

Peer Support in Scotland: Insight Report 1

Part of The Future is Peer series

Summary report

This summary distils **Peer Support in Scotland – Insight Report 1** into its core messages and themes. It provides a concise, accessible overview of why peer support matters, what it is, the evidence of impact, the current picture in Scotland, and what is needed next.

The report is intended for policy makers, service leaders, funders and peer support workers and champions in mental health, social care and the third sector. We encourage you to use the report to inform, inspire, and influence change as together we grow peer support in Scotland.

Why peer support matters for mental health recovery

Mental health recovery is about people being able to live a good life, as they define it, with or without ongoing symptoms. Recovery focused approaches start with the person and their life, not diagnosis or deficit, and are grounded in learning from lived experience. Relationships are central to recovery: being understood, believed in and respected helps people sustain hope and reconnect with a sense of possibility.

Peer support is widely recognised as a core element of a recovery promoting mental health system. It is inherently relational and non-clinical, creating space for conversations that are led by what matters to the person rather than by assessment or treatment requirements. Peer support aligns strongly with the CHIME framework for recovery, supporting connection, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment.

Embedding peer support is therefore not an optional add-on, but a practical way to shift systems towards more human, rights-based and person-centred practice.

What peer support is (and is not)

Peer support is a mutual relationship where people with shared lived experience of mental health challenges support one another. It is grounded in empathy, shared understanding and hope, and is delivered intentionally to support recovery.

Across Scotland, peer support commonly includes:

- Peer support groups (in-person, online or hybrid)

- One-to-one peer support
- Peer roles in community hubs, crisis and first-contact settings
- Peer-led recovery education, learning and self-management

Four core components underpin effective peer support:

1. **Shared lived experience** that builds trust, empathy and hope
2. **Mutuality and equality**, with peers walking alongside rather than fixing
3. **Supportive relationships** based on belief in recovery
4. **Intentional spaces** focused on learning, reflection and moving towards the life a person wants

Peer support is *not* simply telling one's story, friendship, or informal chatting. Peer workers are trained to use lived experience intentionally, with clear boundaries and purpose. Peer support is also not about fixing people or replacing clinical care; it complements other supports by addressing social, emotional and personal aspects of recovery that traditional services often struggle to reach.

Does peer support work?

The evidence shows that peer support *does* work, particularly when outcomes aligned with recovery are measured. Randomised controlled trials demonstrate positive impacts on hope, empowerment and social inclusion. Narrative research, lived-experience evidence and service evaluations consistently highlight that peer support offers something distinct from traditional professional relationships.

Evaluations in Scotland and elsewhere show that peer support:

- Builds trust and openness
- Enables different, more meaningful conversations
- Supports people to make sense of their experiences
- Helps people reconnect with identity, purpose and community

Peer support has also been shown to influence wider systems. Introducing peer workers into services increases recovery focused thinking among other practitioners, challenges stigma and 'them and us' attitudes, and encourages more strengths-based, person-centred practice.

Peer support in Scotland: the current picture

Peer support is already widespread in Scotland, largely driven by the third sector.

Key findings from The Big Scottish Peer Support Survey (2024) include:

- Peer support activity exists in every local authority area
- At least **18,500 people** participated in peer support in 2024
- Over half of services offer online or remote support
- Most services are open-access and many accept cross-sector referrals

Peer support in Scotland is diverse and adaptable, supporting different communities and experiences, including women, men, carers, LGBTQIA+ people, minority ethnic communities, and people affected by trauma, poverty, disability and long-term conditions.

However, the workforce is predominantly **unpaid**:

- At least 235 paid and 1,155 unpaid peer workers
- 73% of paid and 90% of unpaid peer workers are in the third sector
- Only a small proportion of peer workers hold leadership or management roles

Despite strong commitment and innovation, peer support organisations face persistent challenges, particularly insecure funding, high demand, and limited understanding of peer support among decision-makers.

Progress, barriers and what needs to change

While peer support has grown organically in the third sector, Scotland has lagged behind other countries in embedding peer roles within public sector mental health services. Key barriers include:

- Weak and inconsistent national policy drivers
- Limited investment in paid peer roles and peer leadership
- Ongoing discomfort with lived experience challenging traditional professional hierarchies
- Partial and uneven commitment to recovery focused practice

International experience shows that meaningful progress happens when peer support is treated as a driver of cultural change, not just a service. Other countries have accelerated development by:

- Embedding recovery and peer support in national strategies and legislation

- Investing in paid peer worker roles and visible peer leadership at all levels
- Positioning peer support and the development of a paid peer workforce as central to system reform
- Learning from international evidence and collaboration

Key message

Scotland is not starting from scratch. There is strong evidence, widespread activity and deep expertise to build on. To realise the full potential of peer support, a clear national commitment is now needed to:

- Embed peer support and lived experience leadership in policy and practice
- Invest in sustainable, paid peer roles and leadership pathways
- Recognise peer support as essential to recovery focused, people-led mental health systems

The future is peer.