

# SUPPORT GROUP EVALUATION REPORT

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Evaluating the impact of peer support  
within Bipolar Scotland support groups.



April 2026

 0141 560 2050

 [www.bipolarscotland.org.uk](http://www.bipolarscotland.org.uk)

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# INTRODUCTION



Support groups play a vital role in the everyday management of bipolar. They help people living with bipolar by providing peer connection, practical strategies and something unique: being understood by others who get it.


This report evaluates Bipolar Scotland’s support groups, drawing on a Scottish Recovery Network pilot of an Adaptable Outcome Map tool, designed to capture and evaluate the peer support happening across Scotland.


Responses from current and former group attendees provide insight into the groups’ impact. The findings aim to inform the ongoing development of the support groups, ensuring they continue to meet the evolving needs of people living with bipolar in Scotland.


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# KEY FINDINGS



 73% of group members reported a positive or very positive experience of attending support groups.

 Group members consistently reported reduced isolation, increased confidence and improved coping and self-management skills.

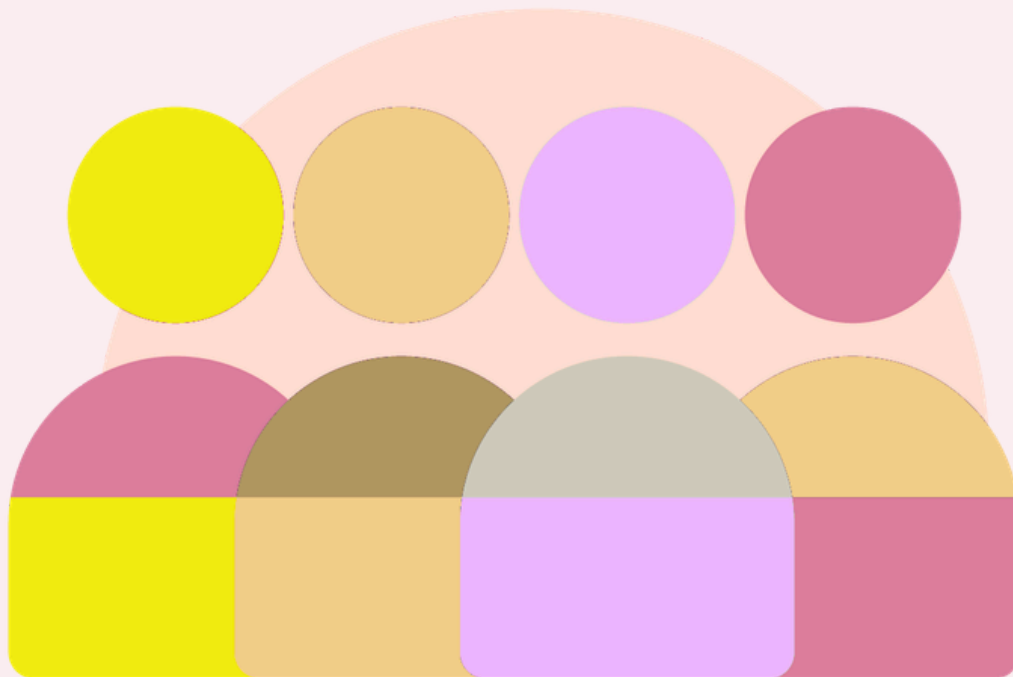
 Groups are widely viewed as safe, welcoming, and well-facilitated, supported by clear boundaries and house rules.

 Peer support and shared lived experience were identified as the most valuable elements of the service.

# EVOLUTION AND CONTEXT



With what began with one support group in 1992, our support groups have since evolved nationally, delivering 23 support groups each month, offered through a mix of online and in-person. This growth reflects sustained demand and our commitment to accessible, peer-led support. Collectively, support groups deliver over 30 hours of direct support to people living with bipolar and their support networks each month. This delivery is underpinned by an exceptional contribution from volunteers, with almost 100 hours each month dedicated to preparation, facilitation and follow-up.



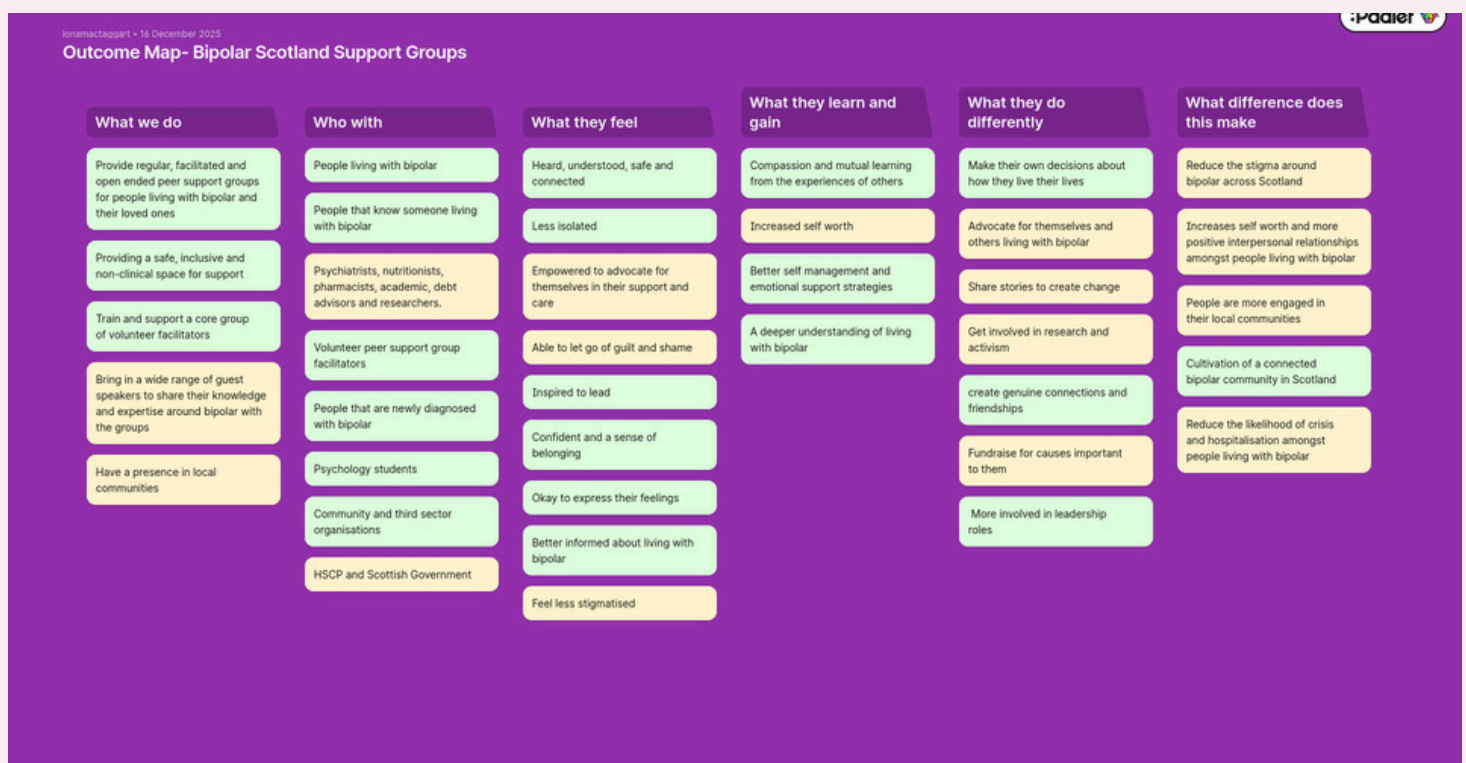
# OUTCOME MAP



Peer support is unique in the way that it supports people. It is about people and their experiences which can be difficult to measure numerically or by traditional evaluation methods.

We were asked by Scottish Recovery Network to be involved in their 'Let's Evaluate Peer Support' pilot and through using their adaptable outcome map develop our own outcome map that allows us to gather and analyse the necessary data for evaluation in a way that works for us and is relative to the work we do.

We decided to focus on our support groups as it was an area of our work we felt we needed to understand more. The outcome map allowed us to take a step back, analyse data gathered in a structured way and think about the ongoing development of our groups in a different way.



The outcome map allowed us to see what was working well (green) and where we needed to spend more time (yellow) on developing / evolving to ensure our support groups are continually meeting the needs of those using them and ensuring we have the right people involved in that ongoing development. Those highlighted in yellow also represent things we feel are happening, but where we'd like to gather more evidence.

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# PARTICIPATION OVERVIEW

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To collect data to evaluate the impact of our support groups, we conducted a survey at the end of 2025 with members across our groups including Paisley, Glasgow West, Ayrshire, Dundee, and online. Their feedback provides valuable insight into how our groups are experienced and the meaningful outcomes they deliver.

This data helped us understand the impact the support groups are having and helps us further develop the support groups. This report is primarily based upon this survey data.

# FINDINGS



## Overall Experience

Overall feedback on the support groups was strongly positive with 73% of respondents reporting that their experience within the group was positive or very positive, with the other respondents remaining neutral, indicating that the groups are meeting their intended aims.

Members frequently described the groups as welcoming, reassuring, and meaningful. Many highlighted the relief of being in a space where they did not have to explain or justify their experiences.

*"Knowing everyone else in the room has similar struggles makes a huge difference."*

*"Even on weeks when I don't speak much, just being there helps."*

*"Very helpful as I know I'm not alone in what I'm experiencing"*

*Another person described the group as very valuable as "[They had] never met another [person living with] BP in person before"*

## Motivations For Joining a Support Group

Participants learned about the groups through various channels, most commonly via social media, care teams (including GPs, psychiatrists and Community Practice Nurses) and word of mouth.

Key motivations for joining a support group included:

- Wanting to feel less alone with bipolar
- Seeking peer support from people with similar experiences
- Learning coping strategies and gaining understanding of bipolar disorder

One member said they joined the group *"To be understood without explanation, To be with others who understand what it's like to have bipolar and have similar experiences, feelings, thoughts, ideas ect, It's a sense of belonging and community without judgement or fear of rejection"*



## Comfort, Safety and Atmosphere

Group members generally felt comfortable sharing within the group with most describing themselves as comfortable or very comfortable sharing with only 2 people feeling discomfort. Within the group environment, group members felt they were accepted and supported by both other group members and facilitators. *"It was great, facilitator was understanding and compassionate"*

Majority of participants highlighted there were enough opportunities to contribute within the group if they wished to do so *"The facilitators are very welcoming and respectful... They are able to make sure everyone has a chance to speak without making anyone feel bad or awkward"*

Respondents, described the group atmosphere as welcoming, safe, and respectful with trust developing over time *"I'm more open to sharing and less introverted at group as the atmosphere is so welcoming"* The house rules contributed to a sense of safety and structure with over 96% of group members citing them as 'clear and helpful'

Whilst we didn't directly ask group members about their experiences of stigma, it was evident that it remains an issue and that attending a group is important for receiving support in a judgment free environment.

*"Following my diagnosis it felt like overnight I lost quite a few friends, probably through ignorance of the condition. Although it was 20 years ago, attitudes to mental health was very different to today. So finding people like me, so to speak, became somewhat necessary. I felt very alone at that time."*

*"[I] Lost a lot of my shame and embarrassment listening to others telling their stories"*

*"[The group] Makes me feel heard and seen and gives me somewhere to talk about things I may not discuss with others outside the group"*

*"Being able to talk about my experience with living with bipolar disorder, not being judged, not feeling alienated"*

*"It means a lot to talk with people who understand what you might be going through, as bipolar disorder is greatly misunderstood and stigmatised."*

# IMPACT AND OUTCOMES



The findings indicate a consistently positive impact of support group participation, with many individuals attending regularly. This ongoing engagement shows that group members are gaining something from attending.

People reported the following:



48% increase in confidence



60% increase in developing coping strategies



48% increase in being able to self-manage bipolar



36% increase in having an improved home life



39% increase in having better social connections



21% increase in improvements within employment or education

*"I feel it's given me more confidence to be heard, And to find better ways of communicating to others who don't have bipolar disorders, There are a few techniques I have learned from others in the group on how to better manage everyday symptoms and I've had a lot more information about other resources that are available that are not widely know and that I can utilise"*

*"I am more outgoing and confident"*



This highlights the broad and meaningful benefits gained from group participation. The most significant improvement was observed in coping skills, suggesting that group members are gaining practical self-management strategies to manage challenges associated with bipolar. Notable increases in confidence further indicate that group members feel empowered in their journey with bipolar.

Improvements in social connections and home life reflect the wider impact of the groups beyond individual wellbeing, supporting stronger relationships and reduced isolation. Improvements in employment and education represent progress in areas where people report significant struggles at times.

This reinforces the role of peer support as an early intervention and ongoing self-management tool.

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# WHAT DOES PEER SUPPORT MEAN TO YOU?

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Peer support and lived experience are at the heart of what we do at Bipolar Scotland. We know that peer support is a successful contributor to the mental health system, whether someone has a new diagnosis, has recently been unwell or are feeling alone and isolated.

Peer support is grounded in that shared experience that was a key motivator in people joining our support groups in the first instance and keeps them coming back. As part of the evaluation, we asked people to think about what peer support means to them.

*"A chance to feel a connection and learn from other people's experiences"*

*"It makes me feel grateful to been seen and heard"*

*"Feeling supported and understood with the day to day reality of living with bipolar"*

*"Feeling understood, having shared experience that ca be discussed."*

*"Knowing that the facilitators / volunteers and fellow members all share the 'common bond' of bipolar experience"*

This demonstrates, the power of lived experience, the importance of having shared experience and how this can make people feel seen, understood and listened to.

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# NEXT STEPS

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The outcome map will be used as a starting point for the ongoing development of the support groups. We will continue to strengthen relationships with stakeholders and donors to ensure that the value of peer support and the everyday realities of living with bipolar, are recognised.

Further regular consultation with group members, both formally and informally, will inform this development. This will help us ensure that support groups remain positive, safe and non-judgemental spaces.

Sections of the outcome map highlighted in yellow will inform a targeted development plan to support the continued evolution of the groups.

We will also adopt the outcome map approach to evaluation across the organisation. During 2026/27, outcome maps will be developed for each service. This consistent approach will help identify areas of strength, as well as opportunities for further development, supporting continuous improvement across the organisation.

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# CONCLUSION

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The data gathered and analysed demonstrates that Bipolar Scotland support groups:

- Deliver clear social impact aligned with organisational objectives
- Reduce isolation and support self-management, potentially easing pressure on statutory services
- Are well-governed, with clear boundaries and effective facilitation

The findings also reinforce the importance of peer support. The sense of connection, understanding and shared experience described by participants is not easily replicated in other settings and is a key driver of the positive outcomes reported.

The consistency of positive feedback demonstrates a well-functioning service with strong foundations for sustainability and growth. Participants consistently report positive experiences, strong peer support and meaningful benefits to their wellbeing and self-management of bipolar.

This evaluation provides both validation of what is working well and a clear platform to build on, as we continue to develop and expand our support to reach more people across Scotland.

***“The service is a real lifeline”***

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report reflects the collective effort of many individuals whose contributions make a tangible difference.

We are especially grateful to those who completed the survey. By sharing your experiences and insights, you have helped us better understand the impact of our groups and how they can continue to evolve to meet community needs.

We recognise the vital role of our volunteers, whose time, commitment, and care directly enable the delivery of these support groups. Their work is central to the positive outcomes highlighted in this report.

## **BIPOLAR SCOTLAND**

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 **Bipolar Scotland** | Scotland's Charity for People Living with Bipolar

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