kinds of activities made them feel they were not defined by their disability.

'I really liked that ... Because our disabilities had nothing at all to do with anything. We were just people, we accepted one another.'

Emma (client)

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, SEOEP adapted to provide critical support to existing and new clients. This included:

- supporting clients to understand COVID-19 and stay safe
- calling clients individually and doing group calls and online activities to combat loneliness and isolation
- arranging access to food, medicine and other essential items
- continuing to help clients with issues to do with housing, benefits and so on
- helping clients with issues that the pandemic had caused or made worse, such as dealing with a partner who had COVID-19, bereavement and disputes with family or neighbours.

Many of the people that SEOEP supported during the pandemic were isolated with little or no other support.

'It was so difficult for them, the people with learning difficulties. They didn't understand what COVID was all about. And there was me and Gina and Jennifer [who] wanted to say: "Don't go out, you have to stay in, you have to wait a while. If you want to go out, go for a walk." All these different things, it was so hard for them.'

Wenda (peer supporter)

In all its work, SEOEP provided emotional support to clients. Peer supporters and other workers spent a lot of time doing this. Some people were very upset and distressed by the issues they were experiencing. The pandemic was particularly upsetting for people who had their usual routines, friendships and support networks disrupted.

SEOEP arranged counselling for some clients but found that it was hard to get specialist counselling for people with learning difficulties, counselling was often expensive or there were long waiting lists.

Some clients had had very difficult and traumatic lives, and were very upset when they presented to SEOEP. This was sometimes stressful and upsetting for peer supporters and other support workers. Peer supporters found that talking to each other, and with other support workers, was one of the best ways of reducing stress. They also found taking part in activities that the project ran, such as yoga and the Art & Chat Group, helpful.

The project had positive impacts on peer supporters' confidence and skills, and they were happy to be working on something that helped other people with learning difficulties.

‘Basically you’re making a difference, and you’re helping other people to see if they could do it in other different areas as well. So that kind of helped me a lot.’

Gina (peer supporter)

‘What I’ve learnt now is to be more confident in my work and talk to people more easily so they don’t feel that no one’s getting hard on them. ... I can listen to the person more easily, and they can talk to me.’

Samantha (peer supporter)

‘I feel more confident speaking with the people with learning difficulties that I work with, that we work with. So it makes me feel more, more happier, more confident, and that goes for all of us really.’

Jennifer (peer supporter)

By offering social activities alongside practical and emotional support, SEOEP was able to build strong relationships with its clients. Some were in such a difficult situation or state when they presented to SEOEP that they were unable to engage socially. If they hadn’t had practical and emotional support from SEOEP, they would have continued to be isolated. Others first got involved with SEOEP through the project’s social activities, but once they knew and trusted SEOEP’s peer supporters and other support workers, they would ask for help with a problem they had or disclose a difficult experience or situation.

It was important that people with learning difficulties led and delivered SEOEP. This meant that clients trusted SEOEP, because advice and support was coming from other people with learning difficulties who could understand and empathise with their experiences.

‘Because you can relate to the person. You’ve got more of a common cause. They know what you’re going through. So they can help you channel a path through life.’

Roy (client)

All the peer supporters who worked on SEOEP found it a rewarding experience and intended to continue doing this kind of work. They thought it was important that the model of advocacy and support by people with learning difficulties for people with learning difficulties was more widespread.

‘That’s very important because I think we’ve got a very unique way of seeing things – people with learning difficulties – and I think if we can get a lot of people in this type of work who have learning difficulties, it will make it so simple and easier for people with learning difficulties, our clients, to understand what we’re doing and what we’re trying to do to help them.’

Neil (peer supporter)

There is an easy-read version of this evaluation report, and a ‘how-to’ guide and film to help organisations set up similar projects.

2. Introduction

Supporting Each Other Equals Power! (SEOEP) was a partnership project between the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), People First (Self Advocacy) (PFSA) and Breaking Out of the Bubble (BOB, formerly People First Lambeth). The Big Lottery Fund's Reaching Communities grant funded the project, which ran for four years, beginning in January 2018 and ending in December 2021.

The project's aim was to empower people with learning difficulties in Lambeth to support each other to achieve their ambitions, overcome isolation and break down the barriers that stop them taking part in society in the same way as other people do.

People with learning difficulties led and delivered the project. People with learning difficulties who worked or volunteered on the project provided support to other people with learning difficulties. By developing and testing a model of peer support, the project intended to show that people with learning difficulties are best placed to solve their own problems. It was hoped that the project would create a new model of good practice in peer support, to share across the United Kingdom (UK).

In the third year of the project, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the UK. People with learning difficulties can have associated long-term health issues and are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. SEOEP continued to operate during the pandemic and adapted to provide critical support to people with learning difficulties.

2.1. The evaluation aims

This evaluation report assesses whether the project met its aims to empower and support people with learning difficulties, and what was learnt from continuing to provide peer support to people with learning difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SEOEP aimed to achieve eight outcomes for the people with learning difficulties it supported:

- Take part in society more.
- Be less socially isolated.
- Feel more confident and in control of one's life.
- Be more independent.
- Have better health and mental wellbeing.
- Have better access to support.
- Be better at supporting each other.
- Be better at working together to solve problems.

As well as investigating the difference SEOEP made to the people it supported, this report also assesses the difference it made to the people with learning difficulties who worked on the project, and to other organisations and people who SEOEP worked or connected with.

It also describes the impact the pandemic had on SEOEP, what SEOEP did to support people during the response to the pandemic, and the difference that made to people.

2.2. Terminology

In this report, people who were supported by SEOEP, who all had learning difficulties, are referred to as **clients**.

BOB and PFSA staff who had learning difficulties and who worked on the project are referred to as **peer supporters**, or peers for short.

People who worked for BOB or PFSA who do not identify as having learning difficulties are referred to as **support workers**.

3. Method

In line with the ethos of the SEOEP project as a whole, the evaluation has taken a co-production approach from the beginning. SCIE has led on the design of the evaluation and on the production of this report, but all partners were involved in designing evaluation questionnaires and interview guides, and collecting data.

The evaluation draws on data from a number of sources:

Case notes

BOB and PFSA kept notes on the cases and clients that SEOEP supported. These included details about the clients, the difficulties they experienced and needed support with, what SEOEP did to help them and any outcomes as a result of their involvement with SEOEP.

Interviews and feedback gathered over the course of the project

Over the course of the project, BOB and PFSA conducted interviews to gather feedback and inform project delivery. These interviews were with both clients and people or organisations that the project worked with.

Monitoring data and progress reports

The project collected monitoring data and provided regular progress reports to the Big Lottery Fund. These give a record of the main activities that the project undertook, the difficulties and successes that the project experienced, what was learnt and how the project adapted.

Interviews with clients, peer supporters and other organisations

We conducted a number of additional interviews specifically for the evaluation.

Members of the project team who the clients knew and were comfortable with conducted the interviews with clients. All client names have been changed to ensure they cannot be identified; some personal details may have also been changed.

SCIE also conducted interviews with the peer supporters with learning difficulties who had delivered the project, and with organisations and people that SEOEP had worked with.

At the beginning of the project, we planned to undertake more quantitative measurements of client outcomes. However, partly because clients' cases and the issues they were experiencing were complicated, and partly because the original forms did not work for all clients, we moved away from this towards more qualitative data collection. This was more accessible and could better capture the complexities of people's situations. Changes to the evaluation are described more fully in section 5.6.4.

4. The SEOEP model

4.1. Co-production and supporting the whole person

SEOEP aimed to empower people with learning difficulties to support other people with learning difficulties. A fundamental principle of the project was that people with learning difficulties would lead and deliver it. The two partners, BOB and PFSA, are organisations that people with learning difficulties run, and members of these organisations played the lead role in steering and delivering the project.

SCIE chaired regular project meetings, provided advice and support and was responsible for reporting to the Big Lottery Fund and producing this evaluation report. However, all aspects of the project were co-produced, including this evaluation.

As well as being led and delivered by people with learning difficulties, a key part of the model was that it combined case work and advocacy with 'social' activities.

The social activities were wide ranging, but all had some element of social engagement. For some activities that might have been a group of people with learning difficulties coming together, for others it might have been something that took place in the local community, which was open to everyone. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the social engagement element had to change, but it did continue, with online groups and meetings taking place and workers on the project reaching out to clients to check on them and how they were doing.

The social activities were not pre-determined at the start of the project. They were developed co-productively based on the preferences and interests of the peer supporters delivering the project and on what clients had told the project they wanted. More details on the activities and the difference they made to people are provided in section 5.2.

The case work and advocacy also took a flexible approach, depending on the issues that clients were experiencing and the support they required. At the outset of the project it was anticipated that clients would need support with issues such as:

- housing
- accessing welfare/benefit entitlements
- making complaints
- reporting hate crime
- accessing work/volunteering opportunities.

This proved to be correct. However, what wasn't anticipated was how complex and long-standing some people's issues were, and how long they would stay connected to the project. This is discussed further in section 5.1.

In some ways, the case work and the individual social events and activities were distinct or discrete strands of the overall project. Individual social events and activities were promoted separately, and were not necessarily 'SEOEP' branded. It is not clear whether people attending Let's Dance realised that it was part of the same project as the inclusive yoga class.

However, people would have recognised the people leading or organising the activity and know that they worked for BOB or PFSA. This, coupled with the relatively small geographical area of the project (Lambeth), is important because in this way SEOEP functioned as a community, or a mechanism for bringing a community together. It was clear throughout the project that the fact that people with learning difficulties led and delivered it was important for building clients' trust, who would then ask for or accept support with the more complex difficulties in their lives.

Another important part of the SEOEP model was that everyone involved worked closely with other organisations, community groups and services in Lambeth. That was in the form of, for example:

- promoting SEOEP and the activities and services that it could provide to and through other groups or organisations
- working in partnership, for instance putting on coffee mornings at the Brixton Pound Café, or engaging with Disability Advice Service Lambeth (DASL) around hate crime
- referring clients to other services and organisations that could provide specialist support and advice.

5. Findings

At the point that the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, SEOEP had supported 129 people with learning difficulties. Many clients primarily attended social activities and groups, but at that point SEOEP had worked more intensively with over 50 clients on issues such as housing, crime, access to services and benefits. Of these clients, 26 had very complex and distressing ongoing problems, involving multiple agencies.

The impact of COVID-19 is discussed further below in section 5.3, but when the pandemic hit, SEOEP continued to support many of these clients, but also took on others who found they had nowhere else to turn for critical support.

SEOEP was delivered in Lambeth, south London. Lambeth has a very diverse population, and SEOEP's clients and workers reflected this. About half of SEOEP's clients identified as Black, Asian or mixed ethnicity.

5.1. Advocacy and case work

The advocacy and case work was much more complicated than was anticipated at the start of the project. Many of the issues that clients brought were more severe and problematic than had been expected. This was compounded by other services and organisations closing – meaning there were fewer or no places to signpost people to – and by the impact of social services, health services and other services being reduced or under pressure.

The project anticipated that people would primarily go to the project with a one-off issue they needed support with or information about, such as support to make a complaint, information about how to access something, help with information they did not understand, information and support to apply for a course or a query about benefits. People did come with issues like these, but as indicated above, there were also more people than had been anticipated who had multiple and complex needs, had ongoing issues and needed intensive support. They were often distressed when they were talking about the issues they were experiencing. Just under half of the clients that SEOEP supported with advocacy and case work needed ongoing support of some kind.

The project felt it was important to support all people who needed help, particularly because the economic context preceding the project – with cuts to services and other organisations closing due to a lack of funding – meant that often people did not have other options to turn to. However, this did affect how the project was delivered – with a greater number of people needing more intensive support over a longer period of time.

Some clients might have only been seen once, or occasionally when they needed support with a specific issue. Others might have been seen on a more regular basis – some once or month, others more than once a week.

The project had to be flexible to accommodate this, and at some points that was challenging. One of the most difficult issues was ensuring there were staff available to help the peer supporters in their work. Both BOB and PFSA have paid members of staff without learning difficulties in support roles. These people typically worked more than their paid hours to make sure the peer supporters could be enabled to work with the clients.

5.1.1. How SEOEP's advocacy and case work has helped people

SEOEP supported clients with a range of practical issues, including:

- resolving housing issues such as applying for housing benefit
- moving homes through schemes like the Shared Lives programme
- raising safeguarding concerns with adult social services
- reporting hate crimes
- helping clients find college courses to attend and volunteering and work groups to join.

As well as these kinds of issues, clients went to SEOEP with much more complicated and long-standing issues. Many of these included elements of abuse and criminality.

Below are three client stories, which illustrate the kinds of issues that SEOEP helped people with. Some details have been changed to protect people and their anonymity.

Client story one: Carol

Carol has multiple complex issues. As well as having learning difficulties she suffers with mental health issues, physical health issues, disabilities and homelessness. SEOEP worked with her intensively to secure emergency housing and the appropriate mental health support.

Lambeth council initially refused to help with her homelessness and said that it had no duty of care to her. She was often told to go to the civic centre and apply for housing but was unable to do this because she was barred from the building.

Carol was admitted to St Thomas' Hospital suffering flare-ups of asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and a fungal infection of her skin, due to living homeless. SEOEP spoke to the homelessness team in the hospital, but the only help they offered was to tell her to go to the civic centre, even after SEOEP explained that she was barred from there.

SEOEP got in touch with Lambeth adult social services to raise a safeguarding concern and ask if they could place her in emergency housing. The manager told SEOEP that Lambeth council had informed them that they were not to do this because the council said it had no duty of care to her.

SEOEP called the Lambeth safer streets team to ask them to pick her up and provide emergency housing. They refused for the same reasons as the social services team.

SEOEP advised Carol to get in touch with a housing solicitors firm who took on the case. Carol has a lot of physical health issues, which include sleep apnoea. She needs to use a machine to help her breathing at night. She could not get the machine or use it as she was homeless. SEOEP spoke to the lawyer about this and other health issues that her homelessness was making worse. The lawyer got in contact with Lambeth council's legal department, raised these concerns and reminded the local authority of their responsibility. Following this, the council agreed to provide emergency housing for Carol.

Carol also asked for a care assessment and an assessment with occupational therapy. At the mental health social worker's request, these were conducted at the SEOEP office.

Following this, social services asked SEOEP to support Carol to move from the inappropriate hostel she was living in to a new one. SEOEP was assured that this was a better property for her and would meet all her needs. On arrival at the property it was clear that it was not appropriate. Carol was unable to fit through the little door within the main gate, and had to climb up some stairs into the building and down more stairs into her room. Her disabilities mean that climbing stairs is a challenge for her. It was also clear that the property would be hard for her to get out of in case of a fire as she would have had to go up and down two sets of stairs to get outside. Also, she was unable to fit into the shower cubicle as she weighed 26 stone, and had only been provided with a single bed for which she was too large.

SEOEP raised these concerns on the day, with the organisation that runs the property and the social worker. SEOEP also supported Carol to book an appointment with the occupational therapist, who was able to confirm that the property was inappropriate. SEOEP then gave this information to her housing lawyer, who was seeking a judicial review on the council's decision.

Carol has been diagnosed with bipolar and a personality disorder. She has stayed in hospital several times and until recently she was receiving section 117 after-care. She has had several suicide attempts, the last four occurring this year.

Carol was discharged from her mental health team and her section 117 after-care was stopped. In a meeting that Carol attended with her mental health lawyer, the lawyer asked them why they would discharge her if they knew she was ill and suicidal. They changed their mind after that and have now taken her back on.

They have provided her with a new care coordinator and SEOEP supported Carol to a meeting with the care coordinator. In this meeting, Carol asked for a new psychiatrist and a medical review. The care coordinator spoke to her bosses about this; they have now given her a new psychiatrist who is looking at her whole file and diagnosis again. She is receiving medication and has also asked for therapy.

Client story two: Paul

Paul has Asperger's syndrome and learning difficulties. Paul first went to spend some time in the Art & Chat Group. Soon after joining the group, he told SEOEP that he had been held prisoner in a religious cult for a number of years in the 1990s, where he was locked up, naked, in a dirty, unfurnished dark room for days on end and raped along with other people, one of whom died. He was also financially abused. Professionals from SEOEP were the first he had confided in. SEOEP supported him to tell the police and he was assigned a special officer who interviewed him in depth, with SEOEP's support.

Paul has very low self-esteem and is convinced he is offending and hurting other people when he isn't. He gets depressed and has trouble looking after himself. He is also aware that he does not have boundaries that protect him from being taken advantage of financially. He told SEOEP that even now he will give his money away. SEOEP supported him to start swimming and visiting SEOEP regularly. SEOEP liaised with the mental health charity Mind and convinced them to fast-track psychotherapy for Paul, which he began receiving monthly. Paul started to phone SEOEP many times a day as he was feeling lonely and depressed. SEOEP was not able to spend as much time with him on the phone as he would have liked because of the other people who needed support, and he was asked to restrict his phone calls to once a day.

Client story three: Ben

Ben is a client SEOEP helped through a number of police investigations. He was accused of and had in turn accused his accuser of violations of non-molestation orders, making false allegations, assault, stalking and assault with a weapon, among other charges.

SEOEP provided Ben with support to understand the process that was happening. It also acted in the role of appropriate adult for all his police interviews and made sure that he understood what was being said and the questions he was being asked. SEOEP was also able to support him to express how he felt about the situation and explain his version of events.

With his consent, SEOEP contacted all agencies working with him, including the mental health team and social services. SEOEP was then able to get some background information as well as medical information, which was sent to the investigating officer. This information was used as mitigations and led to him receiving a caution rather than being charged. It also brought to light some of the issues he faced due to the manipulative and abusive nature of his accuser.

Ben is now waiting for the police to complete an investigation into his accuser, as they may charge him.

5.1.2. Outcomes for clients

These client stories highlight the complexity of the issues that people seeking support from SEOEP experience, and the impact that these issues have on their lives.

Over the course of the project, SEOEP supported clients to achieve a range of outcomes, for example:

- getting a client housed after being homeless for more than a year
- supporting a client to get moved from inappropriate accommodation
- helping a client who had an issue with their neighbour and mate crime – with SEOEP's help, the neighbour was evicted and is being prosecuted over the harassment
- supporting a client to deal with false allegations, arrests, police interviews and the dismissal of a case at court
- supporting a homeless woman to get housed, access a mental health lawyer, be taken seriously by the community mental health team and apply for ESA, PIP and housing benefit – SEOEP also supported the client to get the council to write off a £12,000 housing debt by showing that the property they had been charged with 'abandoning' had not been safe for them.

As well as collecting detailed notes on their cases, clients were asked to indicate how they felt their work with SEOEP had helped them. This data collection wasn't completed because it was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, so the data in the table below is only from 21 clients. Nevertheless, it strongly indicates that they felt the project was helping them to make their own choices, access services and deal with the problems they were experiencing.

The support has helped me to:	Not at all	A bit	A lot	Don't know	All positive
Find out more about getting services I need	0%	14%	76%	10%	90%
Do more things for myself	14%	29%	52%	5%	81%
Make more of my own choices	10%	24%	57%	10%	81%
Find out more about how to sort out my problems	10%	10%	76%	5%	86%

Clients also provided feedback on how they felt the project had helped them.

'The difference about you is that I'm able to talk for longer and it's more solid, kind of stable. These other services, they come and go. They are not constant. They are just for the time being till a problem is solved.'

'It's helped me a lot because a lot of the other services are not available to me. They ignore me, a lot ignore me, or they are closed. It's helped me have less isolation. To talk

through emotions, or handle feelings to work it out and knowing there is a service around. Excellent job you're doing.'

Donna (client)

'If I've got any problems I'll come to [SEOEP]. If I've got any problems with my benefits or my rent or anything like that I will come to you for support.'

Frances (client)

'You [member of SEOEP staff] have helped enormously even though I have violated your boundaries and been very disrespectful in the past. You have helped by ringing me and keeping me company. You also initiated my investigation with the police [about past abuse] and also liaising with [the name of the care coordinator in mental health services] and holistic community care [who provide care in his home].'

Jake (client)

Peer supporters also spoke about how they saw the project helping clients.

'I helped with making helping someone make a complaint, and seeing it through. ... it helped them understand why that situation happens. ... It's helped build up their confidence, so that they can get support in other ways as well.'

Samantha (peer supporter)

5.1.3. The importance of providing emotional support

As well as the physical and health impacts of the issues people were experiencing, they also had a significant impact on their mental wellbeing and emotional state. Offering emotional support was a key part of SEOEP as clients would often arrive at the project in a state of emotional distress due to their experiences.

The number of clients needing support with how they felt and their emotional wellbeing was higher than had been expected. This was exacerbated by the lack of other services available. Clients were often in need of more than just emotional support: they needed professional counselling or therapy.

SEOEP did what it could to help people access counselling, but it can be hard to meet the criteria for NHS counselling and the waiting lists are very long. SEOEP developed a list of counsellors and counselling organisations within the area who provide affordable services and referred clients there.

However, the waiting time for most of the affordable counselling services is long and it could take months before a client had their first session. Not all clients were able to access affordable counselling, and even if they could, the long wait meant that they would seek emotional support from SEOEP while waiting for an appointment.

SEOEP found that it was impossible to work with distressed people to address their problems without also supporting them emotionally. It provided what emotional support it could to people, as well as directing them to organisations such as The Samaritans, alongside more practical support and advice. It provided emotional support to clients on a

regular basis as and when they needed it. For some clients with multiple and complex issues, SEOEP provided emotional support at weekends and in the evenings as well, because their experiences and difficulties were so distressing for them.

In future, PFSA hopes to be able to offer or to facilitate more options for counselling for people with learning difficulties as it was clear that this was an unmet need.

5.1.4. Impact of the advocacy and case work on peer supporters

Dealing with these complicated cases was stressful for all involved in the project. It was difficult speaking to clients who were frustrated because they had not had the support they needed or should have had from services or other agencies.

‘... they were unhappy that the problem that they came to us with, wasn’t sorted out first.’

Samantha (peer supporter)

Cases were often quite difficult to take forward, requiring a lot of research, engagement with multiple agencies and finding a way through bureaucracy. Most distressing, though, were the details of some of the clients’ lives and the abuses that they had suffered.

‘Well, it took a toll out of me. I think it took a toll out of all of us. The situations as well. It was like, how do I cope with this? It was really hard.’

Gina (peer supporter)

It was important for all those involved in delivering SEOEP to support each other when working with these cases.

Where appropriate, SEOEP sought advice from other professionals. For example, one client had borderline personality disorder (BPD) and interacting with them was difficult and stressful for all involved. SEOEP got in touch with an expert in BPD for advice on how to support the client, and how to work with them in a way that reduced the impact on peer supporters and other workers.

Peer supporters found that the best way of dealing with the stress and emotional impact of the difficult cases was speaking to each other and to other support workers.

‘I’ve learnt how to deal with the situations and talk about the situations more a bit better than I used to. And I’ve also learnt about dealing with stress a bit better. I basically talk about it and I do the yoga relaxation as well. I was stressed at one point but now I’m not stressed anymore. And I’ve basically learnt as well that talking to other staff members [peer supporters and others] helps me a lot as well.’

Gina (peer supporter)

As that quote indicates, as well as talking to each other, the activities the project ran such as the Art & Chat Group and the yoga classes helped people to relax and de-stress.

'I like yoga and it makes me feel more relaxed. I feel more confident speaking with the people with learning difficulties that I work with, that we work with. So it makes me feel more happier, more confident.'

Jennifer (peer supporter)

5.1.5. Drop-in support sessions for clients

One adaptation made during the delivery of the project was the introduction of a weekly drop-in session for clients on Fridays. Clients found this useful for bringing issues that they had faced during the week. It meant that SEOEP did not have to give a client a whole-hour or half-hour appointment, as some of the issues could be resolved quickly with support and a phone call or email. That was more efficient for the project and meant a faster service for clients who just wanted clarification or support to understand things like letters, bills and benefit award letters.

It was noted that some clients appeared to be lonely and used the drop-in session as a way to meet and speak to other people. This was used as an opportunity to promote the social activities that SEOEP provided, and encourage clients to attend them.

The drop-in sessions were very popular with clients. However, some were going to them with a need for more significant emotional support, of the type discussed above. This made it harder to quickly support other clients with the more practical difficulties they were experiencing.

SEOEP was exploring ways of addressing this issue when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the UK and all face-to-face support such as the drop-in-sessions had to be put on hold, although emotional support continued via other means, as discussed below in section 5.3.

5.2. Social activities and groups

SEOEP delivered a range of social activities and groups over the course of the project. Decisions about what activities to deliver and how to deliver them were made collectively by the peer supporters working on the project, with the support workers. Ideas for activities and groups came from the peers themselves, and from the outreach work that the project did with local community groups, organisations and associations like the Lambeth Learning Disability Forum.

These are some of the regular social activities that SEOEP delivered:

- **coffee mornings/afternoon tea**, held in Brixton Pound Café, and then **Loughborough Farm Café** – people with learning difficulties brought cakes, shared these and chatted to people without learning difficulties in the café
- **Let's Dance**, an inclusive daytime disco held at Pop Brixton every month – between 30 and 50 people attended each month, a mix of people with learning difficulties, other disabled people and people who are not disabled

- a **monthly radio show** on Resonance FM – peer supporters talked about subjects that are important to people with learning difficulties, such as **having rights and power** and **supporting people in lockdown**
- a weekly **Art & Chat Group** in the 336 centre in Brixton for people with learning difficulties, including people with autism and high support needs
- a **yoga class** at the 336 centre, for anyone who works at the centre.

Other social activities included: visiting local colleges to meet students with learning difficulties and deliver sessions on subjects such as healthy living and being confident; phone and information technology (IT) support sessions to help people use text and email; and trips to the pub, including playing pool at the pub sessions.

As well as organising regular group activities, SEOEP laid on one-off or irregular social events and activities to support people to engage in the community or do an activity they would not otherwise have been able to do. Examples included supporting someone to go to the ballet at Sadler's Wells Theatre, their first experience of live art, and supporting someone to go to a football match, again something they had never had an opportunity to do before.

5.2.1. The difference the activities made

Data gathered during the project shows that clients thought SEOEP helped them with social outcomes, as shown in the table below.

The support has helped me to:	Not at all	A bit	A lot	Don't know	All positive
Find out more about joining in with other people	0%	10%	86%	5%	95%
Make more friends	0%	19%	81%	0%	100%
Be happier	0%	14%	86%	0%	100%
Be healthier	0%	14%	81%	5%	95%

As noted above, the method for collecting this data wasn't accessible to all people, it took time to collect the data and it couldn't be done easily at a social event such as Let's Dance. The data in the table above is from 21 clients, but many more engaged in the social events. SEOEP devised a more accessible way of collecting data specifically on each social activity, but unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic took hold before it could be fully put into place. This is discussed more fully below in section 5.6.4.

However, peer supporters and clients gave qualitative feedback throughout the project. Coupled with the quantitative data we have, it indicates that the social activities were making a real difference to people's lives, building relationships and community between people with learning difficulties, and leading to greater inclusion of people with learning difficulties in the wider community.

'The morning coffee is going great. I like going there because you meet different people there and enjoy yourself. You can mix with different people and also work with them as well, clean up the teas and coffees and give out the cakes and that and have a chat – talk about anything that's on your mind really. Different people go in there doing their laptops as well, not just us.'

Jennifer (peer supporter)

'The radio show is good. We talk about power, what it's like when people with learning difficulties haven't got no power. We play music. Last time we didn't choose it. Students from the college did. I like it. It's a new experience. We interviewed Kate from SCIE. It's fun working with Oli [the person who manages the sound]. It's a laugh.'

Wenda (peer supporter)

Peer supporters noted that the social groups and activities were not just about having fun; they were often also an opportunity for people to talk about and share problems that they were experiencing.

'The Art & Chat Group is going very very very fantastic because we have got loads of people now coming to the Art & Chat Group... We chat and have a laugh. We listen to people's problems actually in the group. People think it's very good for them because it gets them out of the house and helps them to build up their confidence as well.'

Jennifer (peer supporter)

Clients told us about how much they needed social support and engagement.

'I had nothing to do. I had nowhere to go. And I was just bored. ... It was horrible, I felt like committing suicide.'

Emma (client)

And how SEOEP had helped them.

'You've helped me, you've given me the courage to go out and meet people, to talk to people.'

Emma (client)

'Without [SEOEP's] activities I would be extremely isolated ... A lot of people don't understand my needs as mild learning disability. I've got bipolar and [an] emotionally unstable personality disorder. I get anxious because services are not always there even though there's a wide range of services, or they find me too demanding. It's been helpful talking to you because I get on with you. It makes me feel calmer. Most of the wide range of services are not relevant so there's not that many services to meet my needs.'

Jane (client)

They described how the support from SEOEP was empowering them and helping them grow.

'Being able to talk to people has kept me more aware. And I'm starting to listen to people where I didn't before and I've learnt patience, and slowly, I'm still learning a lot, but

learning from other different perspectives as well. So I'm not feeling like, I'm not feeling like I'm in a little box any more being shoved about; being told that you should be like this, or should be like this, or should be a certain way.'

Monica (client)

5.2.2. Using social activities to break down barriers

One aim of the project was to break down barriers between people without learning difficulties and people with learning difficulties and to enable people to take part in society more. The social activities were an important part of this, particularly things like Let's Dance, which was open to everybody and took place in a busy public setting in Brixton.

Peer supporters described how having Let's Dance in a busy and accessible place meant that people could just join in.

'They came after Tai Chi, and then there was a couple of older generations, and we didn't know them but they used to just come in because Let's Dance was on. So basically we got loads of people for Let's Dance, people without learning difficulties and people with learning difficulties. So it was a lot of people and it was a lot of people that we didn't know at the time, and then they came and came to dancing with us, and they kept coming after that, they found it enjoyable because they can dance and do whatever.'

Gina (peer supporter)

Clients described how activities like going to the pub and to see music made them feel that they were not defined by their disability.

'I really liked that ... Because our disabilities had nothing at all to do with anything. We were just people, we accepted one another.'

Emma (client)

People without learning difficulties commented on the inclusivity of activities such as Let's Dance, how they involved other disabled people and people who were not disabled, and showed disabled people enjoying themselves and having a good time – something that is counter to some narratives around disability.

'[There was] ... a woman with mild cerebral palsy, and is in a wheelchair, she's approaching 70 I think, very lively, and she just loved these guys [the peer supporters] because they treated her normally and were very responsive to her. That stood out. There was a woman who had poor sight and wasn't fully mobile, she got an awful lot out of it, it gave her confidence. And then there was a guy who was in a wheelchair and just his being able to be included in the dancing, people dancing around him, and it was just so natural, it felt very unpatronised. It was great fun for him, he laughed a lot and that was

nice to see. Nice to see people who I'd otherwise only seen sitting in rooms and being rather silent and rather enclosed be able to come out a little bit.'

Becca (Local Councillor)

'I think the thing that stood out for me, we were all in there ... it was open to anybody, you know. It's literally just music, come in, have a dance, enjoy yourself.'

Louise (Inclusion London)

A Local Councillor who supported and attended Let's Dance noted how for them it provided an opportunity to meet people in a different context.

'It was a great way to meet in a different context, particularly as a councillor when people don't know quite how to approach you... It was quite nice to be able to dance with people in wheelchairs and chat at the side of the disco hall and have that relaxed context really. I thought it was brilliantly organised, very inclusive, very warm and very individually bespoke to include people from different angles.'

Becca (Local Councillor)

They said they would like to see other professionals or people with roles in authority get involved in things like this because they can help to build trust and confidence between people in authority and people with learning difficulties (or others who may need to access support). They noted that unfamiliarity and fear can hold people back from even raising issues, and that events like this were a way of breaking down those barriers.

'In the abstract, people hate politicians but if you go dancing with one, they become less formidable.'

Becca (Local Councillor)

5.2.3. Romance, sex and sexuality

SEOEP found that many of its clients wanted to meet people to date, and ideally find someone to spend the rest of their lives with. However, they found it difficult to meet people and were concerned about the dangers associated with online dating. Many of SEOEP's clients said that they had had bad experiences with dating in general and dating online, including financial abuse, verbal and physical abuse, and coercive control from partners and/or the people the partners brought into their lives.

To explore safe ways of supporting clients to find potential partners and go on dates, SEOEP made contact with a dating agency that works exclusively and safely with people with disabilities and learning difficulties. SEOEP arranged to meet the agency to discuss how they could work together, but unfortunately this had to be put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SEOEP also supported individual clients with their relationships and sexuality. For example, one client was gay and his family supported him as a gay man, but he also wanted to have LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning) friends and a boyfriend. When he was younger he had been part of an LGBTQ+ youth group, but had to leave that group when he turned 25.

SEOEP worked with him, his mother and his support worker to try to find ways to support him to meet other LGBTQ+ people and date safely. SEOEP went with the client to a community LGBTQ+ night at the Vauxhall Tavern, where SEOEP also gave a talk about the work of the project. SEOEP also supported him to meet with the manager of Gay's the Word bookshop about what's on offer in London. The client enjoyed going to these places but he felt he needed a more supportive place than what was available on the LGBTQ+ scene.

SEOEP worked with the client to think about how together they could form a supportive group for LGBTQ+ people. SEOEP spoke to the client, his mother, employer and other organisations in Lambeth to plan setting up and advertising a group. A venue was found and the LGBTQ+ group had a first meeting. Unfortunately, at that point the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and further meetings had to be postponed, but the hope is that this group will be able to restart soon.

5.3. The impact of COVID-19 and how SEOEP supported people with learning difficulties during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the UK in early 2020. People with learning difficulties are classified as a vulnerable group; many have long-term health conditions alongside their learning difficulties. All people with learning difficulties and all clients of the project were required to stay at home and follow government guidance.

This was a particularly difficult time for people with learning difficulties, for many reasons. Government guidance was not always provided in accessible formats, particularly at first, and even when it was, it changed rapidly. Lockdown restrictions disrupted existing support structures, both family and professional. Many local services shut down or reduced the service they provided and moved away from any face-to-face contact. Many people with learning difficulties did not have the technology for online access and communication, or experience of communicating and accessing services in that way. In the UK as a whole, a disproportionately high number of people with learning difficulties died due to the pandemic, leading to people losing their friends and increased anxiety about their own lives.

In the early stages of the pandemic, SEOEP pivoted to focus on providing essential critical support and advice to its clients. Many of these clients lived on their own, had little support from their family and typically only qualified for limited support from social services. This meant that many clients were suddenly very isolated with nowhere to turn to for help, apart from SEOEP.

The client story below illustrates some of the difficulties and traumas that SEOEP's clients experienced during the pandemic.

Client story four: Bella

Bella was a client who used to frequently pop into SEOEP's office to say hello; she was very sociable. Before lockdown, SEOEP supported Bella with long-term issues she had had with her neighbour, which resulted in her neighbour being evicted.

COVID-19 and lockdown was very difficult and stressful for Bella. The changes to her previously busy routine removed the daily face-to-face contact she'd had with her peers and work colleagues. Bella experienced feelings of loneliness, anxiety, isolation, sleepless nights and depression due to lockdown and the loss of two long-term friendships to COVID-19. It was hard for Bella to process the loss of her friends as she was not able to mourn their deaths traditionally. Bella was unable to be comforted by her loved ones in person or attend a wake or funeral. Instead, she had to say her last goodbyes as she watched her friends being laid to rest through Zoom.

Over this time, SEOEP worked to support Bella's wellbeing and mental health. Because SEOEP had built trust with Bella it was possible to maintain a relationship that made Bella feel connected to SEOEP even in lockdown. SEOEP called Bella weekly, had Zoom sessions and supported her to find bereavement support.

SEOEP gave Bella a listening ear and someone to talk to when she was worried, wanted to vent her frustrations or was feeling down and lonely. SEOEP also gave her advice on how to manage her stress levels, and ideas on how to keep active at home when she was bored.

5.3.1. COVID-19 increased the amount and intensity of work for SEOEP

During the first lockdown, SEOEP supported 35 clients with learning difficulties on a regular basis, i.e. once a week or more often. This was intensive support provided over the phone. SEOEP also worked with a further 16 people less intensively.

SEOEP concentrated on people who needed support the most because they lived on their own, needed support to keep them from getting ill, were in danger or were particularly anxious or depressed. Most of these clients were known to SEOEP before the start of the pandemic, but 12 were new clients who sought support from SEOEP at the start of the pandemic.

The pandemic increased the amount of work for the project: there were new clients, both new and existing clients needed critical, urgent support, many on a repeated or regular basis, and because all work was remote it was more complex and took longer.

Although some clients could join video or conference calls, this wasn't always possible, particularly for meetings with services and other agencies. This meant that SEOEP often had to go back and forth between clients and the various agencies and other organisations to resolve issues. That significantly increased the time needed to resolve an issue or support someone.

5.3.2. Supporting clients to understand COVID-19 and stay safe in the pandemic

SEOEP realised early on that some clients did not understand what the coronavirus was, what a pandemic was or how serious it was. SEOEP had to explain to most clients regularly and repeatedly what COVID-19 was, how it affected the body and how to keep safe. To help them understand, SEOEP also sent out easy-read leaflets teaching people how to wash their hands correctly. The leaflets also explained how the virus can be contracted and how to avoid getting it.

'It was so difficult for them, the people with learning difficulties; they didn't understand what COVID was all about. And there was me and Gina and Jennifer [who] wanted to say: "Don't go out, you have to stay in, you have to wait a while. If you want to go out, go for a walk." All these different things, it was so hard for them.'

Wenda (peer supporter)

Peer supporters felt that their clients were helped by having advice from other people with learning difficulties, and listened to that advice.

'I think they did, because you've got learning difficulties. But I think I don't think they understood the Government. Basically I didn't even understand the Government; it was mixed signals [from the Government].'

Gina (peer supporter)

5.3.3. Reducing loneliness and isolation

Many of SEOEP's clients lived on their own, so SEOEP took steps to make sure that clients knew that people were there for them by actively getting in contact with clients to check in with them, rather than waiting for clients to contact SEOEP. In the earliest stages of the pandemic this was by phoning them, which was very important to clients who otherwise were very isolated.

'Some people didn't have loads of people that were phoning them and things like that. They only had us to talk to. And we made their life a bit better. They all liked us talking and ringing them and stuff at the beginning. ... We still ring now; they still like it as well. They still love it now because there's a lot of chat. We get a lot out of it and it's kind of funny... Now we do it so often, they're so used to it, they just will say anything, they just talk and talk, and we will ask them questions and they'll ask questions, so it still goes on now and they enjoy it.'

Gina (peer supporter)

While some clients and peer supporters could use video-call software like Zoom, for many this wasn't possible. SEOEP developed a method of conference calling where clients and peer supporters were dialled into a group call, and all people had to do was answer their phone. This meant that peer supporters could continue to support clients with learning difficulties during the pandemic.

It also meant that clients and peers could take part in group conversations. These were a crucial part of the work that SEOEP did to maintain people's connections and reduce their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Once peer supporters and clients had got more used to technology, SEOEP began to restart some of the group social activities in an online format. There were regular group video meetings where people could just drop in and chat. And there were more structured activities such as supporting people to be creative and setting up an online gallery page for people's art and poetry, a virtual Christmas party and music and television sessions.

The information packs that SEOEP sent out also included activities such as mindful colouring sheets and coloured pencils. Although this was a relatively simple act, the packs were very well received by clients – perhaps because many of the people SEOEP supported rarely had people send them things that were fun.

'[SEOEP] were really helpful. They [a SEOEP peer supporter with learning difficulties] sent me colouring books, sent me messages about have you got enough food in and how are you coping and she still does. I like talking to you and [client] and [two different SEOEP staff with learning difficulties] with me on the phone. It helps me to talk with people I've known a long time and get on with. It helps you with your mood and your mental state.'

Mary (client)

'[SEOEP has helped by] talking, trying to give advice about what to do, all different things... All of you guys is nice to meet new people and talking to other people. [At the Thursday SEOEP video meetings] They are nice people. It's good to chat instead of just being at home.'

Abebi (client)

5.3.4. Supporting clients to access food, medicine and other essentials

Many people with learning difficulties that SEOEP supported were unable to access food, medication and other essential items such as sanitary items, as many delivery services were only available online. SEOEP worked with individuals, the local authority and other organisations to organise deliveries of these things.

'SEOEP were instrumental in connecting the Brixton Pound project with our friends in the disabled community to provide emergency food provision.'

Sean Roy (Brixton Pound Café)

Clients said that this support was really important.

'You helped me with quite a lot – you've got me food parcels. Last benefit payment on third of January we don't know if there will be a gap.'

Eileen (client)

5.3.5. Continuing to support clients with their problems

As well as providing essential safety advice, translating or explaining government guidance and arranging for deliveries of food, medication and other essentials, SEOEP continued to support clients with issues they were experiencing. Some of these issues were caused or made worse by COVID-19 and the lockdown, such as dealing with a partner who had the virus, bereavement, family disputes and disputes with neighbours.

Many processes that SEOEP had been supporting clients through – such as changes to housing or benefits assessments – were halted due to the pandemic. This added to clients' stress about their situation. In some cases, planned meetings/assessments were being arranged via video or telephone calls, which were inaccessible to many people with learning difficulties, adding to their anxiety. SEOEP continued to support clients through these processes, to advocate on their behalf, and to provide emotional support to them.

Providing that emotional support was important, reassuring clients that they were not on their own.

'I think it helps them, because it reassured them that there was people there ready to help them at any time. If something cropped up, and we were there, and the others that would help them as well, People First (Self Advocacy) would help some people and we would help other clients. But I think it was the reassurance that we were there, so they could phone us at any time to be reassured that things were going to get better, then it can be hard to start off, but they were going to get better.'

Neil (peer supporter)

'It's nice they [SEOEP workers] help me quite a lot. Help me to be strong to make myself cheerful and happy and have things to do.'

Neela (client)

5.4. The difference that SEOEP made to people with learning difficulties who worked on the project

SEOEP's aim was to empower people with learning difficulties to help other people with learning difficulties. As well as looking at the impact that SEOEP had on its clients, it is important to consider the difference that working on the project made to the peer supporters with learning difficulties.

As discussed in section 5.1.4, working on the SEOEP project could sometimes be stressful. Some clients had had very difficult and traumatic lives, and were very upset when they presented to SEOEP. It was also frustrating that it was sometimes hard to get clients the help they needed. Peer supporters dealt with these stresses by talking to each other and the other support workers. They also found that the social activities that SEOEP delivered were helpful in reducing stress.

Although working on SEOEP could be stressful, none of the peer supporters regretted their involvement in the project. The peers found the project rewarding and said that helping other people with learning difficulties made them happy.

‘Basically you’re making a difference, and you’re helping other people to see if they could do it in other different areas as well. So that kind of helped me a lot.’

Gina (peer supporter)

Peer supporters described how working on SEOEP had made them more confident, particularly around speaking to people – and not just clients but also people in authority who they needed to talk to to support and advocate for their clients.

‘What I’ve learnt now is to be more confident in my work and talk to people more easily so they don’t feel that no one’s getting hard on them. ... I can listen to the person more easily, and they can talk to me.’

Samantha (peer supporter)

‘Now it’s easier for me to be chatty to people a lot. I’m happy talking on the radio show. I come up with ideas for our organisation and this project sometimes.’

Wenda (peer supporter)

‘I feel more confident speaking with the people with learning difficulties that I work with, that we work with. So it makes me feel more, more happier, more confident, and that goes for all of us really.’

Jennifer (peer supporter)

Peer supporters also described how SEOEP had given them confidence and experience in things like organising events.

‘I’d had a bit of practice of organising events, but then I just took it to another level, for other people as well. I did have a little bit of organising practice, but SEOEP has just made it more extreme to the lengths that I’ve got to, like I’ve kind of organised a lot of things. So yeah, it did help. It really did. It made me speak up as well, about SEOEP.’

Gina (peer supporter)

Working through the pandemic also meant that they learnt a lot of new technology skills.

‘We’ve all learnt Zoom in one way or another, we’ve learnt Microsoft Teams, we’ve learnt how to video call, we’ve learnt group calls. And there’s probably other things that we’ve learnt on how to use technology to see people and talk to people. We’ve learnt so much in the last 18 months in terms of technology. I mean we’ve just grown in terms of our tech skills.’

Neil (peer supporter)

As well as learning to use these technologies themselves, peer supporters helped SEOEP’s clients to learn new technologies and communication tools.

All the peer supporters who worked on SEOEP found it a rewarding experience, they said that they had learnt a great deal from delivering the project and all intended to continue doing this kind of work.

5.5. The impact of SEOEP on people it collaborated with

SEOEP worked with a lot of organisations in many different ways over the four years that it ran. Examples of this are contained in the sections above. As well as telling us about the work that they and their organisations did with SEOEP, people told us about the difference that working with SEOEP had made to them personally, and what they learnt from this experience.

'I learnt a tremendous amount personally about how to work with a group of people with learning difficulties. ... they had a lot of skills and experience that I needed to learn about and learn from.'

Louise (Inclusion London)

They described how SEOEP helped them connect with others and break down barriers.

'It was a lovely way to get in touch with things I've forgotten, ... the world of local politics can be so brittle and that was really refreshing to find that common humanity, you know. It was quite moving at times when you're all together.'

Becca (Local Councillor)

People also noted that SEOEP had given them opportunities they might not have had otherwise.

'They invited me to do a radio show, which was super-fun. I think it was Resonance [FM]. They invited me to have a little interview where they asked me some questions about the café. For me that was like such an amazing opportunity. I'd never been on the radio before, and it was really good to chat with the members of BOB.'

Sean Roy (Brixton Pound Café)

Interviewees said that they learnt from the co-production approach, noting that even though it could take longer to get together and collaborate, it was a valuable process, which they had taken into other areas of their work.

'Taking some time and being really clear. I learnt so much about what that actually meant. It's not about the language and how you present it. It's how you do it so that everybody feels connected and part of it, and understands it and has an equal say in it.'

Louise (Inclusion London)

Similarly, interviewees praised how SEOEP's structure and framework supported and empowered people.

'I was really enthused and really inspired by the nature of the project. ... it's the strength of the structure, the format of it, a really interesting and fair and dynamic framework for people to do whatever they want to do.'

Sean Roy (Brixton Pound Café)

5.6. Lessons learnt from delivery

5.6.1. It was important to promote SEOEP in lots of different ways

It was important to promote SEOEP to find clients. To reach the right client group, SEOEP started off by developing an accessible leaflet and a poster. It was essential to have information with pictures, so that clients with learning difficulties could understand what SEOEP was and how it could help them.

The peer supporters on the project produced the poster and leaflets together.

'[The] average was about five versions of each poster. We were improving it as time went on. That was a lot of work from everybody, that was – putting everybody's ideas into those flyers and posters and pamphlets and leaflets. Because we wanted to make sure that people with learning difficulties understood what was on these posters, so we had to make sure that it was easy for them to understand and read.'

Neil (peer supporter)

When they were finished, the flyers and posters were sent out to local contacts, who were also asked to promote the project to their networks.

SEOEP found that advertising the project in that way was important, but on its own it wasn't enough. It also had to work with services and other organisations to tell them about the project directly. People working in services are very busy and they receive many emails and flyers. It was important for SEOEP to develop close links and working relationships with services, for example by attending forums, open days and information-sharing events.

SEOEP also visited care homes, day centres, colleges, community centres and other organisations to promote the project and recruit clients.

Peer supporters and other workers also promoted SEOEP in other ways, by:

- giving out information about SEOEP wherever members of the project went
- attending networking events to tell organisations about the work of SEOEP
- developing and launching a website with details of SEOEP and the activities it delivered
- producing and sending out a monthly flyer with dates of social events and other information
- broadening the range of organisations and services that SEOEP was in contact with and sent information to
- talking about SEOEP on the monthly Resonance FM radio show
- phoning clients, and some carers and organisations, to remind them of upcoming events and encouraging them to join them
- attending the local Learning Disability Forum and sending regular updates for its newsletter
- giving presentations to non-disabled organisations and groups such as local churches, an LGBTQ+ group and Faiths Together

- acting as learning disability representatives on Lambeth's Hate Crime Partnership
- delivering a seminar on sharing power with people with learning difficulties at SCIE's national Co-production Festival.

5.6.2. Volunteers were important for delivering SEOEP and a way of giving other people with learning difficulties valuable experience

SEOEP worked with seven volunteers over the course of the project. Volunteers were recruited at different times, but once recruited, many continued to volunteer until the end of the project.

Just over half of the volunteers (four people) had learning difficulties. They supported the project in a number of ways. They learnt how to network with different organisations, went to events to speak about the project, recruited new clients for the project and learnt how to support clients at meetings.

A key aim of having volunteers with learning difficulties was to give them the opportunity to learn and develop employability skills. Volunteers learnt what would be expected of them in an office workplace and how to talk to and work with people in a workplace, including being respectful to other staff members and being able to talk to them professionally. Volunteers were also taught skills to help them get a job, such as writing a curriculum vitae (CV).

Three volunteers did not have learning difficulties. They volunteered in a range of capacities, including helping out at some of the events like Let's Dance and the Art & Chat Group, and providing support and companionship to some of SEOEP's clients.

Volunteers spoke of how the project had benefited them.

'It's been a pleasure supporting people who are living independently. ... I've made friendships with the wonderful people that I've been supporting. At this point in my life this suits me and I feel like I'm using my knowledge and still learning new things. I've learnt a lot from working with SEOEP.'

Vivien (volunteer)

5.6.3. Good communication is important when working in partnership

As discussed above, SEOEP took a co-production approach and BOB and PFSA worked together very productively across the project, having regular meetings to decide on project direction, referring clients to each other and sharing information about clients (with their permission) to make sure they were properly supported in all areas of their lives.

However, there was a point where miscommunication and misunderstanding led to a breakdown in relations between BOB and PFSA. This created lots of confusion and tension for everyone involved in the project. The issue was resolved with a combination of a cooling-down period and mediation by SCIE, which allowed everyone to be heard and the confusion to be cleared up.

Following this, the project put in place a plan where each organisation would give regular updates on what they had been doing and on any future ideas or plans so that everyone

involved in the project could discuss them. SCIE, BOB and PFSA also developed a partnership working agreement together, which clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of all three organisations delivering SEOEP.

This was a lesson in the importance of having good, clear and open communication between partners in projects.

5.6.4. Be ready to adapt evaluation methods to the people and the situation





At the outset of the project, SEOEP identified eight outcomes for clients to do with inclusion, confidence, social isolation, independence, wellbeing, having better access to support, being empowered and supporting others:

- Take part in society more (do more in the community).
- Be less socially isolated (have more friends).
- Feel more confident and in control of one's life.
- Be more independent.
- Have better health and mental wellbeing.
- Have better access to support.
- Be better at supporting each other.
- Be better at working together to solve problems.

When clients first engaged with SEOEP they had a conversation with peer supporters and other workers about the problem or issue that they wanted support from SEOEP with.

They were also asked (with support where appropriate) to fill in a form, which asked them how much help they wanted with each of the eight client outcomes. A partial example of this form is given in Figure 5-1 below; a full example of the questionnaire is included in the Appendix.

Figure 5-1. Extract of the SEOEP client outcomes form

I would like to	Not at all 	A bit 	A lot 	Don't know 
Find out more about getting services I need				
Find out more about how I can join in with other people				
Make more friends				

The intention was that after they had been with the project for some time, clients would fill in another questionnaire, assessing how much the project had helped them with each outcome, thereby helping to show the impact the project had on them (21 clients filled in both an initial and a follow-up outcomes questionnaire).

However, while some clients could fill this form in, with some support and prompting, for many it was quite abstract and hard to link some of the outcomes to the problem or issue they were seeking support with. Also, for people who were seeking support with a particularly urgent or distressing issue, it wasn't always appropriate to ask them to fill in a form at that point. And the form didn't really work for collecting feedback on many of the social activities where a large number of people came and went, such as the Let's Dance disco, the café or evenings out.

For those reasons, it was agreed that this way of collecting data should be revised and SCIE, BOB and PFSA worked together to produce new evaluation methods.

For the case work and advocacy, we agreed to move to a more qualitative approach. SEOEP was already taking regular notes for each case when peer supporters and other support workers spoke to clients, so we agreed to add into this process a few simple questions that could be used to track how clients felt about the issues they were experiencing, and whether they felt that SEOEP had helped them, as shown below:

Questions for the first interview

When a client first comes to SEOEP for support ...

- Can you get help with this problem from anywhere else?
- How does this problem make you feel?
- Do you feel happy or sad about your life generally right now?

Questions for the following interview(s)

After SEOEP has supported the client with the problem or issue ...





- Has SEOEP helped with the problem?
- How do you feel about the problem now?
- Do you feel you can get support to help with other things in your life?
- Do you feel happy or sad about your life in general right now?

For each question there were prompts to help people understand what was being asked, and the wording could be adapted to their case (e.g. exchanging 'the problem' for their specific issue).

For the evaluation, SCIE would extract the answers to these questions from anonymised case notes, and use that data to build up a picture of the impact that SEOEP's support had on clients.

For the social activities, one of the problems was that typically only one or two of the eight client outcomes would be directly relevant to each activity, so we agreed to radically simplify the form so that just one outcome was looked at at a time, as shown below in Figure 5-2. We also changed the form into something that many people could fill in at once, by putting a sticker on the form by marking an X on the form, or similar. We developed a single-page form that could be printed on an A3 piece of paper and taken to any social activity.

Figure 5-2. SEOEP single outcome poster

Supporting Each Other Equals Power	
Did today help you...	
Date: Event:	
.....	
Not at all 	
A bit 	
A lot 	
Don't know 	

Unfortunately, before we could make much progress using these evaluation methods, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and all efforts turned to providing support to SEOEP's many vulnerable clients. However, we used the questions we had developed in the final interviews with clients.

We hope that both revised methods can be used in future as PFSA and BOB intend to continue to deliver peer-led case work and social activities.

6. Conclusion

SEOEP's aim was to empower people with learning difficulties in Lambeth to support each other to achieve their ambitions, overcome isolation and break down the barriers that stop them taking part in society the same way as other people do.

The project achieved this in a context where other organisations that supported people with learning difficulties were shutting down or reducing their services. The COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly heavy impact on people with learning difficulties. SEOEP adapted quickly to support existing and new clients through this very difficult period, while still maintaining the twin principles of supporting people with learning difficulties in all parts of their lives and people with learning difficulties leading the project.

These two principles guided the SEOEP model from the beginning and were fundamental to its success.

6.1. Supporting the whole person

The model of offering social activities alongside practical and emotional support worked well.

Some people got involved in SEOEP's social activities first. The social events attracted new people and provided an opportunity for SEOEP to tell them about the work that it does. Importantly, by attending social events, clients got to know and trust SEOEP peer supporters and other support workers. When they knew and trusted SEOEP they were more willing to ask for help with a problem they had or disclose a difficult experience or situation.

Some people first went to SEOEP looking for help with a specific issue, but then joined in with some of the social activities as well.

One client was put in touch with SEOEP because they wanted a job, specifically a job as a type of scientist. SEOEP supported them to look into the requirements and qualifications needed for the job and they decided that they didn't want to aim for the job after all. They changed their focus and found for themselves what they described as training in counselling. They were very pleased that they had been able to move forward in this way.

This client didn't get out in the evenings, and really wanted to go out at night in the local area. SEOEP supported them to first go to a disco in a local pub, and then arranged for them to go to a local jazz concert and later a ballet.

'I'd never been to a ballet before. So well, yeah, that was fantastic. The ballet and the jazz club was fantastic because I've never been to a ballet before; never been to places like that. So to me, that was a wonderful experience.'

Monica (client)

During the COVID-19 pandemic it was very important that SEOEP helped people with their problems, but also contacted people who were isolating and it set up groups to help people feel less lonely.

'[SEOEP] is helping to bridge a gap between socialising and self-isolation due to the coronavirus and COVID-19 pandemic. I'm a very people-orientated person and I enjoy

the companionship of other human beings. These telephone calls have helped me to grow in self-confidence, self-esteem and talking to [SEOEP] gives me something constructive to do with my daily routine and gives me a sense of purpose and structure to my day. It helps me with my mood as well because [SEOEP] often helps me to think positive.'

Joe (client)

Overall, having both the social activities and the advocacy was important because it helped clients build strong relationships and trust with SEOEP. Some people were in such a difficult situation or state when they first went to SEOEP that they were unable to engage socially. If they hadn't got practical and emotional support from SEOEP then they would have continued to be isolated. By offering practical, emotional and social support, SEOEP was able to support the whole person and adapt to the client's changing needs.

6.2. People with learning difficulties leading the project

The other key element of SEOEP was that people with learning difficulties led and delivered the project and they were empowered to support each other in this.

Having people with learning difficulties make decisions about the project and deliver it helped clients to trust SEOEP because advice and support was coming from other people with learning difficulties, who could therefore understand and empathise with their experiences.

'It's very important for people with learning difficulties because they will have the last say, and they know what people with learning difficulties, other people with learning difficulties, what we have gone through, and what we want, and stuff like that. ... It's easier for people with learning difficulties to understand other people with learning difficulties, because they will relate to us, they will open up to us and stuff like that.'

Gina (peer supporter)

Clients agreed with this and valued the support and understanding they had from peer supporters.

'Because you can relate to the person. You've got more of a common cause. They know what you're going through. So they can help you channel a path through life.'

Roy (client)

'You guys took time to listen to me. And Gina and Jen understand how things can happen to people with special needs, girls and boys. They took the time; they were so understandable and very supportive.'

Lee (client)

As we saw earlier in section 5.4, the project had positive impacts on peer supporters' confidence, skills and knowledge. But it didn't just empower the peer supporters: other people with learning difficulties who came into contact with SEOEP grew through their involvement with it.

'You [SEOEP] actually taught me more patience. I think I've got a bit more understanding for other people, more patience. I mean, before I was I was a little bit selfish. It was me, me, me, me. Then I got to look at another side of things. And I've got to be more patient and more understanding. Not in a rush to do something if that makes sense.'

Monica (client)

'Truthfully I'm not bored now, I'm not lonely, I'm just happy with my life.'

Emma (client)

Peer supporters thought it was important that this model of advocacy and support by people with learning difficulties for people with learning difficulties was more widespread.

'That's very important because I think we've got a very unique way of seeing things – people with learning difficulties – and I think if we can get a lot of people in this type of work who have learning difficulties, it will make it so simple and easier for people with learning difficulties, our clients, to understand what we're doing and what we're trying to do to help them.'

Neil (peer supporter)

6.3. Next steps for SEOEP

Although the SEOEP project itself has ended, both the main partners – PFSA and BOB – intend to carry on with the work they did as part of the project, and hope that other self-advocacy and learning-difficulty-led organisations can use the model and learning from the project in the future.

There is an easy-read version of this evaluation report, and also a 'how-to' guide and film to help organisations set up similar projects.

7. Appendix: SEOEP evaluation forms

7.1. SEOEP outcomes questionnaires





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SEOEP Outcomes Questionnaire 1

When the client enters the service

Name:

Date:

I would like to	Not at all 	A bit 	A lot 	Don't know 
Find out more about getting services I need				
Find out more about how I can join in with other people				
Make more friends				
Be happier				

I would like to	Not at all	A bit	A lot	Don't know
				
Be healthier				
Do more things for myself				
Make more of my own choices				
Find out more about how to sort out my problems				





Supporting Each Other Equals Power





SEOEP Outcomes Questionnaire 2

When the client leaves the service, or at other times as agreed

Name:

Date:

The support has helped me to	Not at all 	A bit 	A lot 	Don't know 
Find out more about getting services I need				
Find out more about how I can join in with other people				
Make more friends				
Be happier				





The support has helped me to	Not at all	A bit	A lot	Don't know
				
Be healthier				
Do more things for myself				
Make more of my own choices				
Find out more about how to sort out my problems				

7.2. SEOEP single outcome poster

Supporting Each Other Equals Power

Did today help you...
.....

Date:
Event:

Not at all 	
A bit 	
A lot 	
Don't know 	

About this report

Supporting Each Other Equals Power! (SEOEP) was a partnership project between the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), People First (Self Advocacy) (PFSA) and Breaking Out of the Bubble (BOB, formerly People First Lambeth). The Big Lottery Fund's Reaching Communities grant-funded the project. The project ran for four years, from January 2018 to December 2021.

The project's aim was to empower people with learning difficulties in Lambeth to support each other to achieve their ambitions, overcome isolation and break down the barriers that stop them taking part in society in the same way as other people do.

The SEOEP project had two key elements:

- People with learning difficulties led and delivered it.
- It provided social, emotional and practical support, to help people with learning difficulties in all areas of their lives.

This evaluation report assesses whether the project met its aims to empower and support people with learning difficulties, and what was learnt from continuing to provide peer support to people with learning difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is an easy-read version of this evaluation report, and there is a 'how-to' guide and film to help organisations set up similar projects.