

Independent Evaluation Summary
Advonet / Leeds Autism AIM

Autism Mentoring and Peer Support

2022 - 2025

The
Advonet
Group
Providing Independent Advocacy

Leeds
Autism
AIM

by Paul Rhodes
Consulting



Autism Mentoring and Peer Support:

Project Overview 2022 - 2025



This National Lottery Community Fund project (value: £159,318) ⁱⁱ aimed to support the delivery of structured, low-level support for autistic adults in Leeds, particularly those facing isolation or complex barriers.

Led by the Leeds Autism AIM service within Advonet, it consisted of volunteer-led mentoring and paid and volunteer peer support (both one to one and in groups), delivered both in-person and remotely, with a strong emphasis on co-production with autistic adults.

This has enabled AIM to add a much-needed wider range of support to their core ICB funded offer, increasing access to essential support for local autistic people.

This independent evaluation report ⁱⁱⁱ assesses the impact and learning AIM has achieved since 2022, and the impact of their blend of paid staff and volunteer support.



“Over the course of the project, we have supported a total of 82 dedicated volunteers across various roles, each contributing to the success and impact of our services. This includes 30 mentors providing one-on-one support, 16 peer support volunteers offering lived-experience guidance, and 23 steering group members helping to shape the direction of our work.”

(AIM End of Funding report April 2025).

This summary report captures the difference and learning from these programmes:

1

Mentoring

2

Volunteer
peer support

3

Specialist paid
peer support

4

Online peer
support (groups)

We will consider the impact on autistic clients and volunteers, together with the learning that AIM has gathered in this period.

Key messages

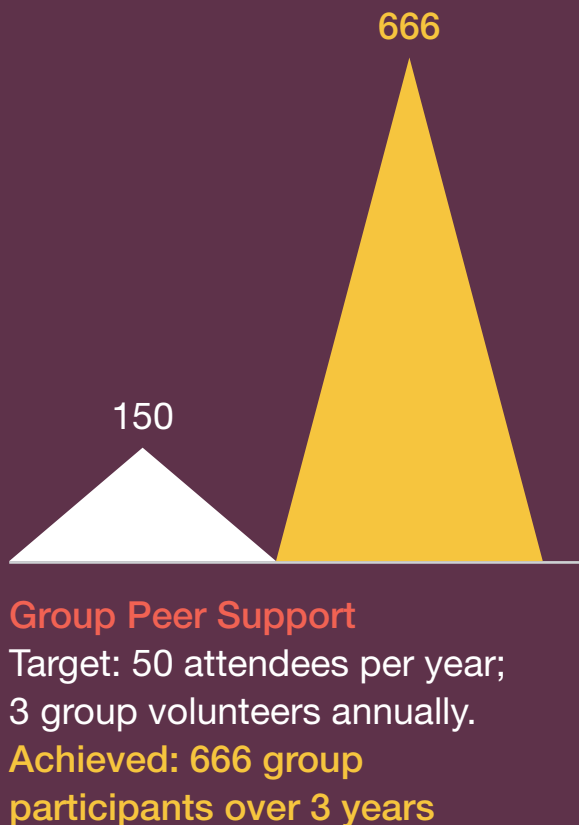
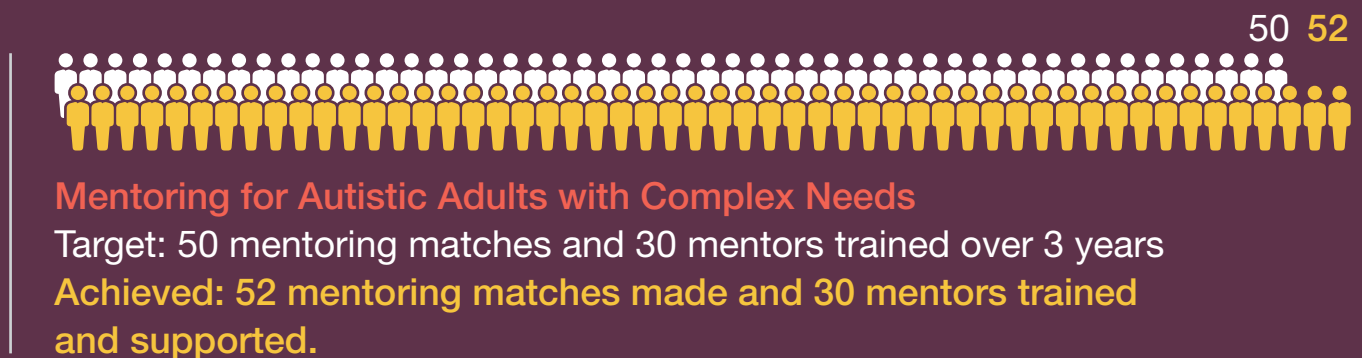
“

Over three years, we built on our foundations to create something powerful, a service shaped and delivered by autistic people, rooted in community, and able to respond flexibly to growing and changing needs.

”

- Thanks to the support of the National Lottery Community Fund, Leeds Autism AIM has evolved and refined a mainly autistic-led model of mentoring and paid and volunteer-led peer support which is accessible and impactful. Having met or exceeded their targets here, the conditions are in place for AIM to quickly re-activate these support channels, given further funding. Online support remains in place.
- Through mentoring, paid peer support and latterly volunteer-led peer support, autistic adults have been supported to **“achieve big goals”**, gain new skills, overcome challenges and to feel more connected. The evidence is arguably strongest on improving confidence, self-advocacy and independence, resulting in improved coping, resilience and mental health.
- Having been prepared by the excellent training delivered by AIM, and then supported throughout, volunteers were engaged and invested in their roles. Volunteer satisfaction (over seven in ten are autistic) from supporting an autistic adult to overcome significant challenges has been considerable. Peer support volunteers recognised that the benefits were shared, with notable benefits for their own understanding, self-development and role satisfaction.
- With AIM’s guidance, autistic adults have taken part in co-produced regional and city-wide health reviews to shape and improve local services. Stakeholders trust AIM’s contributions and prize their ability to bring **“the genuine voices of the autistic community” to the table**.
- There has been valuable learning, as the project has continued to adapt to the post-COVID world; chiefly how to cope with the significant increase in demand for services (and more complex needs) and the blend of online/offline and paid and community-led support required. To respond, AIM has adapted their paid peer support model (4 sessions) and established a longer-term volunteer peer support. An important learning point that informed this evolution from mentoring to peer support was that **“the best matches were often autistic matches”**.

Impact on autistic people







- A total of almost 1,000 interactions, including 947 with autistic volunteers and clients ^{IV}
- 188 autistic adults supported through specialist peer support
- 666 group participants
- 52 mentoring matches and 418.5 hours of mentoring provided
- 20 hours of volunteer peer support introduced
- Estimated social value from all volunteering is £30,575 ^V
- 67% of mentees increased their independence (either 'significantly' or 'a little')
- 67% of mentees felt confident to advocate for themselves (either 'extremely' or 'somewhat')
- 50% felt more resilient and able to cope with challenges (either 'much more' or 'slightly').

Peer support clients

- 82% felt 'definitely' or 'somewhat' more comfortable discussing their autism diagnosis
- 80% 'definitely' or 'somewhat' better understood their autism
- 71% felt 'definitely' or 'somewhat' more confident in setting and achieving personal goals
- 60% could 'definitely' or 'somewhat' handle daily challenges.
- 83% of mentees reported feeling 'somewhat' more confident in accessing education and employment opportunities
- 83% were more informed about the help available to them.
- 67% of mentees were more confident in building and maintaining relationships (either 'extremely' or 'somewhat')

Mentees



Key mentor and peer support findings

- AIM's mentoring and peer support offers for autistic adults in Leeds are considered to be unique and valuable. It improved, for the majority, independence, wellbeing, and confidence.
- The autistic community is still working through the legacy of the pandemic, particularly the isolation and lack of connection. Online groups offer a chance to come together around a shared interest or characteristic. All involved in the online groups would recommend them to their peers.
- The experience of mentoring or peer support (both paid and volunteer-led) reduced the isolation mentees were experiencing, at least for a time.
- Mentees found, with support, the confidence to engage and continue to engage, not only with their mentoring or peer support but also with their work or study.
- Case study evidence presents how some of the matches developed lasting friendships and connections as a result.





Key mentor and peer support findings



- Paid peer support clients have been supported towards a range of outcomes; including achieving personal goals, better understanding their autism (“I’ve learned that the way I feel and some of the things I struggle with are due to my autism, not because I’m ‘wrong’.”) and daily strategies for coping and self-advocating (“I am more confident disclosing my autism at work.”)
- Whether online or in person, the sessions have created a safe space where autistic people can be heard.
- Where matches have not been successful, AIM has sometimes been able to identify more suitable support.
- AIM’s mentors and peer volunteers have also supported autistic adults to deal with significant mental health challenges over the course of the match. Clear boundaries are in place to keep both parties safe, but mentees make a connection between their recovery and the support received.



Participant outcomes

1 Confidence and resilience in managing day-to-day life

2 Participation in employment, education or volunteering opportunities

3 Wellbeing and mental health

4 Confidence in managing social relationships

5 Connections to local community

6 Access to wider services/support when needed

Mentee Case Study

R is a professional and works part time. R was stuck and wanted help to move forward, so signed up for mentoring. They benefited from structured, empathetic support to find improved approaches and resources to manage more effectively day to day. Their mentor's support enabled R to talk things through, explore boundaries, and develop practical coping strategies.

“ They never rushed or judged, it felt like we were learning from each other. ”



During weekly online sessions, R learned to manage sensory overload and prioritise tasks. This reduced the number of stress-related meltdowns. They also gained skills to advocate for themselves in the workplace.

Importantly, R still draws on those strategies and resources. The 18 months of mentoring (the full ‘dose’) laid the foundation for long-term resilience. The combination of effective matching, flexible delivery, and an autistic-informed approach has supported them to achieve “some big goals” despite challenging life events.

“ Without my mentor, I think it would have been much harder. She helped me realise I was making progress even when I couldn’t see it myself. ”

Peer Support Volunteer Case Study

F found Leeds Autism AIM when she was in a vulnerable place. Following years of involvement with mental health services that failed to recognise her autism, she was referred to AIM by a social prescriber. AIM’s support made a tangible, immediate difference. With AIM’s guidance, F developed a health passport and service profile that enabled police, hospitals, and GPs to make critical adjustments, allowing their needs to be recognised and acted on.

With the help of AIM staff and her peer support volunteer, F was able to use coping strategies which greatly reduced hospital admissions, and they have since started taking part in an online group.

F describes the mentoring as the first time they felt truly understood, not by a professional, but by someone who had “lived it.” That connection helped to break a cycle of crisis and gave them a new sense of control.

Stakeholder feedback

- Reveals how AIM is able to access autistic people and support them to share their experiences and views as part of co-produced strategies or consultations.
- For the ICB and local authority, AIM is a long-standing trusted partner, and the recognised experts in peer-led support. Their input is sought and respected.
- Without AIM's expertise in managing these processes, the resulting strategies and consultations would likely have included fewer lived experience inputs. Instead, partners have commended the quality of these consultations.
- There is a shared desire to carry on working together and new potential areas to take mentoring and peer support have been identified. Although AIM is recognised for being adaptable and resourceful, without the support of other funders, it is unclear how much of this work will take place due to the challenging economic realities in the public sector.



Impact on Volunteers

- 1,806 volunteering hours
- 83 volunteers (73% are autistic)
- 30 mentors and 16 peer support volunteers trained.
- 100% improved their understanding as a result of the training
- 83% said it had a very positive effect on their personal growth
- Volunteering with AIM has increased mentors' confidence, with 67% reporting a 'great increase' and 33% 'a slight increase' in confidence.
- Volunteers developed a strong connection to AIM, with 50% expressing a strong sense of community and the remaining 50% reporting a moderate sense of belonging
- Every mentor surveyed (100%) was extremely confident that their mentoring experience will have a lasting impact on their personal or professional life
- AIM's team has provided excellent, considerate and ongoing support to mentors and peer support volunteers, with 100% feeling very well supported in their role.



Volunteer key findings

- As well as supporting clients to achieve their goals, volunteering has boosted confidence, skills, sense of purpose and for younger volunteers, employability
- The experience of volunteering has been beneficial to both volunteers and those they have supported. Mentors for example talked about feeling more aware, knowledgeable and part of the autistic community.
- Successful matches enhanced their feeling of wellbeing, and also benefited them in their professional lives or 're-purposed' people in retirement.
- Feedback and case study evidence consistently points to the quality of the training provided by AIM as underpinning successful matches, and also helping volunteers in other parts of their life, inspiring at least one to want to work with autistic people.
- Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback and tangible impact, this peer-led training would ideally be continued and expanded. The structure has proven effective, with both small and larger group sessions gaining positive feedback. Future iterations could reach a wider audience, including more professionals, family members, and additional community volunteers.
- Case study evidence shows how invested volunteers are in supporting autistic adults, and their desire to continue to do so if more funding can be found. Mentees and peer support volunteers have thought deeply about why and how it worked well, and this expertise should ideally be retained by AIM going forward.
- Many volunteers have continued engaging with the service by taking on additional roles such as peer supporters, event volunteering, and as part of the steering group. The Advonet Group has also employed AIM volunteers into their wider services, including AIM itself. The team continue to support this group, for example by providing written references for those who secured either employment or additional voluntary roles.



Mentee Case Study

“ I know what a diagnosis has done for me. I wanted to give something back. ”

G is a retired head teacher. She received her autistic and ADHD assessment at 57. This led her to become a mentor. G brought her lived experience and professional insight to the role: “Each week built on the last, but always with their energy and mental health in mind.”

Her mentee was “holding down an incredible job, but they were coming home and going straight to bed. There was nothing left in the tank.”

They talked about self-esteem, burnout, and shame:

“ We didn’t just try to fix things. We understood why they were happening, then found ways of working that could last. ”

G is passionate about the value of mentoring:

“ Professionals and neurotypical people want to fix you. They don’t mean to, but they either deny your struggle or try to take control which disempowers you. It’s like an iPhone trying to understand an Android device. Unless you’ve lived it, you can’t fully get it. ”

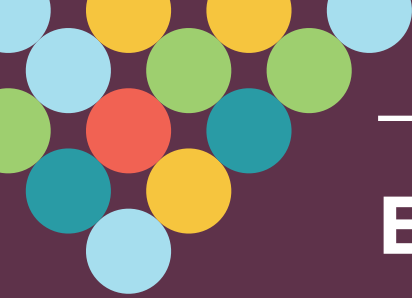


Lessons learned

- AIM's mainly autistic-led approach continues to be a key enabling factor, taking part made safe and possible by the care and compassion by which AIM implemented their support systems and frameworks.
- All of AIM's support provided is free to access, which sets it apart from (mostly online) alternatives.
- The rigorous preparation, then face to face trial meeting created the conditions where matches were more likely to succeed. Successful matches included those that finished early, where the original goals had been met or superseded by others, or where clients were supported to find other more suitable support.
- Autistic-led, co-produced delivery models have resulted in effective, inclusive, and trusted mentoring and peer support. This finding is supported by the wider research literature. ^{vi}
- AIM's on-going support to clients and volunteers, their ability to source and represent views from across the autistic community was more likely to result in improved strategies to contribute to more equitable outcomes.
- Support is client-centred, beginning with setting out their goals and objectives. Mentors and peer support volunteers have been able to bring their own skills and expertise to their matches, and all were well grounded thanks to the excellent training they received.
- The blend of in person and online support helped to make the support more accessible. Learning from online groups led to additional safeguards.
- Balancing supply with increasing, and more complex, demand while remaining led by the needs of autistic people has been a challenge. AIM's paid peer support offer has

been refined, and the team are better able to identify if clients would benefit from other support instead. AIM's offer has been able to adapt, chiefly through adding in a new transition pathway from paid to volunteer peer support.

- AIM paid support staff managed client expectations before signposting them to other services.
- This change expanded the potential capacity, and also created the conditions for longer term support to be put in place, cognisant that “ideally, we would want something in place where people could dip in and out of it over time, as they wanted. For a lot of autistic people, there is always going to be issues that come up, because we’re trying to function in a world that’s not designed for us. We’re trying to understand that every day, so you can work with someone and nail down something, but then there’s going to be something else.”
- This shift was also informed by the realisation “the best matches were often autistic matches.”
- Co-design and feedback shaped all AIM service elements and played an important part in informing and influencing key local and regional NHS strategies for autistic people.
- The AIM team exemplify generous leadership, putting the needs of others (whether clients or other partners) above their own. Their support has helped autistic adults to take part in co-production projects, reviews and consultations to the benefit of the wider community. AIM is a trusted, respected partner in the wider Leeds system, thanks to their ability to bring the authentic voices of the autistic community.



Enabling factors

Staff continuity and learning culture.

Collaboration with and training for other services.

Support for transition.

Trauma informed approaches.

Safe spaces.

Flexible delivery options - e.g online which are more accessible.

Strong training and follow up support, reflection sessions and supervision.

Personalised support with clearly defined and restated boundaries.

Expectations managed and feedback regularly sought.

Resources for autistic adults to draw on when needed.

Free to access. Mainly autistic-led.



Volunteer Coordinator Case Study

Over three years, the Volunteer Coordinator for Leeds Autism AIM found fulfilment in supporting autistic-led mentoring and peer support.

“ I could feel the connection build in those first sessions and knew they would be an amazing match. ”

The coordinator took pride in creating resources used across the programme (and more widely). She valued being part of an autistic-led team, which fostered trust and community.

“ Being autistic yourself breaks down some barriers of social hierarchy and makes our clients feel less vulnerable with us, and that they can unmask and be themselves, and to a degree, we can too. ”

The toolkit shows, in participants' words, why mentoring and peer support made a difference, how it works and what difference it makes to autistic adults and volunteers.

- I Source: AIM's 10th year celebration event (March 2025) - used with permission.
- II Actual total spend was £166,901, thanks to an additional transfer from Health England.
- III Evaluation method: A review of all monitoring and evaluation sources gathered by AIM: Volunteer training feedback (13 survey responses), Mentee feedback (6 survey responses) Peer support clients (31 survey responses) and AIM group member survey (10 responses). The independent evaluator then carried out 12 case study interviews with participants and stakeholders and 3 learning lesson reviews with staff.
- IV 947 interactions across mentoring, peer and group support and volunteers trained.
- V This includes 1,260 hours of direct volunteer work and 546 hours of training.
- VI Source: “Post-diagnostic support for adults diagnosed with autism in adulthood in the UK: A systematic review with narrative synthesis – Jade Eloise Norris, Rebecca Harvey, Laura Hull, 2024”



Enabling factors

Why it's important	How it works
<p>Supporting others:</p> <p>“I have felt great pride and fulfilment on seeing the very positive impact the mentoring had on the life of my mentee.”</p> <p>Self-knowledge:</p> <p>“I know what a diagnosis has done for me. I wanted to give something back.”</p> <p>Creates and strengthens community:</p> <p>“With the service being autistic-led – a lot of our volunteers were also autistic. This created a huge sense of community for both myself, my team, volunteers and clients.”</p> <p>Giving back:</p> <p>“I’ve always worked or volunteered or studied. It’s just something I believe in probably because I didn’t get the support myself.”</p> <p>Provides a trusted, credible voice:</p> <p>“People trust what they say, the genuine voices from the autistic community.”</p>	<p>Free to access / no referral</p> <p>Effective matching:</p> <p>“When it’s right, you don’t need many sessions to feel the connection. It’s about having that understanding and trust.”</p> <p>Structure and client-led:</p> <p>“Each week built on the last, but always with their energy and mental health in mind.”</p> <p>Space for volunteers to bring lived and skills:</p> <p>“One session we did ‘emotion islands’; another time we tried ‘neurographics’. I’d say, ‘Would you like to try this?’ And she absolutely loved it.”</p> <p>Curiosity and humility:</p> <p>“I’m not autistic, and that’s important. My job is to stay curious, ask the right questions, and know that I don’t know. It’s all about what works for them.”</p> <p>Clear boundaries and compassionate support:</p> <p>“They had boundaries about what they felt was appropriate to talk to me about. They didn’t use me as a therapist...”</p>



Volunteer outcomes	Autistic adult outcomes
<p>Fulfilment:</p> <p>“The delight for me is just to see the blossoming and thriving of somebody else, you know, their chance to flourish. My goal was for them to take off on their own, to not need me anymore.”</p> <p>Sense of purpose:</p> <p>“I had moments after retiring where I doubted everything I’d achieved. Mentoring reminded me what I can do.”</p> <p>Confidence boost:</p> <p>“What surprised me most was that I grew my confidence. I’ve been a coach and a support worker, but being a peer volunteer was different – it let me use my experience, but I didn’t have to perform or be ‘the expert.’ I could just be me. I felt heard as well.”</p> <p>Personal growth:</p> <p>“This role has changed my outlook on my own life, and close circles have noticed changes in me in a positive way.”</p>	<p>Improved understanding of autism and support available</p> <p>Increased confidence in day-to-day life</p> <p>More resilient and able to self-advocate</p> <p>Increased participation in employment, education or volunteering</p> <p>Increased wellbeing and mental health</p> <p>Increased connections to their local community</p> <p>Increased access to wider services/ support when needed</p>

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2022 - 2025

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