

They speak my language

A summary report

May 2026



About this report

In early 2026, Habitus Collective spoke with twenty people connected to Scottish Recovery Network's work across Scotland. We spoke with peer support practitioners, people leading peer support in organisations, people working to embed peer support in statutory services, and people working across community and third sector settings. We asked them what had shifted, what Scottish Recovery Network was making possible, and what was still getting in the way.

In 2024 we carried out an evaluation of Scottish Recovery Network's work. This report looks at what has shifted since then, where things have moved, and where there is still further to go.

This is a summary of what we heard.

Key messages

- Scottish Recovery Network is producing real and evidenced change at individual, organisational, and systems levels, and the picture is considerably stronger since the 2024 evaluation.
- People connected to Scottish Recovery Network are growing in confidence and being taken more seriously by colleagues, commissioners, and institutions.
- Scottish Recovery Network spaces are sustaining the peer support workforce through difficult work, keeping motivated people going in systems that are slow to change.
- People's ideas and needs are visibly shaping Scottish Recovery Network's work in ways that feel mutual, and people are replicating Scottish Recovery Network's ways of working in their own organisations.
- The hardest shifts in Scotland, changing institutional culture and clinical power, will take longer and require a wider coalition of people than Scottish Recovery Network can build alone.
- Relationships are Scottish Recovery Network's most powerful mechanism for change, and using relationships as catalysts is the most significant development available in the next phase of work.
- Reaching further into the spaces and settings where peer support still needs to take root, through the relationships and connections that already exist, is where the next phase of the work needs to go.

The findings are being used alongside evidence from Scottish Recovery Network's wider programme to inform the organisation's ten-year strategic plan and the development of its next programme.

What the conversations found

Theme 1: People are growing in confidence and being taken more seriously

Theme 2: Scottish Recovery Network creates a hopeful space that keeps people going

Theme 3: People's ideas and needs are visibly shaping the work

Theme 4: Change is happening at individual, organisational, and systems levels

Theme 5: Peer support is growing, and the infrastructure needs to keep pace

Theme 6: The approach to systems change is working, and the hardest shifts are still ahead

Theme 7: Relationships are Scottish Recovery Network's most powerful mechanism for change

Theme 8: Those not yet connected to Scottish Recovery Network are as important to the agenda as those who are

Theme 1: People are growing in confidence and being taken more seriously

"To be able to say, when I'm putting forward an idea, that there is evidence and guidance to back this up, that is what Scottish Recovery Network gives you"

What we found

Something real has shifted in how people connected to Scottish Recovery Network carry themselves and how they are received by others. People describe growing more certain that their knowledge and experience are valid, more willing to take up space, more ready to speak, and being taken more seriously by colleagues, commissioners, and institutions that have historically been slow to make room for peer support.

In 2024, confidence was identified as an emerging outcome but with limited evidence of it translating into changed behaviour. The conversations this time provide that longer term evidence, with people describing shifts they can date, attribute, and illustrate with specific examples.

The internal shift and the external one are related but they require different things to develop and tend to happen across different timescales. Growing in confidence comes through sustained connection with a community where your experience is understood and valued. Being taken more seriously by institutions comes through association with an organisation that carries its own credibility in those settings, and through having evidence and language behind you that you did not have before.

One person described preparing for a safeguarding committee challenge by drawing on Scottish Recovery Network's evidence base to reframe peer support from a safeguarding risk into a safeguarding asset, ready with the argument before anyone raised it. Another described challenging their NHS post banding, getting it upgraded, and continuing to be consistently vocal in meetings with senior clinical staff in ways that would not have felt possible earlier in their career.

This connects directly to the first strategic outcome in Scottish Recovery Network's ten-year plan: creating opportunities for lived experience and peer leaders to grow, connect and influence change across communities, services and systems.

Theme 2: Scottish Recovery Network creates a hopeful space that keeps people going

“Scottish Recovery Network spaces are the only ones where I feel I can bring my full experience as both a professional and someone with lived experience, without having to separate the two.”

What we found

People doing this work often do it in difficult conditions, in organisations that do not always understand peer support, in systems that are slow to change, sometimes without colleagues who share their frame of reference. Scottish Recovery Network spaces are described, consistently and unprompted, as one of the few places where the work is understood without explanation, where the language is shared, and where motivation is restored. For some people, particularly those working alone in statutory settings, it is what makes the job feel possible.

“They speak my language. There is a real relief in being with people who get it. You do not have to come already ready to advocate. You can just come and be you.”

“It is a kind of lonely job. Knowing that there is an organisation that not only has tools and resources but gives me peer support, meeting with other peer support workers from all over Scotland, that is really, really invaluable. I do not have that network outside of Scottish Recovery Network. I really do not.”

One person described a Scottish Recovery Network event as the moment a young person in their project committed fully to the work. Listening to others further along the same journey, he said he was there because he wanted to build something that had not existed when he needed it. The event did not teach him to do that, it simply gave him the space to say it out loud for the first time.

The strategic plan describes Scottish Recovery Network's role as hosting what does not exist elsewhere and being relational at every level. This theme is perhaps the clearest evidence of both of those things in practice.

Keeping motivated people going and feeling supported through resistant systems, was not a named outcome in the 2024 evaluation and came through clearly and unprompted across almost every conversation. Scottish Recovery Network is doing this consistently.

Theme 3: People's ideas and needs are visibly shaping the work

"Had Scottish Recovery Network not been a thing that existed in my country, I would have been all the poorer for it. It was the start of a reframing that felt really invaluable and shaped where I went with my career."

What we found

Scottish Recovery Network has always been described as a relational organisation, and what has changed is the nature and depth of that relationality. People describe a real shift over the last two years, from engagement that felt warm but largely one-directional, where Scottish Recovery Network brought things to people and people received them, toward something that feels genuinely mutual. Feedback leads to changes, and people can see their ideas reflected in what Scottish Recovery Network does next.

"In the past there was not the idea that I had any influence... now they come to me and say, 'help us with X' and you feel like you are helping to shape that."

Something else is happening alongside this. People are not only learning from what Scottish Recovery Network produces but from how Scottish Recovery Network does things, and carrying those ways of working back into their own organisations and settings. The quality of welcome at events, the way staff model openness about their own lived experience, the way space is held for difficult conversations, all of these are being replicated elsewhere, without Scottish Recovery Network needing to ask.

The strategic plan describes Scottish Recovery Network's ambition to model recovery and peer values in how it works, and to make it possible for others to do the same. The modelling function evidenced here suggests this is already happening, quietly and at scale.

Theme 4: Change is happening at individual, organisational, and systems levels

“I wanted to bring Creating Hope with Peer Support to my area, to give people an understanding that they are doing suicide prevention work. And if you understand that you're doing it, you can be more intentional about it.”

What we found

The 2024 evaluation described systems change as beginning to emerge and found evidence primarily at the relational level. The interviews we conducted produced strong and specific evidence of change across three levels. At the individual level, people are taking Scottish Recovery Network's learning directly into institutional settings, using its research outputs in commissioning conversations, citing it in funding bids, and going into settings with a clearer sense of how to present peer support in ways that land rather than provoke resistance.

At the organisational level, peer support has been written into strategic work plans at senior level in large organisations, full peer development pathways have been built, and peer teams whose original recruits are still in post years later because the foundations were right. Scottish Recovery Network co-developed the first peer-to-peer student support service in a Scottish further education college, and the institution's leadership said publicly that they should have done it years ago.

At the systems level, peer support is now a formal commissioning priority in at least one public body, with Scottish Recovery Network presenting to strategic decision-making meetings. In one NHS setting, a senior clinical decision-maker will not approve work without lived experience input, described by the person who shared it as previously unimaginable.

Scottish Recovery Network's involvement also makes things possible that individuals could not achieve alone. It lends weight to local arguments, provides a credible external voice in institutional settings, and appears in tendering and funding documents cited by partner organisations making the case for peer support in their own settings. One person described citing Scottish Recovery Network in commissioning conversations in a public body to shift peer support from a personal advocacy position to an evidenced case. Another described using its evidence base to make the case for a new service to senior leadership, framing peer support as a safeguarding asset. A third described referencing it in a funding application as evidence of the quality and credibility of the approach.

Alongside this evidence of change, there are genuinely different views about what Scottish Recovery Network's role in driving that change should look like and how far it should go. That conversation is explored in Theme 6.

Theme 5: Peer support is growing, and the infrastructure needs to keep pace

“My personal and professional development is coming from Scottish Recovery Network... the support around evaluation doesn't exist anywhere else, that has been really crucial. But there's no peer leadership training... something around line managing and leading peers. That's what's missing.”

What we found

Peer2Peer training is the most consistently valued thing Scottish Recovery Network offers, valued for its quality and for the generosity with which Scottish Recovery Network holds it, since people do not feel they need permission to adapt and use it. It has been the foundation for building peer teams, developing pathways, and establishing the credibility of peer support in organisations that had not previously engaged with it.

A new and urgent set of needs has emerged, however, from the organisations that are furthest along. Getting peer workers into post is no longer the hardest part of the work. The harder challenge now is managing peer workers well in ways that protect their practice and their wellbeing, building career pathways within peer support rather than out of it, and developing the leadership capacity of experienced peer workers to move into more senior roles. The concern is not only about resourcing the workforce but about protecting what makes peer workers distinct as they become more embedded in organisations and systems that were not designed with them in mind.

One person described setting up her organisation's first peer support group in 2024 and relying directly on Scottish Recovery Network's peer facilitation guides throughout, because nothing else existed that was designed specifically for peer-led group work. Another described being asked to prove the value of their role using tools that were never designed to measure it, and finding Scottish Recovery Network's evaluation support the only available help. One person described in detail what Scottish Recovery Network meant to their own development as a leader, and asked who will be doing that for the next generation.

The people and organisations most invested in peer support have moved further than expected, and what they need now is different from what got them here.

Theme 6: The approach to systems change is working, and the hardest shifts are still ahead

“What I feel has happened is that peer support has been seen as somebody else's job... And what the danger has been is it has absolved statutory organisations of taking responsibility and really incorporating it.”

What we found

Several people offered thoughtful analysis of how Scottish Recovery Network's approach to systems change actually works. The picture they painted was consistent: Scottish Recovery Network is building a community of motivated, credible, well-connected people who carry change into spaces it cannot reach directly. In Scotland, where clinical authority in policy and commissioning is particularly concentrated, and where the moment you push for change you can find yourself surrounded by people whose job it suddenly becomes to stop it, building trust and relationships is the approach that works, and people describe it as both intentional and strategically sound.

This is the logic that underpins Scottish Recovery Network's ten-year strategic plan, which describes its role as a catalyst for change: sparking and nurturing change by seeding new ideas, testing approaches, and supporting others to make them their own.

The international dimension of Scottish Recovery Network's work is a real strength here. Evidence of what is possible in NHS England, in Canada, in Singapore, shifts what people feel able to argue for at home, and hearing that peer support workers hold senior NHS roles elsewhere makes the argument for change in Scotland harder to dismiss.

In 2024, the evaluation found that the deepest level of change, shifting how institutions think and what they assume to be true about peer support, was the hardest to reach and the furthest away. That is still the case. The evidence from these conversations is that individual mental models are shifting, with people who were sceptical becoming allies and people inside statutory organisations finding more room to advocate. Institutional cultures are moving more slowly, and transformative change at the level of systems, structures, and deeply held assumptions about who has credibility and authority in mental health, remains the long game.

Theme 7: Relationships are Scottish Recovery Network's most powerful mechanism for change

"He said to me, 'I'm committed to this because I want to set up something which I needed and wasn't there twelve years ago.' He told me that at a Scottish Recovery Network event. That was the moment things changed."

What we found

The 2024 evaluation identified relational capacity as both the primary way in which Scottish Recovery Network achieves impact and as a succession risk. Both remain true, and both are evidenced more strongly than before.

Every single conversation named individual Scottish Recovery Network staff members, not the organisation in the abstract but specific people, remembered conversations, moments where someone was reached out to at exactly the right time, messages that felt written for them rather than sent to everyone. Being remembered and receiving a personalised approach comes through consistently as something that genuinely shifted how people felt about themselves and their work.

"I have said to our teams: watch what they do. Just watch how they go about their work. It is really admirable."

"Scottish Recovery Network was the conduit. Everything kind of led to me having this network that I found. If it were not for them, I would never have found this world."

Several people also described a professional culture within Scottish Recovery Network that models what peer values look like in practice, with curiosity, warmth, openness about lived experience, and non-hierarchy all named as qualities that are noticed and that carry weight. One person described watching Scottish Recovery Network staff as a professional development model for their own team, and another described Scottish Recovery Network as the most valued source of evidence, information, and encouragement in their work.

Moving from connecting people with an offer toward using relationships as catalysts for change, where the conversation goes deeper into what someone actually needs and what might shift as a result, is something Scottish Recovery Network is already beginning to do, and there is more to unlock in how it is used.

Theme 8: Those not yet connected to Scottish Recovery Network are as important to the agenda as those who are

"Everything was focused on the third sector, and I felt that if you worked for a clinical service, it almost gave you a black mark. But when I made contact again a couple of years ago, there was a much different outlook."

What we found

Reaching the people and settings not yet connected to Scottish Recovery Network is as important to the peer support agenda as deepening what already exists. Some organisations are keeping a deliberate distance, not because of values disagreement but because of competitive dynamics in the sector. Some people working for change inside statutory services describe a framing that does not always feel like it includes them. Some community and grassroots settings have lighter connection to Scottish Recovery Network than others. The historical perception that Scottish Recovery Network was unwelcoming to people in clinical services has shifted, and people working in statutory settings describe a much more open and collaborative relationship now than they did a few years ago, and there is more ground to cover.

One person described contacting Scottish Recovery Network again after a gap of several years, saying the experience was completely different from what they remembered, and that the shift toward genuinely welcoming people from statutory settings had changed what felt possible for them in their own work.

The people who shared critical observations were also consistent in what they described wanting: curiosity and collaboration, the sense that Scottish Recovery Network works at its best when it comes to the work with genuine openness about what is and what could be, building change through relationships, and creating a space where the third sector and statutory divide can simply be set aside and where people can show up as practitioners rather than as representatives of their organisational context.

The strategic plan specifically names the need to identify and connect mental health system changemakers, including those new to working outside NHS structures, and to help them know they are not alone. That ambition sits directly alongside this finding.

What comes next

The peer support agenda in Scotland is at an important moment. Policy conditions are more favourable than they have been for some time, there are people inside statutory services who are ready for change and looking for support to make it happen, and the recovery movement has not gone away. Scottish Recovery Network has 25 years of relationships, evidence, and credibility to draw on.

A cohort of organisations and individuals have moved further along the change journey than anticipated and have shared a clear picture of what they need next: line management support, career pathways, governance frameworks, and peer leadership development are at the top of what they are asking for.

The conversations in this report also point to something about how change happens in Scotland and what enables it. The people who are shifting things are doing it through relationships, through trust built over time, through the confidence that comes from knowing someone is behind them and that what they are doing has evidence and a community behind it. That is what Scottish Recovery Network makes possible, and it is what the peer support agenda in Scotland will continue to need. The relationships Scottish Recovery Network builds and nurtures are its most distinctive asset, and there is more to unlock in how they are used.

The findings in this report speak directly to Scottish Recovery Network's ten-year strategic plan, Catalysts for Change, published in 2026. Where the strategic plan sets out four outcomes: lived experience and peer leaders who influence systems, an intentional peer support workforce that thrives, collaboration that drives innovation, and a skilled and adaptive organisation. The conversations in this report provide early evidence of all four beginning to take shape. They also point clearly to where the work now needs to go.



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