Scottish Recovery Network

Getting Started: Developing Peer Support Groups

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About this resource

At Scottish Recovery Network, we are passionate about the powerful contribution that peer support can make to peoples' mental health recovery. Peer support also has an important role to play in suicide prevention, creating opportunities for connection, understanding and mutual support through the sharing of lived experience. There is real power in the sharing of experiences in a mutual and supportive way.

This resource has been created to support people interested in developing peer support groups. It offers enough information to get you started and leaves space for your ideas and creativity. It provides room to design the activities you want to organise, set up, or deliver. It is interactive and features tools, templates, and case studies.

Lived experience sits at the heart of the resource. The content has been co-developed with people who are involved in facilitating and taking part in peer support groups and activities across Scotland.

We would love to hear how you are getting on with using this resource and to share your learning and ideas. Please **get in touch** or join the conversation on social media using **#PeerSupportScot.**

Thanks - Scottish Recovery Network team.

Section one: exploring peer support

In this section, we will explore what peer support is, the role of lived experience, and the key values that guide peer work. Understanding these foundations will help you create intentional, recovery-focused spaces where peer connections can thrive.

What is peer support?

Before getting started, it's important to have a clear understanding of what peer support involves and the values that guide it.

Peer support is a relational and mutual approach where people with shared lived experiences support each other through challenging times, not as experts but as equals.

Peer support has been happening for centuries and has a long-standing history within mental health. In mental health communities, it has evolved into including more formally organised peer support around community spaces, support groups, and collective advocacy. As understanding of the benefits of peer support grew, more formal peer worker roles (both voluntary and paid) and peer support approaches began to emerge.

Peer support is flexible, culturally relevant, and responsive to community needs. Though it may feel informal, it is grounded in peer values and a skilled workforce.

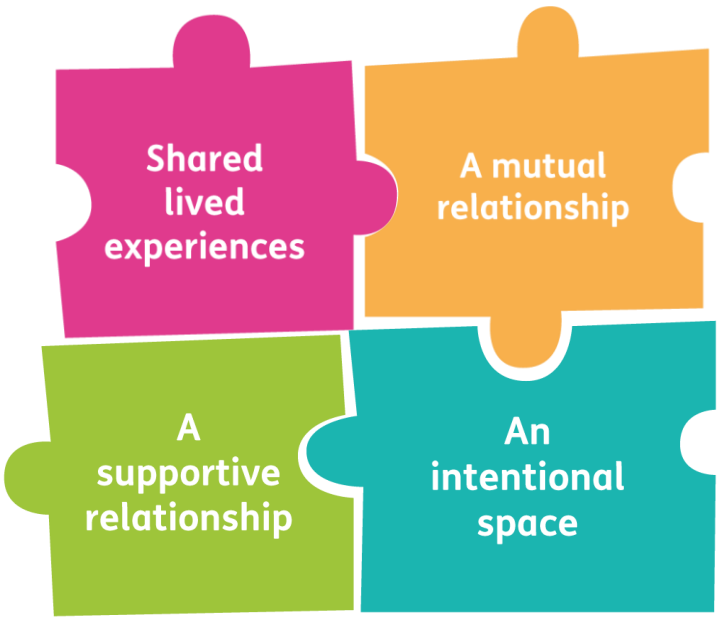
Peer support can take many different forms. It might be 1-to-1 support, a peer support group, or a more informal space where people come together and support each other. It can happen in community organisations, services, workplaces, online, or anywhere people connect around shared experiences. Some peer support is structured and facilitated, while other forms are more informal. It might also centre around an activity, such as walking, arts and crafts, gardening or cooking. What makes it peer support is the shared lived experience, the sense of equality between people, and the opportunity to connect, learn from each other and offer support in a mutual way.

Peer support helps people feel seen, creates connection and reminds people they do not have to face mental health recovery alone.

"When I think of peer support, I think of something authentic, organic, where you connect with somebody on a completely different level, and that's due to the fact that they have lived experience"

- Lindsay Williams, Operations Manager at The Hive, Kirkcaldy

Scottish Recovery Network asked people across Scotland about peer support and what it means to them. They told us that peer support has four key components:



Shared lived experiences build trust, empathy and understanding, focusing on the person and their life experiences, not just diagnosis.

Mutual relationships are built on equality; people walk alongside rather than trying to fix one another, valuing lives experience and bringing learning and insight to those involved.

Supportive relationships are rooted in hope. Peers show that recovery is possible and are evidence that things can get better.

Intentional space means peer support isn't just about telling your story; it's creating a collaborative space where peers use their experiences purposefully to support others to find their own recovery path.

Lived experience

Throughout this resource, we will talk about lived experience. Lived experience is the knowledge and understanding you get when you have personally lived through something. Lived experience offers a depth of understanding that comes from having navigated challenges, change and growth. It brings insight into what recovery feels like and the possibilities.

How lived experience is defined will depend on the context of your peer support activities. Peer support is recovery-focused, which means being grounded in lived experience, inclusive and accessible, strengths-based, and trauma-informed.

Peer support values

The development of peer support activities can be enhanced by using a set of peer values, such as the 'HEAR ME' framework.

These values were developed by peer workers and can be used in support, practice, and reflection. We will reference HEAR ME in different parts of this resource.

Find out more in **Putting the Pieces Together**: A Framework for Mental Health Peer Support in Scotland.

This framework is for anyone introducing, developing, delivering, or supporting peer support roles and services, including policymakers, commissioners, and peer support practitioners seeking to strengthen their work and put peer values into practice.

Section two: planning and evaluating your peer support group

Good planning is an important part of delivering a successful peer support group. This includes thinking about how you will evaluate your work to understand its impact and identify what is working well and where improvements can be made.

This section covers some key things to consider when planning your peer support group, including evaluation, building connections, practical arrangements, and promotion. Taking time to plan can help create a welcoming and inclusive experience where everyone feels able to take part and benefit.

Preparing for your peer support group

Investing time in planning your peer support group can help create a positive experience for everyone involved and support the long-term success of your activities.

The most important first step is checking in with yourself and your own mental health and wellbeing.

- Do I feel in the right place with my own mental health?
- What support do I have in place?
- Do I have the time and energy to commit to the project?

Evaluating peer support

Evaluation is not just about demonstrating impact to funders. It's also an opportunity to understand what is working well and how your peer support activity can continue to grow and improve.

The impact of peer support is often found in the relationships people build, the hope they gain, and the mutual support they offer one another. These experiences can be difficult to measure using traditional evaluation methods, which often focus on short-term interventions and clearly defined outcomes.

Start your evaluation planning right at the beginning, not as an afterthought.

Before creating any survey or feedback form, ask yourself:

- Why am I collecting this information?
- What will I actually do with these responses?
- Does this question honour the person's experience or just satisfy a tick-box requirement?

Choose methods that fit your capacity and reflect the values of peer support. Evaluation should feel meaningful and proportionate, rather than becoming a burden for participants or those delivering the activity.

Evaluation should strengthen peer support, not diminish it. Start with your values, involve your community and trust the relationships that are forming in the group or setting.

Our **Let's Evaluate Peer Support: Adaptable Outcome Map** was co-created to support people and organisations involved in mental health peer support to evaluate their work in ways that feel meaningful, creative and true to peer support values.

Building connections

Starting to build relationships, connections, and networking are all important. Having good connections will benefit you and your project in lots of ways, such as:

- Sharing ideas and experiences
- Support and promotion of your activities to a wider audience
- Opportunities to exchange skills and resources

We know that people feel more inspired when they are connected to a wider group of mutual support.

Your local **Third Sector Interface** (TSI) is a good place to start. TSI's serve as a local point of contact and support for Scotland's voluntary and community organisations, social enterprises and volunteers.

Social media is also a great way to connect with others. Are there any local groups or organisations doing interesting things that align with what you would like to do?

Identifying and reducing barriers

Think about what might make it easier or harder for people to take part in your activity. Understanding these factors can help you plan a more accessible and inclusive experience.

People tell us that common barriers include the time and location of the activity, travel costs, childcare responsibilities, language, and cultural differences. Consider what support you can offer to help address these barriers and enable more people to take part.

Taking time to plan for accessibility and inclusion can help ensure that everyone who may benefit from the activity can participate.

Working collaboratively with others

Working collaboratively can help build support for your group and ensure it reflects the needs and experiences of the people involved.

Involve people in conversations from the earliest stages of planning. Ask for ideas, suggestions, and feedback, and create opportunities for people to help shape the activity that takes place in the group. Be open and responsive to what you hear.

Collaboration is an ongoing process, not just something that happens during planning. As your activity develops, continue to involve people and keep lived experience at the centre of decision-making. For example, think about:

- How can you work with others – what can they bring to the table and what can you offer them?
- What are people's interests?
- Does anyone have any particular skills to offer?
- How might you capture ideas – feedback, reflection time, taking stock sessions?

Planning practicalities

In person peer support groups

You've made some connections, and you have a firm idea in place, so now you need to think about practicalities! Where are you going to meet? People delivering peer support groups shared some key things to think about when exploring a space.

Think about your audience and the kind of peer support group you want to deliver. If delivering in person what would be an appropriate space? A room, a community space, a café, a park?

- How does the environment feel? Is it inviting, warm, and comfortable?
- Is there parking nearby and access to public transport?
- Is it accessible for people to enter the space?
- What about the sensory stuff – Lighting? Strong smells? Acoustics?
- What are the toilet facilities like?
- Are there any costs associated with the space?

It's important that people know what to expect before attending. Talk to people about the venue and share information that may help them feel prepared and comfortable.

This could include details about accessibility, the layout of the space, how to get there, and what will happen when they arrive. If you have contact details for participants, consider sharing photos of the venue in advance, as this can help reduce uncertainty and ease any anxieties about attending for the first time.

Where to go if you are looking for a space?

Your connections will play a role here. Reach out and ask if anyone knows of anything appropriate. Your local TSI might have information on what is available locally and the different spaces that other groups and organisations are using.

Link up with another organisation that has similar aims and a space to offer. What can you offer them as an exchange? Maybe you are thinking about setting something up in a public space or a café?

Providing refreshments and support

If you're an organisation, we would highly recommend that, at a minimum, you provide a hot drink, water, and a biscuit. Coming to a new group setting can be daunting, and it's comforting to have a warm welcome.

If you are an individual starting something new, it is worth finding out how this can be provided without you being out of pocket. Is there a local food bank that you can link up with? Can you approach a supermarket or biscuit factory (big companies are often happy to donate to charity) and ask for donations?

Be mindful of dietary requirements and provide alternative options. Ask people if they have specific preferences but know your limitations!

Some other things to think about

What is the maximum number of people you can have in the group? Consider the steps and processes you will put in place to make sure you don't need to turn people away.

Is it adults only? Do you continue during the school holidays? Do you get people to text and let you know if they're coming and with how many others? Your space might develop and change over time.

Spreading the word

Advertising and spreading the word about your peer support group are essential to ensure you reach the right people. Your connections are important here, too. These people will be key in supporting the promotion of your group.

It's important to think about your audience – who are you trying to encourage to come along? This will inform how you promote your group.

Posters, flyers, and more discrete options like business cards can be useful. You can distribute these in cafés, community spaces, GP surgeries, and health centres. Again, it's about going to where your audience is!

When posting online, think about what platforms you are using and the type of audience you might reach. Some people join Facebook groups to share details about what they're doing or create a page for their peer support group to entice people to learn more. Some peer support groups have websites, including contact details and more information about when the group meets.

Social media isn't the only option when it comes to promoting your group online. **ALISS** is an online directory that helps people find services and support for health and wellbeing across Scotland. It's free to list your group or activity.

When promoting your group, make sure to include key details such as the date, time, location, and contact information. You may also want to include additional information depending on what you are offering, such as whether refreshments or childcare are available.

Canva is a free online design tool that can be used to create posters and leaflets, with both free and paid features available.

"[In] one conversation, and having a chat with somebody, you don't know how many people you're going to impact... I've had conversations with people where they've said, 'you've changed my life'."

- Sandy, Men United

Section three: running a peer support session

Now it's time to think about the session itself. This section will guide you through what a session might look like from start to finish, with ideas for how to help everyone feel safe, supported, and able to take part. We'll look at how your session might flow, and how you can make choices that help both participants and facilitators get the best possible experience.

We recommend having a clear structure for your session. This means including a defined start, middle, and end. This helps people understand what to expect and provides clarity about the process.

Sessions can be formal or informal, depending on your approach. You may choose to have a clear focus, such as a theme or planned activity, or keep it more open so people can come together for informal conversations. This will depend on your group, and it may change over time.

Beginning: Starting the group

The start of your session is important, as it sets the tone for what follows and helps people feel welcome. A warm, friendly greeting can make a big difference. People may feel nervous at the beginning (including facilitators), so it is helpful to think about how you can ease those feelings.

Starting on time is also important, as people may have other commitments or time pressures. Once everyone has arrived, briefly outline the plan for the session and check that people are happy with it.

Connecting-up activities

We recommend starting sessions with a connecting-up activity. This helps people share a little about themselves and build connection within the group. It can also help create a sense of equality in the space.

You might use a general prompt, such as “How has your week been?”, or a lighter question like “What is one thing that made you smile this week?”. These activities can be simple, light-hearted, and fun.

It is helpful for the facilitator to go first, as this models what is being asked and helps set the tone for the group.

Creating a group agreement

A group agreement sets out shared expectations for how people will work together. It helps ensure that everyone has a positive and respectful experience. It should be developed together and owned by everyone in the group.

The first session is a good time to create the agreement. Allow enough time for the group to discuss and agree it together.

You may wish to revisit the agreement at the start of each session. Keeping it visible can help support ongoing reflection and accountability. If new people join later, make sure they also can review and contribute to it. The group agreement should be created by the group itself, with everyone having a role in shaping it.

Middle: Activities and discussions

Once everyone is settled into the space, you’ve connected, and set up your group agreement, the middle of your session will be the most significant part. There are lots of different examples of what people do with this time:

- Deliver an activity
- Have someone else visit to contribute
- Go through learning materials
- Have a chat about a specific theme or issue
- Facilitate a free-flowing conversation and let people connect individually

It’s always good to have a planned break as part of a session. This is an opportunity to refresh and recharge. Check in with everyone. How’s everyone feeling? What’s the energy like? Be open to adapting your

plan if things arise and let people know how long there is left before you finish.

End: Closing your session well

You want to bring your peer support group to a close with a similar tone to how you started the session. It's important that people feel valued. Take time to recognise the contributions people have made in being there. This can also be a good opportunity to get feedback on people's experiences.

It is also important to let people know when you plan to meet again. Are there other opportunities happening in the community that people might be interested in?

Boundaries

We want to create safe and supportive spaces where peer relationships can grow. One important part of this is thinking about boundaries.

Boundaries help us understand what is and is not okay in relationships. They shape how we treat others, how others treat us, and how we treat ourselves. They can be both formal (such as agreed group expectations) and informal (such as shared understandings of respectful interaction).

Boundaries in the peer relationship are established to:

- Promote trust
- Increase safety
- Demonstrate respect
- Develop rapport
- Provide structure to the helping relationship

There will be different sets of boundaries that impact your activities. Boundaries will be set through the law, organisational / group policies, procedures, and your own and others' interests and limits.

Knowing your own boundaries

We suggest taking time to reflect on your own boundaries, starting with your values. Values are the beliefs that guide what we consider important and help shape our decisions and behaviour.

Think about what matters to you in your role and what feels right for you. Being comfortable with saying "no" is important, as is having a clear understanding of what your role does and does not include.

"You can't be everything to everyone. It's really important to know your own boundaries"

- Peer Worker

Clear communication and confidentiality

Healthy boundaries rely on clear communication. People may have different views of what is and is not acceptable, shaped by their upbringing, culture, and life experiences. Because of this, it is important to be explicit and consistent in how you communicate.

People taking part in your activity should know what to expect from facilitators and from others in the group, as well as what is expected of them. This helps create a shared understanding of how the group will work.

Your group agreement plays an important role in setting and maintaining these boundaries within the group.

Section four: the role of the facilitator

The facilitator plays a key role in creating a safe, supportive, and effective peer support space. In this section, we explore what peer facilitation involves, the responsibilities it brings, and the skills and support that can help facilitators thrive. We also look at reflection, self-care, and building strong relationships, helping you feel confident and supported in this role.

What is peer facilitation?

Peer facilitation is when someone with lived experience facilitates a group or activity. They intentionally bring their lived experience into the space as part of how they support the group. This can be a powerful way to build connection and understanding between people.

While there are many resources on facilitation skills, few focus specifically on peer facilitation. Scottish Recovery Network has co-produced a comprehensive guide called **'Let's do Peer Group Facilitation'** with people who run peer support groups.

Facilitator responsibilities

How lived experience is understood will depend on the type of activity being delivered. Some groups may not be peer-led, but facilitators still play an important role in supporting a peer-based environment.

Regardless of who is facilitating the group, it is important to keep a peer values at the centre of the work. The facilitator has a big task:

- Key contact
- Hold the space
- Manage the dynamic
- Guide the group through materials or an activity
- Organise and co-ordinate the planning and delivery of the session

This is why co-facilitation is often recommended, as it allows responsibilities and workload to be shared. Facilitating a group on your own can be demanding and is not always sustainable.

It is important to check in with yourself and your co-facilitator(s) during and after sessions. Taking time to reflect together can help you learn from the experience and identify any changes needed before the next session. This can be done through a debrief.

Debriefs and reflections

A debrief is a useful way to reflect after a session or meetup. There is no single right way to do this. Debriefs can take place with a co-facilitator, supervisor, or through mutual support.

Debriefs provide space to reflect on how the session went, how it felt, what was learned, and what might change next time. Regular reflection helps create an ongoing cycle of reflection, planning, and delivery, which can support learning and development over time.

The HEAR ME peer values can also be used to guide debriefs and help keep a peer focus at the centre of practice. We've created an example **debrief template** that is framed around HEAR ME for you to use.

Self-care and avoiding burnout

Looking after yourself is an important part of peer facilitation, supporting both your wellbeing and your development in the role. It also helps you stay effective and sustainable in what you are doing.

Self-care can look different for everyone. Think about what helps you feel supported, and what you need in place to do your role well. This might include people around you, as well as practical or emotional support. Juno in Edinburgh **shared their learning** with us. They emphasise the importance of support for facilitators.

Connecting with others who are doing similar work can be a powerful way to support one another. This might be locally or across wider networks. Mutual support can help you stay inspired, share learning, and keep focused on what you are trying to achieve. Consider whether you are already linked in with others, or whether there are local or national networks you could connect with.

Some facilitators will have access to formal support structures within a workplace. It is important to consider whether these are meeting

your needs, and to raise any concerns or gaps with the appropriate people if they are not. Think about whether there is regular, consistent support in place, and whether it is grounded in the values of peer support.

Supportive conversations can be framed using the HEAR ME framework. That way, they explicitly relate back to the peer values

“We have 2 volunteers on per group. There is always a backup volunteer. Supervision, support and training are essential”

- Peer Worker, Juno

Building strong relationships and communication

Good relationships and clear communication are central to the facilitator role. Being able to listen actively and respond appropriately in different situations helps create a supportive and effective group environment.

Facilitators need to be able to build positive relationships, engage with participants, and navigate group dynamics as they arise. This relies on strong interpersonal skills and the ability to connect with people in a genuine and respectful way.

The relationship between co-facilitators is also important, as it is visible to participants. Working well together helps model positive peer relationships within the group. Strong relationships and communication provide a solid foundation for effective facilitation.

Mutual support networks

Connecting with others who are doing similar work can be a powerful way to support one another. This might be locally or across wider networks. Mutual support can help you stay inspired, share learning, and keep focused on what you are trying to achieve. Consider whether you are already linked in with others, or whether there are local or national networks you could connect with.

Journaling for reflection

We all make judgements, and sometimes these can affect how we build relationships with others. Journaling can be a helpful way to notice and reflect on our own assumptions and biases.

It can also support our mental health and wellbeing by giving space to process experiences and reflect on practice.

Training and development opportunities

To be an effective peer worker and facilitator, it is important to continue developing your knowledge and skills. There are many organisations that offer relevant training, and it is helpful to start by thinking about what you need most at this stage.

This might include peer support skills and peer facilitation. Depending on your activity, you may also want to explore more specialist training opportunities.

Some training is available for free, while other courses may have associated costs, so it is important to consider this when planning your development.

We have some useful tools and resources at the Scottish Recovery Network.

Peer Recovery Hub

Tools, resources, events and opportunities to support you to develop and champion peer support.

Peer2Peer online toolbox

A reflective, strengths-based group training course supporting the learning and development of peer workers.

Peer Connects

A programme of webinars and in-person events bringing people together to share learning, reflect on practice and strengthen peer support across Scotland.

Places to look out for training and development opportunities include:

Peer Networks delivering peer support training

- Fife Peer Network
- Dundee Peer Supporters Network

Wellness and Recovery Colleges delivering peer support training

- North Ayrshire Wellbeing & Recovery College
- Moray Wellbeing Hub
- Discovery College Highland

Other

- Your local Third Sector Interface (TSI)
- Scottish Council for the Voluntary Sector (SCVO)

Section five: celebrating and sustaining peer support

In this section, we focus on how to sustain and celebrate your peer support activity over time. Setting up a group is an important achievement, but keeping it going requires ongoing care, reflection, and recognition.

Funding and sustainability

Think about how you will sustain your peer support activity in the longer term. This will depend on a range of factors, including your aims and ambitions for the group, as well as its size and structure.

Funding opportunities will vary depending on your context. Being able to show the benefits and impact of your activity can help when applying for funding. It can be useful to think through the things you might need funding for:

- Room hires
- Resources
- Expenses –travel, accessibility, childcare
- Refreshments

Applying for funding, managing funds, and reporting to funders all take time. If you are working at a grassroots level, it can be helpful to put simple systems in place to support these processes. It may also be useful to think about partnerships. Consider what you could do with others, and what skills, resources, or support you could share or exchange.

Tools like the **Adaptable Outcome Map** can help you to demonstrate the value of peer support, in a way that stays grounded in peer values.

Your local **Third Sector Interface** is a useful point of contact. They can support you with group structure, governance, and identifying funding opportunities. You may also find the **GovernanceWiki** resource, developed by Midlothian Community Action, useful.

Celebrating and recognition

Celebrating peer support is important, as it recognises the effort, commitment, and progress of everyone involved.

Taking time to acknowledge achievements helps people feel valued, strengthens connections within the group, and highlights the positive impact of your activity. It can also help maintain motivation, attract new members, and show the value of your work to funders or partners.

Celebration doesn't need to be formal. It can be a moment within a session, a small gathering, or simply taking time to reflect on milestones and what you want to achieve next.

Get in touch

At Scottish Recovery Network, we are always happy to have a chat about your ideas and answer any questions.

We would love to hear you feedback and ideas for this resource which will change and grow over time.

If you need this resource in a different format please let us know.

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