PANDAS Foundation

Peer Support Training and Development Strategy

Professional Expertise, Lived Experience, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

Training framework for NHS commissioners and funders

1. Our approach to peer-support training

PANDAS Foundation provides non-clinical perinatal mental health peer support to parents and families through community groups and remote services. Our training framework has been developed to ensure that volunteers have the knowledge, understanding and practical skills needed to provide compassionate, consistent and safe support throughout pregnancy and early parenthood.

Our approach recognises that peer support has a distinct and important role alongside NHS maternity services, primary care, health visiting and specialist perinatal mental health provision. Volunteers offer understanding, connection, shared experience, practical information and appropriate signposting, while maintaining clear boundaries between peer support and clinical care.

Training is central to the quality and sustainability of our services. It enables volunteers to understand the range of perinatal mental health experiences, recognise the wider circumstances that can affect parents' wellbeing and respond appropriately when additional support or safeguarding intervention may be required.

Our strategy brings together professional knowledge, lived experience, structured volunteer learning, safeguarding governance and ongoing supervision. It provides a foundation for expanding PANDAS services while maintaining consistency and accountability across our community and remote provision.

2. The origins of our training framework

PANDAS training was originally developed with input from healthcare professionals, perinatal mental health specialists, subject-matter trustees, employees and external specialist providers.

The framework has drawn on established approaches to NHS peer-support training, learning from the Institute of Health Visiting and professional expertise relating to maternity care, perinatal mental health and family wellbeing. This professional involvement has helped ensure that volunteers develop an informed understanding of perinatal mental health, including the range of conditions, experiences and circumstances that may affect parents during pregnancy and following birth.

However, PANDAS has always recognised that effective peer support requires more than an understanding of clinical terminology or mental health presentations. Volunteers must also be able to build trusting relationships, listen without judgement, respect individual experiences and understand the appropriate use of lived experience.

Our training therefore combines professional expertise with the practical realities of peer-support delivery.

3. Our strategic review and partnership with With-you Consultancy

Approximately three years ago, feedback from PANDAS volunteers highlighted that elements of our training had become too clinically focused and did not fully reflect the nature of the support volunteers were providing.

We recognised that our training needed to maintain a strong understanding of perinatal mental health while placing greater emphasis on the principles and practical skills of peer support. PANDAS undertook a strategic

review of its training approach and worked with With-you Consultancy, an organisation experienced in NHS peer-support training and supervision.

This work helped us develop a training approach that better reflects the role of a PANDAS volunteer, placing relationships, lived experience, empowerment, choice and mutual understanding at the centre of support.

The peer support principles that inform our approach

Our training draws on the principles of:

- Mutuality: recognising the shared humanity and understanding that can develop between people with relevant lived experiences.
- Reciprocity: acknowledging that peer-support relationships involve mutual respect and that both individuals bring valuable experiences and perspectives.
- Authenticity: encouraging genuine, compassionate and respectful relationships.
- Choice: respecting each parent's decisions, circumstances and preferences.
- Empowerment: supporting parents to recognise their own strengths and make informed decisions.
- Hope: helping parents recognise that experiences can change and that support is available.
- Lived experience: recognising the value of personal experience while ensuring that it is shared appropriately and does not overshadow the person receiving support.
- Equality and respect: recognising individual differences and ensuring that support is welcoming, inclusive and non-judgemental.

These principles are reflected throughout our volunteer training, supervision and service delivery.

The development of our framework represents a deliberate move towards training that is professionally informed while remaining firmly grounded in the purpose and values of peer support.

4. Our three training pillars

The PANDAS volunteer training framework is structured around three connected pillars.

Each pillar has a distinct purpose, while safeguarding, inclusion, professional boundaries and reflective practice are reinforced throughout the training programme.

PILLAR ONE: Perinatal Mental Health, Safeguarding and Cultural Understanding

The first pillar provides volunteers with a strong foundation in perinatal mental health and the responsibilities associated with delivering safe, inclusive peer support.

Volunteers are supported to understand the different ways mental health difficulties may present during pregnancy and after birth, alongside the importance of responding with empathy, maintaining appropriate boundaries and recognising when additional professional support may be needed.

Key areas of learning include:

- Understanding antenatal and postnatal depression, including the different ways symptoms may present.
- Understanding perinatal anxiety and the impact of persistent worry, fear and distress.
- Awareness of postpartum psychosis and the importance of urgent professional intervention when serious concerns arise.
- Understanding birth trauma and the emotional impact of difficult or distressing birth experiences.
- Recognising maternal rage, anger, irritability and other emotional experiences that parents may find difficult to discuss.

- Understanding how perinatal mental health difficulties can affect relationships, confidence, identity and family life.
- Recognising that parents may experience emotional distress without meeting thresholds for specialist clinical services.
- Developing compassionate listening skills and understanding how to respond without judgement.
- Understanding the value and limitations of lived experience within peer-support relationships.
- Recognising the boundaries between peer support and clinical assessment, diagnosis or treatment.

Safeguarding and safer volunteering

Safeguarding is a fundamental part of this pillar and of the wider PANDAS training framework.

Training and volunteer arrangements include:

- DBS checks as part of safer recruitment and volunteer onboarding.
- Mandatory safeguarding training before volunteers begin providing support.
- Recognising potential safeguarding concerns involving parents, babies and other family members.
- Understanding confidentiality and the circumstances in which concerns must be escalated.
- Following PANDAS safeguarding policies and reporting procedures.
- Recognising the importance of seeking guidance rather than managing serious concerns independently.
- Understanding the role of supervision and management oversight in safe service delivery.

Cultural understanding, inclusion and barriers to support

We recognise that parents' experiences of perinatal mental health and access to support can be influenced by culture, identity, discrimination and wider inequalities.

Training therefore addresses:

- Cultural stigma surrounding mental health, pregnancy and parenthood.
- Racism and discrimination and their impact on experiences of care and support.
- Anti-racism and the importance of actively inclusive peer-support practice.
- Language barriers and difficulties navigating health and community services.
- The experiences of parents from minoritised ethnic communities.
- Disability and barriers to accessing appropriate support.
- Neurodivergence and the importance of adapting communication and support approaches.
- Respecting different family structures, beliefs and personal circumstances.
- Understanding that some parents may feel excluded, misunderstood or reluctant to seek help because of previous experiences.

The purpose of this pillar is to prepare volunteers to provide informed and inclusive emotional support, recognise the limits of their role and help parents access appropriate services when needed.

PILLAR TWO: Contributing Factors, Inequalities and Family Circumstances

The second pillar develops volunteers' understanding of the experiences and circumstances that can contribute to perinatal mental health difficulties or affect a parent's ability to access support.

PANDAS recognises that perinatal mental health cannot be understood in isolation from a parent's wider life, relationships, pregnancy experiences and social circumstances.

This pillar helps volunteers approach each parent as an individual, without assumptions about their experiences or needs.

Key areas of learning include:

Previous mental health and personal experiences

- Previous experiences of depression, anxiety or other mental health difficulties.
- Antenatal depression and anxiety.
- Childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences.
- Previous traumatic experiences.
- Significant life changes and emotional stress.
- Grief, bereavement and the loss of important support relationships.

Relationships and social support

- Limited support from partners, family members or friends.
- Social isolation and loneliness.
- Relationship difficulties and family conflict.
- Domestic abuse and coercive control.
- The emotional impact of parenting without a strong support network.
- Changes in relationships and identity following pregnancy and birth.

Financial and practical pressures

- Financial hardship and debt.
- Employment insecurity or unemployment.
- Housing insecurity and unsuitable living conditions.
- Difficulties accessing services because of transport, geography or caring responsibilities.
- The impact of practical pressures on emotional wellbeing and help-seeking.

Pregnancy, birth and neonatal experiences

- Hyperemesis gravidarum (HG) and the physical and emotional impact of severe pregnancy sickness.
- Pregnancy complications and prolonged periods of uncertainty.
- Birth trauma and difficult birth experiences.
- Premature birth.
- Neonatal intensive care experiences.
- Caring for babies with additional medical or developmental needs.
- Feeding challenges and sleep difficulties.
- Miscarriage, baby loss and other pregnancy-related bereavement.

Parents facing additional barriers

- Teenage and younger parents.
- Parents experiencing racism or discrimination.
- Disabled and neurodivergent parents.
- Parents with limited family or community support.
- Parents facing several overlapping social, financial or personal difficulties.

The purpose of this pillar is not to train volunteers to identify clinical risk or make assumptions about the causes of mental health difficulties.

Instead, it helps them understand the complexity of parents' experiences, respond with sensitivity and recognise that effective peer support must take account of the wider circumstances affecting each individual.

PILLAR THREE: Specialist Learning and Safe Peer-Support Delivery

The third pillar focuses on the specialist knowledge and practical skills required to deliver PANDAS peer support safely and consistently across community groups and remote services.

It brings together additional perinatal subjects, communication skills, volunteer wellbeing, supervision and the responsibilities associated with different support settings.

Specialist perinatal subjects

- Miscarriage, baby loss and bereavement.
- Grief and the different ways parents may experience loss.
- Birth trauma and trauma-informed approaches to support.
- Premature birth and neonatal intensive care experiences.
- Feeding and sleep-related difficulties.
- Maternal rage and other less frequently discussed emotional experiences.
- Neurodiversity and inclusive approaches to peer support.
- Domestic abuse awareness and responding appropriately to disclosures.

Mental health concerns and safeguarding

- Suicide awareness.
- Self-harm awareness.
- Responding to parents experiencing significant distress.
- Recognising situations that require urgent professional intervention.
- Understanding crisis procedures and escalation pathways.
- Managing safeguarding concerns in community and remote settings.
- Recording and reporting incidents in line with PANDAS policies.

Communication and peer-support skills

- Active listening and compassionate communication.
- Managing difficult conversations.
- Appropriate use of personal lived experience.
- Maintaining boundaries within peer-support relationships.
- Understanding the importance of confidentiality.
- Supporting parents without offering clinical advice.
- Providing appropriate information and signposting.

Community group delivery

- Establishing and developing PANDAS peer-support groups.
- Creating welcoming and inclusive environments.
- Group facilitation skills.
- Managing group discussions and different support needs.
- Maintaining appropriate boundaries in group settings.
- Responding to difficult situations or incidents within groups.
- Supporting positive relationships with local services and community partners.

Remote and digital peer support

- Providing compassionate support through digital communication.
- Understanding the differences between face-to-face and remote peer-support relationships.
- One-to-one peer-support skills.

- Maintaining boundaries when supporting parents remotely.
- Confidentiality and data protection.
- GDPR responsibilities.
- Appropriate use of PANDAS communication systems, including Zendesk, WhatsApp and telephone support.

Volunteer wellbeing and supervision

- Understanding the emotional demands of peer-support volunteering.
- Maintaining appropriate personal and professional boundaries.
- Recognising the importance of volunteer wellbeing.
- Reflective practice and learning from experience.
- Participating in supervision.
- Seeking advice when situations fall outside the volunteer role.
- Understanding the importance of consistent organisational support.

This pillar recognises that specialist knowledge must be accompanied by strong practical skills, appropriate supervision and clear organisational procedures.

Our October 2026 training plan identifies specialist elective modules for development with relevant experts, with nine of the twelve electives planned for expert co-production.

5. Safeguarding and organisational governance

Safeguarding is paramount to PANDAS and remains a central consideration throughout our training and service delivery.

Our approach recognises that volunteers may support parents experiencing distress, isolation, difficult relationships or circumstances that raise concerns about their wellbeing or the safety of others.

Volunteers must therefore understand how to respond appropriately, recognise the boundaries of their responsibilities and access management support when concerns arise.

PANDAS safeguarding arrangements include:

- Mandatory safeguarding training for volunteers.
- Safeguarding training for managers.
- Two safeguarding policies, reviewed annually.
- Oversight from our Safeguarding Manager.
- Ongoing supervision and opportunities to discuss concerns.
- Clear procedures for reporting and escalating safeguarding matters.
- A Serious Incident Policy.
- Reinforcement of safeguarding responsibilities across relevant training modules.

Safeguarding is not treated as an isolated training subject. It is embedded within learning about difficult conversations, domestic abuse, crisis situations, boundaries, group delivery, remote support and incident management.

For NHS commissioners, this approach demonstrates the importance PANDAS places on organisational responsibility, volunteer preparedness and maintaining safe pathways for escalation.

6. Professional expertise and quality assurance

PANDAS recognises that the quality of volunteer training depends on maintaining accurate, relevant and appropriately reviewed content.

Our training development draws on professional expertise from healthcare, perinatal mental health and specialist subject areas, alongside the experiences of parents, volunteers, managers and trustees.

Professional contributors identified in our development approach include:

- Dr Heather Burnard, who supervised the nationwide Aldi baby-wipes Spot the Symptoms campaign.
- Internal midwives with relevant maternity and perinatal expertise.
- Kathryn Di Virgilio, our in-house specialist occupational therapist and therapist.
- Trustees with relevant subject-matter expertise.
- External specialists in areas requiring additional professional knowledge.
- Employees and managers with experience of PANDAS service delivery.

As part of the current redevelopment, each redesigned module is intended to align with the three-pillar framework and undergo appropriate professional review, approval and certification.

This is an important development commitment. It does not mean that every redesigned module has already completed professional review or certification.

Our quality-assurance approach is intended to ensure that training content remains accurate, relevant to the volunteer role, inclusive and consistent with PANDAS safeguarding responsibilities.

7. Volunteer training pathways

PANDAS operates different volunteer pathways to reflect the requirements of community group support and remote services.

Although all volunteers need a consistent understanding of peer-support principles, safeguarding, boundaries and perinatal mental health, their practical training must also reflect the environments in which they provide support.

Community group volunteers

The October 2026 training plan identifies:

- 16 mandatory training modules.
- Nine mandatory modules to be completed before volunteering begins.
- Seven additional mandatory modules to be completed within six months.
- Twelve elective modules available for further development.

Community training includes the foundations of peer support alongside the practical responsibilities of establishing, facilitating and maintaining safe, inclusive groups.

Remote support volunteers

The October 2026 training plan identifies:

- 14 mandatory training modules.
- Ten mandatory modules to be completed before volunteering begins.
- Four additional mandatory modules.
- Twelve elective modules available for further development.

Remote training includes the foundations of peer support alongside the requirements of digital communication, confidentiality, one-to-one support and the systems used to deliver PANDAS services.

The detailed remote module lists in the current plan require reconciliation with the headline mandatory-module total before the figures are used in a final external submission.

Mandatory and elective learning

Mandatory training establishes the essential knowledge and responsibilities required for a volunteer's role.

Elective training provides opportunities to develop further understanding of specialist perinatal subjects and situations that may arise during service delivery.

This structure allows PANDAS to maintain consistent expectations across volunteer roles while recognising the different skills and experiences involved in community and remote support.

8. Phased redevelopment of our training

Our October 2026 training plan sets out a phased programme for redesigning and introducing updated learning.

The programme is intended to strengthen the connection between professional subject knowledge, peer-support principles and the practical responsibilities of volunteers.

Phase One – By 27 November 2026

The first phase focuses on foundational and role-specific learning, including volunteer induction, peer support, community group learning, digital peer support, Zendesk use, one-to-one support and GDPR.

Phase Two – By 29 January 2027

The second phase focuses on active listening, reflective practice, supervision, understanding perinatal mental health, group facilitation, facilitator boundaries and managing incidents.

Phase Three – By 26 March 2027

The third phase includes birth trauma and trauma-informed support, volunteer wellbeing, suicide and self-harm awareness, crisis response, difficult conversations and the appropriate use of lived experience.

Existing safeguarding essentials and PANDAS policies are identified for retention during the redevelopment.

Specialist elective modules will be developed with relevant expert input, with delivery dependent on the availability of suitable contributors.

The phased approach provides a structured programme for improving the curriculum while allowing professional review and specialist development to take place.

9. Supervision, volunteer wellbeing and ongoing learning

Training is one part of the wider support that PANDAS provides to volunteers. We recognise that peer-support volunteering can involve emotionally demanding conversations and that volunteers need appropriate opportunities to reflect on their experiences, discuss concerns and maintain healthy boundaries.

Supervision is therefore an important part of our approach to volunteer support and safe service delivery.

Our training framework includes learning about reflective practice, volunteer wellbeing, boundaries and the appropriate use of lived experience. These subjects help volunteers understand that effective peer support depends on recognising the limits of their role, maintaining their own wellbeing and accessing guidance when required. Supervision also provides an opportunity to identify emerging learning needs, review difficult situations and consider improvements to training and service delivery.

10. Listening to parents and volunteers

PANDAS training has developed through a combination of professional expertise and feedback from the people involved in our services.

The strategic review undertaken approximately three years ago demonstrates the importance of listening to volunteers and being prepared to make substantial changes when training no longer fully reflects the needs of the role.

Our ongoing development is informed by:

- Feedback from volunteers.
- Common themes raised by parents accessing PANDAS support.
- Observations and learning from managers.
- Guidance from trustees.
- Professional advice from healthcare and specialist contributors.
- Learning arising through supervision and service delivery.

These sources help us identify gaps in knowledge, areas requiring greater emphasis and opportunities to improve the relevance and accessibility of training.

The intention is to maintain a framework that develops alongside the needs of parents, volunteers and the services PANDAS provides.

11. Why this matters for NHS commissioners and funders

PANDAS peer support complements NHS services by offering parents opportunities for connection, understanding and practical guidance outside clinical appointments.

Parents experiencing perinatal mental health difficulties may face isolation, stigma, uncertainty about available support or practical barriers to accessing services.

Our October 2026 Lanarkshire focus group work identified themes relating to social isolation, difficulties navigating support, barriers to help-seeking and the importance of accessible community-based provision.

These findings provide qualitative insight into the experiences of parents and professionals, rather than a quantified estimate of unmet need.

Our training strategy responds to these challenges by preparing volunteers to offer appropriate peer support while maintaining strong connections with clinical and community pathways.

The value of a structured training framework

For NHS commissioners, the framework provides a basis for assurance that PANDAS is developing services through:

- Defined volunteer roles and boundaries.
- Structured mandatory training.

- Safer recruitment arrangements and DBS checks.
- Safeguarding training and organisational oversight.
- Professional input into curriculum development.
- Supervision and volunteer wellbeing support.
- Inclusive and anti-racist approaches.
- Appropriate signposting and escalation.
- Ongoing review informed by service experience.
- Consistent expectations across community and remote provision.

This approach supports responsible service development while protecting the distinct value of lived-experience peer support.

12. Monitoring, evaluation and commissioner assurance

As the training framework develops, PANDAS can strengthen the evidence available to commissioners through proportionate monitoring and evaluation.

Relevant areas for reporting include:

- Volunteer recruitment and induction.
- Completion of mandatory training.
- Participation in specialist elective learning.
- Professional review and approval of redesigned modules.
- Supervision participation.
- Volunteer feedback and confidence.
- Safeguarding training compliance.
- Incident reporting, review and organisational learning.
- Community group and remote service reach.
- Parent feedback on connection, understanding and access to support.
- Signposting and partnership working with NHS and community services.

These are proposed areas for commissioner reporting and should not be interpreted as existing measured outcomes unless supported by PANDAS service data.

Developing a consistent reporting approach would help demonstrate the contribution of training to service quality, volunteer preparedness and safe expansion.

13. Our strategic priorities

Our continuing training development is guided by the following priorities.

Strengthening the peer-support model

We will maintain a clear focus on mutuality, lived experience, empowerment, choice and compassionate relationships, ensuring that training reflects the distinctive contribution of peer support.

Maintaining safeguarding and safe boundaries

We will continue to reinforce safeguarding responsibilities, escalation procedures, supervision and the distinction between volunteer support and clinical care.

Improving inclusion and accessibility

We will develop learning that helps volunteers recognise cultural barriers, discrimination, racism, disability-related barriers and the experiences of parents who may face additional difficulties accessing support.

Embedding professional review

We intend to ensure redesigned modules receive appropriate professional review, approval and certification, with specialist contributions used where additional expertise is required.

Supporting volunteers throughout their roles

We will maintain an emphasis on volunteer wellbeing, supervision, reflective practice and opportunities for ongoing learning.

Using feedback to improve training

We will continue to draw on the experiences of parents, volunteers, managers and trustees when reviewing and developing learning.

Supporting sustainable service expansion

We will develop training pathways that enable community and remote services to grow while maintaining consistent standards and appropriate organisational oversight.

14. The case for continued investment

Expanding peer support requires investment in more than volunteer recruitment.

A sustainable service depends on the quality of volunteer preparation, access to specialist knowledge, safeguarding oversight, supervision, management support and ongoing training development.

For PANDAS, these elements are fundamental to maintaining a service that parents can approach with confidence and that NHS partners can understand as a clearly defined part of the wider perinatal support landscape.

Investment in our training framework would support the continued development of accessible, inclusive peer support while strengthening the organisational systems required to deliver services responsibly.

Our approach brings together the knowledge of healthcare professionals, the experience of parents, the commitment of volunteers and the governance arrangements needed to maintain safe and consistent support.

PANDAS is committed to ensuring that its volunteers are not expected to act as clinicians, but are properly prepared to provide meaningful peer relationships, compassionate listening and appropriate connections to further help.

15. Conclusion

The PANDAS Foundation peer-support training strategy reflects the development of an organisation that has listened to volunteers, drawn on professional expertise and reviewed its approach to ensure that training remains appropriate to the support being delivered.

Our three-pillar framework brings together understanding of perinatal mental health, awareness of the wider circumstances affecting parents and the specialist skills required for safe peer-support delivery. Safeguarding, DBS checks, inclusive practice, anti-racism, supervision, professional input and ongoing review all contribute to the strength of this approach.

Through the phased redevelopment of our curriculum, PANDAS is working to establish a more consistent, professionally informed and peer-support-focused training programme that can support the responsible growth of community and remote services.

For NHS commissioners and funders, this strategy sets out how PANDAS intends to maintain the quality, safety and integrity of its volunteer-led support while extending opportunities for parents to feel heard, understood and connected during pregnancy and early parenthood.