



**The Big Life group
Research and Evaluation
Annual Report: 2023-24**



Introduction

This is the third Research and Evaluation Annual Report produced by The Big Life group, and it is remarkable how swiftly time has passed since we crafted our inaugural report.

Our engagement in the research arena has flourished, making a significant impact on our group's overarching mission and purpose. By ensuring that our robust service delivery is both evidence-based and informed by the latest academic literature, we have reinforced our commitment to excellence. As we continue to innovate in the Big Life Way, our dedication to building a solid evidence base for our groundbreaking work remains steadfast.

We are also on a mission to become a learning organisation. Through our impressive Research, Learning, and Development (RLD) programme of webinars, we provide a platform for our staff to hear from eminent researchers and opinion leaders. This initiative helps our teams and staff develop and update their knowledge on key topics, ensuring they stay at the forefront of their fields.

Furthermore, we are now building a track record of publishing in academic journals, showcasing our services and work to the broader academic community. This not only highlights our contributions to the field but also strengthens our reputation as a credible and influential third sector organisation.

Our growing influence as a not-for-profit organisation in the research field is evident through our extensive collaborations with the research community both within the UK and internationally. These partnerships are crucial, especially for developing services in areas where most research has historically been conducted abroad with non-UK populations. Our contributions and active involvement in research not only bolster our initiatives but also underscore our role as a leader in the third sector, driving forward meaningful, research-informed change.

This report focuses on the key workstreams and activities undertaken in the field of research and evaluation for the period 1st April 2023 - 31st March 2024.

Research Strategy Group

As in previous years, all research and evaluation activities within the group have been rigorously overseen by the Research Strategy Group (RSG), chaired by the Director of Research and Mental Health. The RSG convenes quarterly and includes representation from across the organisation.

The RSG is committed to the following objectives:

- Advancing the integration of practice-based evidence and evidence-based practice across our services, ensuring all actions are driven by research.
- Demonstrating the tangible impact of our services and the effectiveness of the Big Life approach in reshaping public services.
- Creating and embedding a strong culture of research and evaluation throughout the Big Life group.

This year, we have made significant strides in achieving all three objectives. Particularly noteworthy is our progress in cultivating a research and evaluation culture, showcased through the ongoing RLD webinar series, the continued execution and publication of primary research, and intra-group research initiatives, such as the development of a research tools library.

Key highlights this year:

Healing from Racial Trauma Group (HeaRT)

Following a pivotal session organised by the Mental Health Strategy Group on World Mental Health Day 2023, led by UK and international experts in racial trauma, we committed to launching a pioneering non-clinical intervention to support individuals experiencing racial trauma. This initiative aligns with our ongoing goal of becoming a trauma-informed and anti-racist organisation.

It is pleasing to report that we have made swift and substantial progress in this area. The HeaRT group intervention, along with a comprehensive service evaluation proposal, has been fully developed and is ready for roll-out in Autumn 2024. We have also secured collaboration and expertise from global leaders in the field, whilst also, with author permission, adapting validated international racial trauma measures to suit a UK context. Additionally, we have established an external steering group to guide the project's research, including representatives from King's College, London, and a public health-focused research entrepreneur.

Given the trailblazing nature of HeaRT, we will be implementing an extensive dissemination strategy to maximise the impact and reach of this crucial work throughout the project's duration.

Published research and articles

This year also saw the successful publication of a key paper on our groundbreaking Multi-Modality Practitioner (MMP) approach. This publication has not only defined the concept but also firmly attributed its innovation to the Big Life group, reinforcing our leadership in advancing progressive mental health practices.

The Multi-Modality Practitioner (MMP) approach: a technically eclectic, multimodal workforce innovation in the provision of support for individuals and families with multiple needs

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The authors would like to thank Dr Mark Widdowson, University of Salford, for his support of the initial MMP concept and Dr Julie A Lawrence, University of Salford, for her initial development of the curriculum, along with Emma Eaton and Moira Bell.

The authors declare no known/perceived conflicts of interest.

Ethics approval. Ethics approval was not sought as this was not a formal research study.

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to describe and detail a new workforce initiative developed by a third sector organisation: the Multi-Modality Practitioner (MMP) approach, in the provision of support for individuals and families presenting in the community with multiple and varied needs.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents a case study on a third sector organisation's pioneering workforce initiative – the MMP approach.

Findings – The MMP approach has been developed as an alternative to existing approaches designed to address "single issues", providing those working in the fields of health and social care and beyond, with a range of technically eclectic interventions from different modalities and approaches, to enable them to appropriately meet the needs of individuals and families presenting with multiple needs.

Research limitations/implications – This case study is limited to providing a rationale for the development of the MMP approach and a description. It does not include any formal analysis as a future evaluative paper will report on an independent theory-based examination of the MMP approach via Theory of Change and Contribution Analysis methodologies.

Practical implications – This case study describes the innovative role that the MMP approach as a workforce innovation plays in meeting multiple needs in the community when deployed as either a stand-alone approach, or one that can be integrated with existing community-based services including, but not limited to, mental health, employability, addiction, housing, homelessness, public health and child and family services.

Social implications – The MMP approach constitutes a disruptive, pioneering, client-centred, workplace innovation that is trauma-informed, relational, strengths-based and continuity of care focused, capable of supporting individuals and families with multiple needs, negating onward referral and with potential to reduce demand on public services. It also provides those working in a range of health and social care roles with the opportunity to expand their therapeutic repertoire through high-quality, multi-skilled training in evidence-based and societally important, technically eclectic interventions drawn from a range of modalities.

Originality/value – Pluralistic practice and multimodal theories have been in existence for over two decades, the MMP approach however, whilst sharing some of these concepts and philosophies, differs in that it provides those trained in the approach with a "toolkit" of interventions that are technically eclectic, drawn from a range of modalities and approaches and aimed at meeting multiple needs in a pragmatic and accessible manner. Furthermore, the Diploma in Multi-Modality Practice is the first training course of its kind available at postgraduate level.

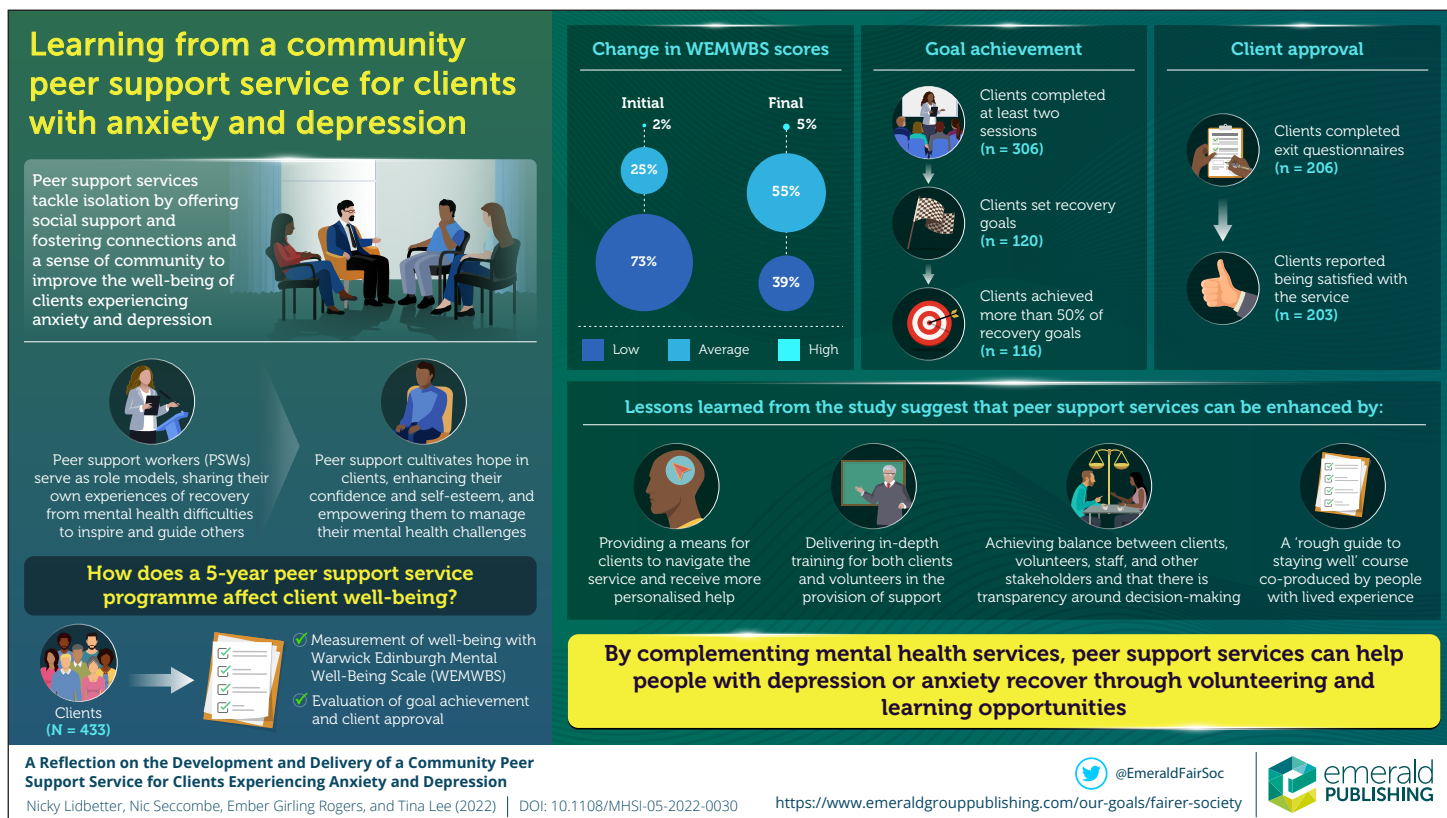
Keywords Health, Social care, Multimodal, Innovation, Workforce

Paper type Case study

Having this paper has also ensured that we have a solid foundation on which to then undertake and publish further research on the MMP approach to demonstrate its utility in public service delivery.

This year we continued our collaborative efforts to secure publication of the service evaluation focused on our eTherapy (non-clinician supported vs clinician-supported) service and are pleased to advise that at the time of writing this report, our manuscript had been accepted for publication in a peer reviewed journal. Much learning was derived in undertaking the above and helped to inform a decision taken earlier in the year, not to continue work on a second similarly focused paper. We have also, because of our expanding research networks, become aware of other publishing options aside from publishing in traditional academic journals including the F1000 and Octopus platforms; both of which no doubt will be helpful for the future as cost-effective solutions.

Following on from the publication of our paper: **A reflection on the development and delivery of a community peer support service for clients experiencing anxiety and depression** in *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, we were approached by Emerald Publishing in regard to their Fairer Society goal area which is directly informed by the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and takes the form of a series of research-related mission campaigns, one such being seeking to explore and understand the role, and impact, of volunteerism in civil society. The conclusion of our involvement with this initiative was the production of a blog on the topic, see: [The power of volunteerism | Emerald Publishing \(emeraldgroupublishing.com\)](https://emeraldgroupublishing.com) as well as the infographic depicted below, which is also published on the publisher's website: [Volunteerism for a fairer society | Emerald Publishing \(emeraldgroupublishing.com\)](https://emeraldgroupublishing.com)



In addition to the above, our pioneering innovation – the Multi-Modality Practitioner approach, was selected by NHS England North West for inclusion in their flipbook on Social Care careers; thereby showcasing the approach to prospective participants.

Social Care e-Flip Book:

So that's what great **CARE** careers look like in the northwest!

This e-flip book is an essential read if:

- You are choosing a new career
- You are thinking about a career move
- You want to show your Board members what great social care careers look like in the North West

Building internal research expertise and capacity

This year, we have made significant strides in enhancing our organisation's internal research expertise, fostering a culture of confidence, capability, and engagement among staff. Our efforts have been directed towards empowering our teams to not only understand the critical role of research in shaping our work but also to actively contribute to it.

We developed a comprehensive toolkit and user-friendly guide on writing case studies using case study research methodology. In addition, we recorded a session on 'Understanding Ethics,' both of which were created with invaluable support from research experts at the Universities of Manchester and Salford.

Our growing connections with the research community have also enabled us to tap into specialised expertise. This includes gaining proficiency in 'R,' a powerful statistical programming tool, which has significantly bolstered our data handling capabilities, particularly for our Research Coordinator. Furthermore, through a peer-mentoring program offered by the International Society for Research on Internet Interventions (ISRII), of which we are an active member, our team, and Research Coordinator in particular, has been able to deepen their research skills.

This year, we have continued our active engagement with several key networks, including the European Connected Health Alliance (ECHA) and the GM Connected Health Ecosystem, attending various events focused on digital health interventions. We also joined the North West Research Network through GMCVO, which offers valuable networking opportunities alongside themed webinars and training sessions. Notably, we participated in a session on Ripple Effect Mapping, a qualitative, participatory methodology well-suited to many of our services and likely to be adopted and utilised in the future.

Additionally, we became members of the Trauma Research Foundation, gaining access to a range of resources that support our work as a trauma-informed organisation. We also established connections with Health Services Research UK to explore ways in which third-sector organisations can better access research resources. Our discussions are focused on addressing these challenges and sharing our experiences as we embark on our organisational research journey.

In a bid to gauge the baseline level of interest, involvement, and research competence across staff teams, our Research Coordinator conducted a series of meetings with managers across the group. These findings were presented at the annual managers' conference in May 2023 and similarly assessed at Leadership Team level. This initiative resulted in the creation of a prioritised research and evaluation agenda for the organisation, now formally established as the Big Life Internal Research Programme, based on the following:

1. Would the research have a positive impact on funding/contract renewal etc.
2. Would the research demonstrate the Big Life Way?
3. Are others better placed to do /already doing the research?
4. Does the research align with Big Life's new business plan for 2025-2030

Key research priorities for the group over the coming years have been decided as follows:

Research topic/idea	Where idea originated?	Why research needed	How would research help?	What research do we think can be done? Action to be taken.	Timescale
Assertive outreach model	Recovery services	We feel we have innovative model that we haven't evidenced or proven but know it is working and we want to roll it out more	Demonstrate concept, effectiveness (& acceptability) and provide a framework for ongoing measurement of outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature review on AO models (to check what's out there) Concept paper Effectiveness pilot study 	2024 2024
Detection, assessment & support for racial trauma	Cross group	To help ensure that our services can detect and responding appropriately to, racial trauma	Would evidence whether an existing racial trauma assessment tool developed in the US can be successfully adapted for UK use.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt the tool Pilot its use Measure acceptability. Demonstrate acceptability and effectiveness of the trauma support intervention 	2024
Trauma audit	Cross group	To help understand how far we have progressed on our journey towards becoming a trauma-informed organisation	Provides a benchmark (useful for tenders/ renewal of contracts) and future securing accreditation in trauma.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop audit tool Roll-out across group Write up results 	2024
eTherapy paper 1 (non-clinician supported vs clinician supported)	Mental Health & wellbeing	To demonstrate that non-clinicians/peer support model is as effective as clinician-supported	Champions our peer support model & our unique, eTherapy model of service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publish the quantitative research study 	
The Big Life research journey to date	Cross group	To demonstrate our pioneering approach as a third sector organisation to research	Sharing learnings with other organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write manuscript Publish paper 	
Experts by Experience (EbE) and influence that Community Voice has had on influencing strategy for drugs & alcohol in L/pool	Skills & employment	To demonstrate how our EbE programme has influenced and made a material impact on the way that statutory agencies (police, social care etc.) undertake their work.	<p>Demonstrate concept, effectiveness (& acceptability) & impact of.</p> <p>Use this model to engage with other programmes/ commissioning opportunities where the citizen voice is needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature review on our EBE, Community Voice model (to check what's out there) Concept paper Effectiveness pilot study 	
MMP Paper 2	Cross Group	To demonstrate the impact of the MMP approach, attract interest and support sale of training to public health workforce	Evidencing the MMP Theory of Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation drafted Academic paper 	2024/25

The outlined research priorities are not fixed, as they may shift in response to emerging areas of focus and the evolving need to demonstrate service effectiveness. However, they provide a valuable and indicative roadmap for our ongoing work. This process is further supported by the introduction of an internal research request form, enabling staff to formally seek the research team's input for future research and evaluation initiatives.

Additionally, a comprehensive staff research skills audit has been developed and is set to be distributed to all staff in Autumn 2024. Moving forward, this audit will be integrated into the standard induction process for new employees. The audit is thorough in scope, capturing a wide range of research methodologies, and serves as a critical tool for assessing and enhancing research capabilities across the organisation.

In recognition of our leadership in this field, the group's Director of Research and Mental Health was awarded a Visiting Research Fellowship at the Centre for Social Responsibility at Edge Hill University, further strengthening our existing partnership with this institution.

Lastly, we have updated and reviewed the group's Research and Evaluation Policy to reflect recent developments in our internal processes and areas of focus, ensuring alignment with our evolving strategic goals.

Research, learning and development webinars

Our much-valued programme of monthly Research, Learning and Development (RLD) webinars continued this year with an impressive range of speakers secured from across the globe, who delivered interactive presentations on an extensive range of topics as follows:

2023-24 Research year		
Date	Presenter and topic	Live views
26th April 2023	Dr Kate Webb, Harvard McLean University, USA The Neural Impact of Structural Racism and Implications for Structural Change.	47
17th May 2023	Dr Natalia Lewis, GP and University of Bristol Trauma-informed approaches in health care (The TAP CARE) study	47
21st June 2023	Sonya Rafiq, University of Manchester Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study in Asian populations – reporting of findings	39
26th July 2023	Dr Amy Bradley, Hult International Business School Post traumatic growth: learning the hard way	25
13th Sept 2023	Kylie Watson– University of Manchester The maternity care experiences of women from areas of social deprivation and/or from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups	25
18th Oct 2023	Ann Don Bosco, Co-Founder & Director, Canopie App Reporting on research to date via research collaboration with Big Life group & use of Canopie perinatal app in Children & Families	33
1st Nov 2023	Professor Ann Devlin, Connecticut College, USA Evidence-based and trauma-informed design: how research can improve healthcare environments	17
13th Dec 2023	Mia Bennion, University of Manchester Between-session low intensity work	20
24th Jan 2024	Rob Griffiths, University of Manchester Patient scheduling and Perceptual Control Theory	20
14th Feb 2024	Dr Andrew Rosen, Founder and Director of The Center for Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders and The Children’s Center for Psychiatry Psychology and Related Services, Delray Beach, Florida, USA Sex and Anxiety	32
20th March 2024	Vivian McKinnon, MD of Hydro-ease, Northern Ireland Showing of Vivan’s film on her lived experience of recovery from trauma: The Magic is Within You.	5

A notable achievement this year regarding the above programme of webinars was securing Continuing Professional Development certification status for several more recently delivered webinars. Given that it is a requirement of many clinical and therapeutic professional bodies that staff undertake and can actively demonstrate receipt of ongoing training, such certification is invaluable, whilst also furthering our goal of becoming a learning organisation.

In line with the objective to ensure that all that we do is informed by research, after RLD webinars have taken place, learning and recommendations that can be embedded into our work are discussed with an action log for timely implementation created.

This year, the following service developments arose as a direct result of the RLD webinar programme:

- Permission obtained for our services to use an adapted version of the ACEs questionnaire (suitable for use with South Asian populations).
- Information on trauma-informed design from Prof Devlin's webinar was used directly to inform renovation of Big Life's estates e.g. colour palette, furniture, room dressing etc.
- Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners (PWPs) are now utilising tips detailed in Mia Bennon's webinar for enhancing engagement between session work for clients accessing our step 2 Talking Therapy services.
- Rob Griffiths' webinar on Perceptual Control Theory which covered the topic of patient-led appointment scheduling has led to our longer-term involvement with his research activities including our involvement a new study where a fully funded PWP trained in this approach, will be based in one of our talking therapy services.
- Drs Jacob Obadai and Victoria Foster's webinar on Adaptive Capacity Theory has led to this methodology being directly used by our HR leads in their work on the group's organisational development plans.

As a token of appreciation for RLD webinar speakers who typically give their time for free, we developed a series of 'thank you' digital cards (see below), based on the group's values. This goes some way to thank speakers for their time and effort, and of course sets the right tone regarding maintenance and continuation of positive long-term relationships.



This year, we continued to collaborate on a range of research and evaluation initiatives, all of which are captured on the group's Research Tracker which facilitates a quick overview of all recently completed research activities (both internal and external), as well as those still active.

Increasingly, external researchers are coming to Big Life to seek collaboration. A dedicated research section on our website was viewed 189 times last year, with 10 requests coming in via an online form. During the period 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024, there were 14 ongoing research collaborations and activities, (depicted below):

1. Multi-Modality Practitioner approach – continuing to prove the concept and establish the evidence base for its effectiveness and acceptability for the people we work with, and staff trained as MMPs (Multi-Modality Practitioners). Big Life group & Manchester Metropolitan University.
2. Developing the evidence base for the effectiveness and acceptability of the community-based Managing Distressing Thoughts course (for those experiencing suicidal ideation). Big Life group and University of Manchester.
3. Exploring negative and unpleasant childhood experiences in people from South Asian communities. University of Manchester.
4. Understanding the association between mental health and alcohol use in Black, Asian and Minority ethnic groups. Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster.
5. Exploring the effectiveness and acceptability of the Canopie perinatal mental health app. Canopie and the Big Life group.
6. Genetic links to anxiety and depression (the GLAD study) - improving understanding of anxiety and depression to develop more effective treatments. NIHR.
7. 2023/4 Big Issue in the North, vendor audit. The Big Life group.
8. EQUITY trial – enhancing the quality of psychological interventions delivered by telephone. University of Manchester.
9. Mental Health Implementation Network (MHIN) - implementation of a high-level alcohol assertive outreach team (AAOT) as part of the MHIN. NIHR
10. Project ADDER (Addiction, Diversion, Disruption, Enforcement and Recovery). Merseyside Police.
11. Feasibility study evaluating the use of patient-led scheduling for Step 2 NHS Talking Therapies services. University of Manchester.
12. ACORN II trial – Exploring effectiveness and acceptability of a brief intervention for reducing maternal anxiety during pregnancy. University of Exeter.
13. HeART – evaluating the effectiveness and acceptability of a pilot programme for individuals affected by racial trauma. The Big Life group.
14. PCMIS: Evaluating the effectiveness of outcome feedback in NHS Talking Therapies. PCMIS & University of Sheffield.

Future

While our work in the sphere of research has progressed at pace, as is to be expected, we have ambitious plans including:

- Researching and publishing on the effectiveness and acceptability of our ground-breaking HeaRT, racial trauma support initiative
- Publishing a case study on the Multi-Modality Practitioner (MMP) approach to further highlight the approach's acceptability in clients and practitioners
- Further developing the group's research webpage to ensure all research studies and collaborations are easily located and the group's success in research is visibly depicted and celebrated
- Continuing to push for equality of opportunity for third sector organisations in research
- Formally documenting the group's journey in becoming a research-informed organisation
- Entering new award schemes to further profile our activities in the research field

Conclusion

This year has marked significant progress in our commitment to advancing research and evaluation across the group. From fostering a culture of research within our teams to developing pioneering initiatives like the HeaRT group, we have reinforced our dedication to evidence-based practice and innovation. Our internal capabilities have grown through the development of tools, training, and strategic partnerships with leading academic institutions, while our external collaborations have positioned us at the forefront of research in areas such as trauma and digital health interventions.

As we look ahead, our evolving research priorities, bolstered by robust frameworks and policies, ensure that we remain adaptable and forward-thinking. We are confident that these efforts will continue to drive the impact and effectiveness of our services, shaping the future of service delivery in a meaningful and lasting way. Further, research will be at the heart of the group's new business plan for 2025-2030 and the bedrock for all developments and innovations.