

Making Recovery Real podcast

What we nourish will flourish

Grampian Public Empowerment Group

Introduction: Hi, you're listening to the Making Recovery Real podcast, with the Scottish Recovery Network and friends. Stay tuned for insights, ideas and stories to help you make mental health recovery real where you are.

Holly: Welcome to the Scottish Recovery Network podcast. This podcast is an opportunity to reflect on experience and learning from the Grampian Public Empowerment Group. My name is Holly and I'm a Network Officer with the Scottish Recovery Network. We believe that to make recovery real, we all need to be equal partners in transforming the mental health system. Grampian Public Empowerment Group is working to create change around traditional consultation approaches, to develop more meaningful lived experience involvement through co-production. In this episode we are chatting to Andrew, Amanda and Liz. This podcast is a reflection of their experiences and learning.

Andrew, would you be up for just starting off and telling us a bit of context around the role of the Public Empowerment Group?

Andrew: It was about a year ago that I had a conversation with Liz about the intention to create a lived experience group to support having a place on the transformation board, looking at the modernisation of mental health and learning disability services in Grampian. I was intrigued at the idea that people were going to try and do something a bit different and that it was a chance to meet new people and to use some of my experience in a sort of positive way. Meeting some of the people that I was introduced to, gave me the assurance that there was a lot of goodwill behind the idea.

Holly: This is sort of an opportunity to use your own experience in an intentional way. Liz, what about from your role as a consultation and engagement advisor? What has this meant for you?

Liz: On a personal level, this has just been such an amazing journey that we've been on collectively and, actually, I feel really proud of everything that we've achieved. But from the context of an organisational perspective, the review of mental health and learning disability services took place in 2019. And as somebody who works in public involvement, we had quite a wide range of methods of gathering the views of people and gathering all that data and some of the lived experience. And this opportunity was kind of initiated by the public involvement team and mental health and learning disability services as well. It was really great that they were instigating this different way of approaching. And the reason the group was put together was to sense check what the outcomes of that review were. So, that when changes were being made, or if changes were being made, then there's people who use those services are around to sense check that as things evolve and develop.

And traditionally, this Public Empowerment Group is a new way of us working, in a way of bringing people together and a safe space in a supported way. So that people feel safe to be able to express the views and opinions in a place where there are people who are having a similar lived experience as opposed to having to go into a space which is owned by clinical staff or senior leadership staff. So, we started small, like Andrew says, maybe about a year ago.

And I think that, while we were so lucky that Andrew agreed to be a chair of the PEG, because this has been really like an aligning of the planets. People who got involved in the early stages, including yourself Holly, were very much around creating a culture and a space of co-production and working together to support each other in almost like a community space. So, I think by having the opportunity to develop that kind of community space also then attracted people with a similar ethos. And from that we've kind of organically grown, and we've taken

people along on that journey with us. So, what's that done essentially is created a space where people feel really comfortably, hopefully, to share their views, share their experiences, feel that their supported to influence and drive through change in the organisation. And hopefully what we will do, as we progress as well, is try to find meaningful opportunities for people to progress and develop, which is something that I know Andrew is really supportive of and really keen to progress as well. There's so much potential for where this work could go. And just as a side note, we've been really lucky to have secured some funding for one day a week, part time member of staff who will be dedicated to this. So, with that in mind, we'll have somebody who will be able to really take forward the actions of the group.

Holly: Thank you for providing that context. And I think it's really important in helping us make sense of where the group sits locally and what its role is. And maybe we could start with Amanda now, and it would be great to hear what motivated you to get involved, Amanda?

Amanda: I have strong feelings about mental health. I'm blind, so, that has mental health implications and also, I had problems when I was a child. So, I've always really wanted to be involved in mental health but could never really find a way to actually do it. so, I was speaking to Liz on the phone one day and she told me about this group. So I thought, absolutely I need to jump on it. So, I did, and I'm really glad I did.

Holly: Thank you for sharing that, Amanda. What about you, Andrew?

Andrew: Background in my working life earlier on in doing some advocacy work and this subject of mental health and people's empowerment in and around using services is something that I've always been passionate about. I've had very good experiences and some not so good experiences. And I thought that something good can be taken out of that if the things that I've learned can be shared. But also, realising that I probably had the experience from work and other volunteering roles to possibly help get the group set up as a network, because it was important that the group involved people from all the

different parts of Grampian. I know, from my work, how difficult that can be. So, just felt that the mutual benefit in me volunteering to do it and being glad that I have, and learning from that people that you meet, you know? So, in bringing together the group and involving people, starting from a blank sheet of paper and hearing other people's points of views and things, a lot of learning and just doing the process even though it was quite uncertain.

Holly: I wonder now if we could chat through three development stages of the PEG and thinking about the early days, the present day and the future. And I'd be really interested to hear, Andrew, the early development activities that have been essential to building the Public Empowerment Group's foundations.

Andrew I put together a, I think it was, five W's and how set of questions, and they started workshopping with people what their views on why we're doing this and just capturing everybody's shared sense of it. And that led to workshopping on a vision and aims for the group and sketching out a one-page road map document to try and track what, roughly, we might need to be doing so that we were moving towards being ready for the transformation board reconvening. So, we had that time before the transformation board reconvened to spend time talking about values and visions. And also just the consistency of having regular meetings and keeping that momentum going so that it's not left with people not knowing when the next meetings are happening. So, people like Liz and others have been good at helping make that happen.

Holly: And it sounds like that time has been of real benefit. It might not have been planned for to the same extent if it wasn't for the circumstances around COVID. But actually, what it has given is quite a significant amount of space for this really important development work, do that in a very mutual way. So, it's not like Andrew you've set the agenda and the values pre-decided, what it would look like. But people have had an equal opportunity to really contribute to the picture, basically.

Liz: I think that those of us that were involved in it right at the start, we were so lucky that we all came to that space with this sense of co-production and building relationships and being asset based and positive-framed. And I think that because we came to that space with those kinds of ideals, it was really easy for us to build relationships with each other. And I always believe, in the work that I've done in the past, that people rarely turn up to meetings because they've got a great policy, or they've got fantastic minutes or because they've got really great processes in place. I think people turn up to things because of relationships and because of people. What's difficult is to keep the momentum after the initial flurry of 'this is a new, exciting, shiny thing!' has passed. People can find other shiny things to go on to. so, I think that what we really set out to try and do was to create that space where people wanted to come back because of each other, because of who else was in the group and because they wanted to see and speak to and hear from other people and to kind of have that shared space and community. So, I really hope that's how people feel about it. because I think that was our real intention when we started.

Holly: Yeah, I think that's a really powerful point and it leads us on really nicely to just invite Amanda, if you'd be up for sharing what it feels like to be involved in PEG?

Amanda: It was a lovely experience from the start, because I felt like I was welcomed by everybody from the word go, and I feel like being part of the Empowerment Group that I do have a voice. I do feel that I'm being listened to. I hope that in the end, what I say and what everybody else says will be acted on. I get supported very well by the people in the group as well, on a mental health basis.

Holly: What do you think, Andrew, is supported – and we've probably touched on this a bit – what do you think the key activities have been in creating the space that Amanda's talking about? Amanda's touched on being supported, it sounds like there's been a bit of investment in time into the people who are participating.

Andrew: I've taken the view that it has to, as a group, have a life of its own for people to feel like they matter in the group. So, it's not just a meeting, consulting people on how we put together the agenda but then not being too bound by the agenda if people want to talk about things. 'Cause I've kind of realised that we can't just exist because the transformation board want a lived experience group, it has to have a life and energy of its own. And I try to use humour and informality in running the meetings so that people, hopefully, feel they've enjoyed taking part in it, rather than it being a heavy business-oriented agenda. People show up with different things going on and I try to be mindful of that.

Holly: Bringing humour into it and just also just allowing people to bring their humanness. Formality doesn't give space to the humanness and authenticity that people can bring. So, I think we can create spaces informally that still meet strategic aims and objectives. And so, I just think it's such an important point to raise. Thinking about the future of the PEG, it is an ongoing development, what do you feel are the most important things for its future growth?

Amanda: I think, I'm hoping that they'll be lots of collaboration with different parts of the service and I hope there'll be some sort of training to help. Because I really do want to learn everything, well, not everything, but everything I can that will help me to have this voice. So, I hope that'll happen. I mean, I think it will because I have been involved in some suicide training which was last week, and it was very informative. I was quite tired after it was finished but it was a good starting point. So, I hope there'll be a lot of that meeting face-to-face hopefully, at some point, and online with everybody. I just hope that that kind of thing will happen. Right from January, right from the word go. Just making sure that we have this voice that we do want to have.

Andrew: I think there's work needed to help make the long-term future of the group viable. It's really important to me that the people that have joined aren't overburdened. So, we have a plan, a cycle of

developments so that as we recruit new members and try and find what it is that they would like to be involved in and what their capacity is, and what support they need, but then reviewing that with people to check that they're getting out of it what they want and getting the support they need. And I think there's some questions about how that's resourced long term. Because I think people want to be informed, as Amanda says, so that they're knowing how best to utilise their lived experience. As a group we're still always learning what to say yes to and what to say no to. Because there's a lot of curiosity and interest in a new lived experience group, PEG, we changed it from an engagement group to an empowerment group through a conversation. So, there's interest in people with a role around engagement. And what I hope doesn't happen is that lots of different organisations all try and create lots of their own lived experience groups which fragment the people and capacity to come together.

So, I think there's an ongoing cycle of activity about maintaining the reach across the region and involving more people, supporting those people and reviewing how that's going on a regular basis. The things that we've identified so far like people wanting training, wanting mentoring. I mean, those asks have been answered and one of the tips have been be explicit in what you want and ask for it. so, we've kind of made the point to beyond the one day a week, one year, endowment funded support role there's a question about the longer term of, how do you support people to take part in a group like this? And to meaningfully contribute to what is quite a complicated thing. Because we're not just talking about asking individuals about their individual experience of a specific service. We're trying to empower a group of people to have a view on the whole system and that's complicated.

Liz: Andrew came in post as our chair right at the very beginning and that was a very deliberate action on behalf of the service was to make that key statement that lived experience is at the heart of the PEG. And we did have a vice chair, who was a person with lived experience of learning disability services, although he's obviously gone off to college now, but it was just really a key mission statement that lived

experiences is at the heart of this whole work on the network. There are people with lived experience but we also have third sector organisations from across the whole of Grampian so, at a time when the pandemic has made it difficult for people to communicate I think that we've taken really full advantage of the Teams revolution and it's given us a great opportunity to involve people that would normally have been able to participate in a Grampian wide group such as this. So, we've been able to do that quite well and obviously we have support from the service as well, so people come up from the public sector, from the third sector, who have lived experience and I think that everybody agrees that having that diversity of membership in the group brings lots of great opportunities for collaboration and to share each other's work and to build capacity and become more than the sum total of our parts, or whatever.

Holly: Yeah absolutely.

Andrew: Teamwork!

Holly: Yeah teamwork! That's so important. Just being able to draw on everyone's knowledge, skills and experience in a mutual way and then I think what you've really spoken about is how important the space is in allowing that to happen. Thank you so much for sharing all of that and I wondered if you had a takeaway message for those who are listening?

Amanda: My feeling is that mental health should be treated like physical health, which I don't think it is. And it certainly hasn't been, I don't think, during the pandemic. Physical and mental health are just as important, not mental health is just a background, a not very important thing. That's really what I'd just like to see.

Liz: People have come to this group with a whole range of passions and gifts and skills, and by creating that space where people can share those passions, gifts and skills in a cohesive way, really brings life to the work that we're trying to do. And I heard something on a podcast the other day and it's just really stuck with me and it's what we nourish, will

flourish. And I just feel that that's how I feel about this piece of work and this community.

Andrew: It's hard to top that! People being able to embrace the uncertainty of beginning doing something different is important, because it wouldn't work to try and prescriptively design somebody else's group or situation. I mean, I got involved by accident because I'd signed up to volunteer for a totally different thing about music. So, there's maybe just allowing for the uncertainty of how fast things can move and how and when people join and how that evolves over time. And it'll be influenced by the people that join and to encourage people who join with lived experience to enjoy the process, manage the expectation about, it's a big, complicated subject, takes time to change things, but to just sort of try to enjoy the process.

Holly: Yeah, I like that, sort of being okay with the unknown that comes with doing something different. Yeah, well thank you so much Amanda and Andrew and Liz, for sharing those reflections and the learning. It is timely and important that we share these messages widely.

Outro: If you'd like to find out more, get in touch with Scottish Recovery Network and we can connect you with Grampian Public Empowerment Group. You can sign up to our newsletter on our website, www.scottishrecovery.net and you can also follow us on social media.

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Together, we can make mental health recovery real.