



Peer Research Group Report 2024

Listening, Learning, Leading: peer voices at the centre



connection | hope | belonging

centred.scot/discoverycollege

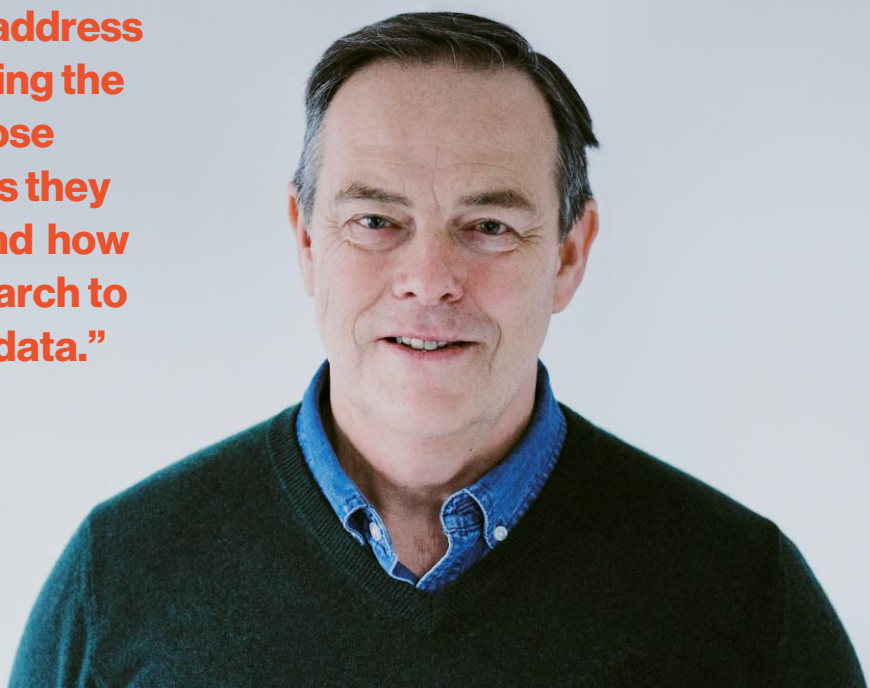
Foreword by David Brookfield

Centred (Scotland) has a long history of delivering mental health services in Highland. Established in 1984 it prides itself in being the leading provider of mental health services in the region, it is certainly the most innovative. So, when the concept of a Recovery College co-developed with people who have lived experience was first introduced and then researched, it was clear that this kind of innovation would bring major improvements to the wellbeing of people within Highland. Supporting those who are socially excluded to find a way to a better future for themselves is a key motivation for this work.

Mental health problems cause varied and considerable challenges and can have devastating consequences. Scotland has a higher suicide rate than England and Wales (Highland has the second highest rate of suicide in Scotland with Orkney only marginally ahead) so it is vital that we try to address the root causes of these worrying figures. People who are socially excluded have a higher risk of developing mental ill health and more challenges in accessing support. This group includes those in deprived areas (either due to rurality or economic reasons), children in care, people with drug or alcohol problems, black and ethnic minority groups, homeless people and ex-prisoners. There have been many developments over the years in the treatment of mental health conditions and although peer support has its roots in the 18th century it has only been since the 1990s that it was formalised. In the UK and particularly Scotland it remains in its infancy and more research on its benefits needs to be examined and demonstrated. This report aims to identify the challenges and benefits of peer research, and to contribute to the Discovery College's model for excellence in peer practice.

“The work carried out by our research team begins to address key issues of understanding the effects of research on those going through recovery as they create social networks and how best to conduct that research to gain the most significant data.”

David Brookfield



Acknowledgements

The Discovery College has been co-developed alongside those with lived experience and in collaboration with Centred Scotland, HUG (Action for Mental Health), Spirit Advocacy, Scottish Recovery Network, NHS Highland, Caithness Mental Health Group and Habitus Collective, who have all supported the planning, building, and envisioning of this new development for the Highland region.

The Discovery College Peer Research Group would like to thank the Ideas Fund and Habitus Collective for making our research work possible; Centred CEO David Brookfield, Discovery College Manager Sue Lyons, our Brand Manager Christine Butchart and her assistant Alana Kotrys for their input into this report; and all of DC peer support workers, trainees, volunteers, peer students and peer walk-ins for their participation in our research work.

Abbreviations used in this report:

DC	Discovery College
ICR	Independent Community Researcher
PR	Peer Researcher
PRG	Peer Research Group
PS	Peer Student
PSW	Peer Support Worker
PWi	Peer Walk-in



Contents

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Contextual Influences
- 1.2 The importance of Peer Support
- 1.2 Key summary insight from Peer Research Group

2 Overview of Discovery College

- 2.1 What is Discovery College?
- 2.2 Who is Discovery College for?
- 2.3 What does Discovery College offer?
- 2.4 Where can I visit Discovery College?
 - 2.4.1 Eastgate, Inverness
 - 2.4.2 Caithness
 - 2.4.3 Lochaber
 - 2.4.4 Discovery College Online
- 2.5 Discovery College prospectus
- 2.6 Significant growth, challenges and successes
 - 2.6.1 Growth
 - 2.6.2 Challenges
 - 2.6.3 Successes
- 2.7 Unique approach to building community

3. Peer Research Group

- 3.1 The need for Peer driven research
 - 3.1.1 PRG definition of Peer Research
- 3.2 Collaboration to fund Peer Research
- 3.3 Reflection on PRG team building process.
- 3.4 A safe environment for connection
- 3.5 Finding the synergy in peer support work and peer research
 - 3.5.1 Framing peer research at Discovery College
 - 3.5.2 Approaching the question of research
 - 3.5.3 A natural fit?
- 3.6 Key learning

4. Development of peer research approaches

- 4.1 Ethnography in peer research
 - 4.1.1 Observational research
 - 4.1.2 Reflexivity
 - 4.1.3 Open Conversations and Peer Feedback
 - 4.1.4 Loosely structured interviews
- 4.2 Ethical Considerations
- 4.3 Identifying strengths, skills and talents
- 4.4 Sharing, reflecting and always learning
- 4.5 The supporting role of the independent community researcher

Contents cont'd

4. Development of peer research approaches cont'd

- 4.6 PRG Collaborative outputs
 - 4.6.1 Designed Research Tools
 - 4.6.2 Co-analysed Data
 - 4.6.3 Presented new knowledge
 - 4.6.4 Supported development of Discovery College
 - 4.6.5 Fieldwork in the Community

5. Descriptions of PRG activities and focus areas

- 5.1 An exercise in building community research skills
- 5.2 Peer research in Discovery College, Eastgate
- 5.3 Table Talk
- 5.4 Question Boards
- 5.5 Crafting Conversations
- 5.6 Mutually beneficial relationships
- 5.7 Peer research during peer support activities in Caithness

6. Conducting long-term research in marginalised and under-served communities

- 6.1 Recovery Unit, Porterfield Prison, Inverness
- 6.2 From Rainbow Group to Friendship Fridays, Caithness

7. Collaboration and co-evolution of Discovery College in Highland

8. References

Collective Summary

Discovery College is not just a service, it is a community of practice, a movement, and a living response to the urgent realities of mental health recovery in rural Scotland. This report, co-produced by the college's peer research group (PRG), documents the emergence of a new paradigm in research - one that is relational, reflexive, and radically inclusive. It offers not only findings, but a philosophy: that lived experience is expertise, and that recovery is best nurtured through mutuality, creativity, and care.

Discovery College's reach across the Highlands, from Caithness to Inverness and Lochaber, from prisons to crafting tables, is testament to its adaptability and relevance. But its true power lies in its ethos: co-production, inclusivity, and the lived experience lens. These are not just principles, they are practices embedded in every conversation, every tool, and every moment of connection. Discovery College does not impose structure, it invites participation. It bends formal rules to make space for authenticity, and in doing so, it builds trust.

Peer support and peer research are not parallel tracks in our work, the synergy between them forms a cornerstone of the Discovery College's identity. Peer support workers are also peer researchers, and this dual role brings a depth of insight that transforms research from data collection into relational inquiry. Reflexivity, open conversation, and loosely structured interviews are not just methods, they are expressions of dignity, trust, and relational ethics. The PRG's definition of peer research, reflective, creative, and grounded in mutuality, captures this beautifully.

Throughout the report, quotes from peer support workers/peer researchers (PSWs/PRs), the independent community researcher (ICR) and most importantly, peer walk-ins (PWIs) and peer students (PSs), convey the emotional and transformative impact of peer support. They speak to the "magic" of mutual recovery: the moment someone walks through the door, is met with warmth, and begins to feel seen. These moments are not incidental, they are foundational. They are the invisible scaffolding that holds up the visible outcomes.

Peer-led research is not something done about Discovery College, it is done within it, as part of its daily rhythm and relational fabric. The integration of the PSW/PR and ICR roles, the co-designed tools, and creative methods like "Table Talk" reinforce the ethos of responsiveness. Research is not an external audit, rather it is a living dialogue. Peer research that informs Development Days and so helps shape the Prospectus of courses and sessions are a clear example of how relational inquiry drives service development in real time.

The PRG's work is rich with ethical, emotional, and methodological depth. The tension between support and research is handled with care, and the move towards an ethnographic research approach feels like a natural evolution rooted in Discovery College's values. Decompression sessions, naming conventions like "peer walk-in," and the use of crafting conversations and question boards are more than techniques, they are microcosms of the College's ethos: connection through creativity, authenticity, and mutual care.

Collective Summary cont'd

The case studies on Porterfield Prison, Friendship Fridays, and the snowy vignette from Wick, illustrate how peer research can catalyse systemic change in even the most marginalised spaces. These are not isolated successes but signs of a deeper shift. Discovery College is not just building a recovery community, it is shaping a new paradigm for research itself.

The emphasis is on co-evolution. For example, how peer research actively shapes service delivery through Development Days and ongoing feedback, positions Discovery College as a dynamic, responsive system. It is not a static model to be replicated - it is a movement to be joined. This report invites funders, policymakers, and practitioners to recognise peer-led initiatives not as supplements, but as essential infrastructure for mental health recovery.

In sum, this report is a collective act of storytelling, inquiry, and transformation. It honours the voices of those with lived experience, and it offers a blueprint for how research can be reimagined, not as extraction, but as relationship. Discovery College is proof that when research is rooted in community, creativity, and care, it doesn't just describe change – it becomes it.



1. Introduction

This report is a collaboration by members of the Discovery College's peer research group (PRG) and is based on knowledge drawn from the group's experiences in conducting peer support work and peer research throughout 2024. The report also refers to academic and organisational papers and reports for contextual and background information and includes insights and observations from Discovery College management team.

This report does not cover in detail all the elements that feature in the practice of peer support work. Rather, its focus is on the peer research process as experienced by peer support workers (PSWs) working alongside an independent community researcher (ICR) as members of the PRG. The purpose of the report is to share knowledge built on the experiences gained by the PRG about the challenges and benefits of peer research at Discovery College. The aim of the report is to contribute to the collaborative creation of a model for excellence in the conduct of peer research and peer practice in rural areas.

The peer research activities and insights presented in this report are unique. They are significant in terms of their contribution to understanding the complexities and benefits of combining peer support work and peer research. The insights also underline the value of peer support work and the need for peer support work to be acknowledged as a protective factor against mental ill-health and as a vital support in mental health recovery. This is particularly important for people who live in rural areas or are part of a marginalised demographic and/or community. In Discovery College Highland's catchment area, 65% of people live in remote rural, accessible rural areas or remote small towns (HCPP, 2022).



1.1 Contextual Influences

The need for recognition and utilisation of peer support organisations is more apparent than ever in the context of recent reports published by key stakeholders in public health in Scotland and particularly the Highland region. In reporting on their recent investigation in Highland Region, the Scottish Human Rights Commission reported 'an apparent failure to meet the most basic international obligations related to the right to health, the right to housing and the right to food' (SHRC, 2024). Among the critical issues they found were that:

- In certain areas, sustained cuts to critical health services have been made with significant impacts on the local population.
- A significant number of people are homeless, and there is a shortage of affordable housing in rural areas including social housing.
- There are concerns about the ability of most people to heat their homes, exacerbated by high energy costs.
- Poverty forces individuals to prioritise fuel over food. This is a direct consequence of the need to travel for work and healthcare, as well as the high cost of heating homes.

The impact of poverty and inequalities on rural communities was explored in the report "Our Lives, Our Solutions" (The Poverty Alliance 2020) and highlighted that investment in mental health services was key to improving the lives of people who are facing inequalities in rural communities.

Addressing inequalities in access to healthcare, housing, and food is crucial for improving mental health and wellbeing across communities in Highland. These, and other inequalities, such as poor public transport infrastructure in rural areas significantly contribute to a further sad and stark reality: Highland Council reports that the rate of mental illness and suicide is significantly higher in the Highlands compared to Scotland as a whole, for both men and women (McNeill, 2022).

The reality of living with the inequalities set out above erodes hope, connection and feelings of belonging for people, and can have an adverse effect on community cohesion. Research carried out by HUG (Action for Mental Health), which surveyed 901 participants, identified that people living in rural poverty have the lowest levels of mental wellbeing with the population (Lyons 2019). These findings also show the urgent need for more and better support for people in this area.

This report from Discovery College's Peer Research Group will show that peer support/ peer research with and within affected communities already plays a critical role in meeting the need that people have for mental health support. This report asserts that government and other funding bodies should promote and support the growth of peer support organisations across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

1.2 Importance of peer support

Peer support has a vital role to play in supporting mental health and wellbeing for individuals and communities and there is both academic and community research to support this claim. Academic research shows that peer support helps reduce social isolation (Fuller et al, 2022; Bravata et al, 2023), increases hope (Barr et al 2020), a sense of belonging (Joo et al, 2022) and reduces stigma (Sun et al, 2022).

Evidence shows that peer support workers are often better able to connect and engage with underserved and disconnected populations, particularly in supporting the accessibility of mental health services in rural settings (Cheesmond et al, 2020). In some NHS Health Boards outwith Highland, peer support workers are trained, employed and integrated into existing treatment pathways.

Despite this evidence, the life-changing opportunities and bespoke support services available through community-led, third sector and peer support organisations are currently undervalued and underfunded in the Health and Social Care sector.

Since 2020 alone a number of charities, community hubs and support groups in Highland have either had to close or have experienced cuts to their funding. This includes groups such as Health and Happiness, Creativity in Care and ACI Inverness, all of whom have faced funding cuts which have affected their services. Across Scotland at the time of writing, campaigns are underway in other areas to ensure the survival of vital community projects and services supporting people with their mental health (Gill, 2025).

At the same time, waiting lists remain long. In April 2025, a Freedom of Information request to NHS Highland identified that 702 people were on the waiting lists for the psychological department. This included data for Adult Mental Health services, Adult Psychology, Psychological Services and Clinical Psychology (NHS Highland Freedom of Information Team 2025).

These challenges, nationally and locally, mean that people in remote and rural communities in the Highlands face many barriers to receiving accessible, timely and ongoing support for their mental health recovery. These barriers also make it difficult for people to navigate the impacts of the challenging external circumstances highlighted by the SHRC 2024 report. It is hoped that this report will contribute to recognising, understanding and addressing these inequalities.

This report will also reflect on the significance of the development of the Discovery College in urban and rural areas of the Highlands. Although the model is based on the established concept of Recovery Colleges elsewhere in the UK, the Discovery College is exceptional in its progressive and visionary approach and aim of building an inclusive recovery community and excellence in peer support and peer research across the Highlands of Scotland.

Finally, the ongoing work of peer support work/peer research within the Discovery College aims to contribute to system change within Highland. The objectives for system change are to increase the adoption of peer practices to support mental health service delivery in both the third and statutory sectors, drive excellence in peer support and peer research and increase the availability of peer support across Highland.

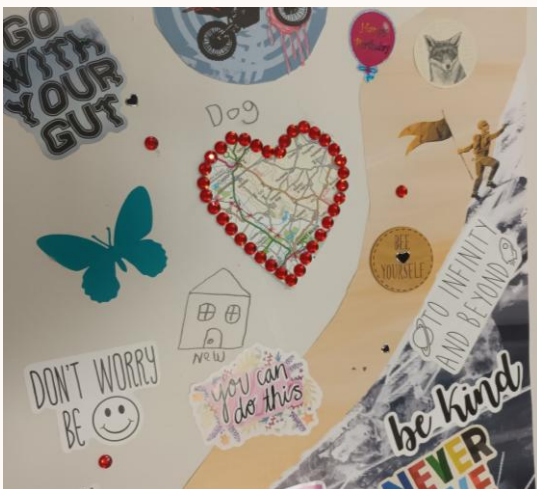
1.3 Key Insights from Peer Research Group

- **Peer-to-peer connection is central to Discovery College, nurturing trust, safety, and meaningful recovery through shared lived experience.**
- **Peer support workers build and sustain social connection, hope, and belonging by valuing their own and others' experiences.**
- **Discovery College spaces enable mutual support with empathy, humour, creativity, and kindness.**
- **Peer research is grounded in equity - peer researchers, peer supporter workers and participants share lived experience, deepening insight and understanding.**

Peer-to-peer connections are centered throughout all activities in the Discovery College model. This supports the creation of safe spaces where trust can grow, deeper connections can develop and where sharing lived experience creates opportunities for meaningful and sustainable personal growth and recovery.

Peer support workers at Discovery College help people to find and contribute to meaningful social connections. This helps them to sustain feelings of hope and belonging for themselves and others and they do this through embracing and valuing their own lived experience as well as that of every individual coming through the doors. Discovery College provides the spaces, tools and opportunities for people to both receive and give support with understanding, empathy, kindness, good humour and creativity.

In terms of peer research in this environment, there is equitable status between peer researchers (PRs) and those contributing to the research. PSW/PRs have personal experience of walking the same/similar path as those now engaging with Discovery College services and this brings a deep level of insight, empathy and understanding to this work.



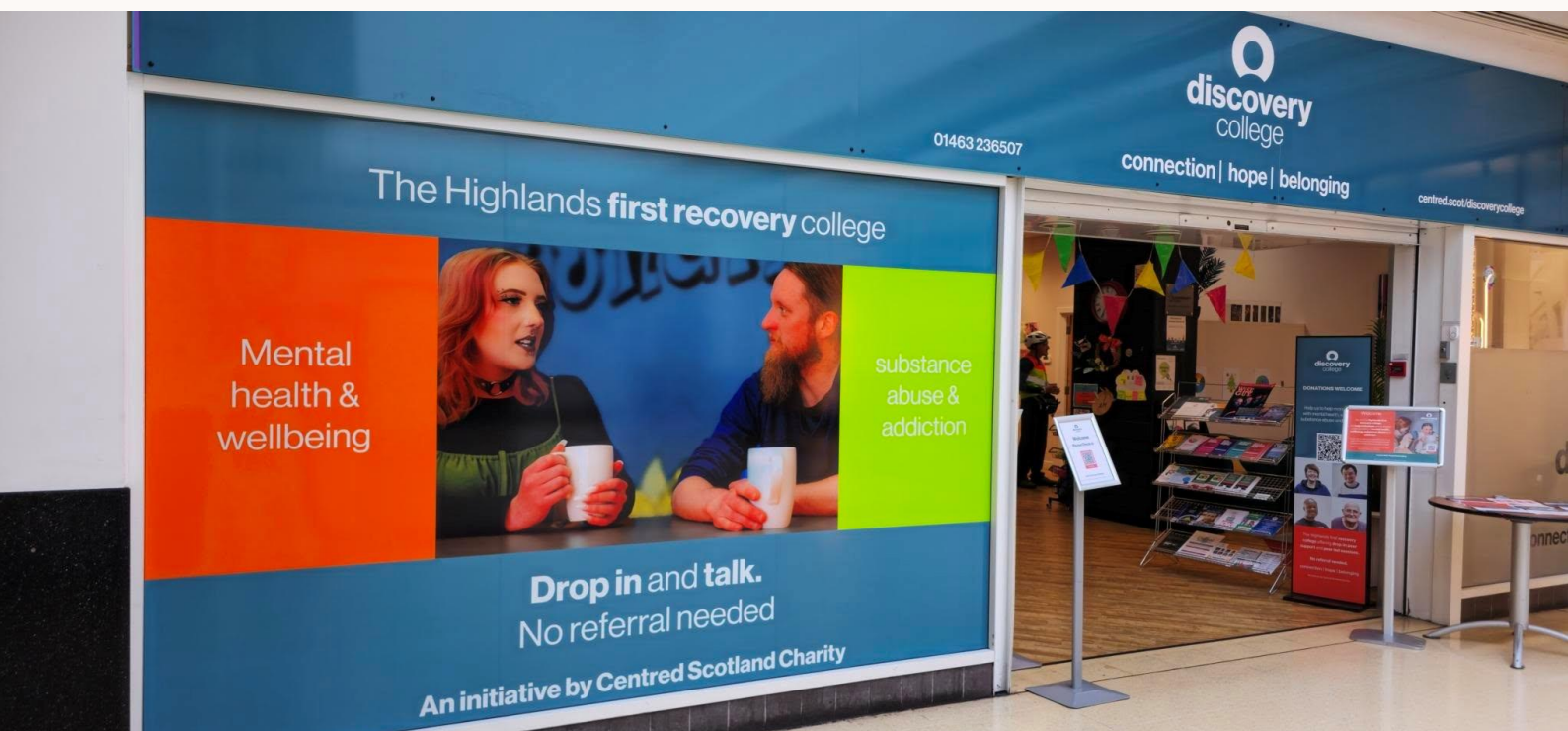
“We are creating a community of peers through the Discovery College, where sharing lived experience in a safe space can help us support each other and reduce stigma about mental ill-health and substance use”. (DC peer support workers).

“Everything is good for me in Discovery College. I have friendly people to talk to who are always willing to help me. I’m originally from Bangladesh, and I’ve faced racial abuse in other settings but here they take time to listen to me and understand me, and they don’t judge. I’m accepted and welcomed”. (Peer Walk-in).

2. Overview of Discovery College

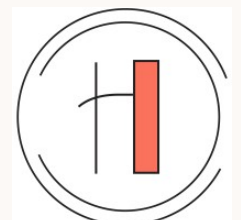
The Highland Discovery College is a new and much needed, inclusive service based on two principles:

- That peer support within a safe environment can offer hope, connection and belonging for people at every stage of their recovery journey.
- That gaining a deeper understanding of wellbeing, mental health and substance use can be a transformative experience which helps people in their recovery.



The demand for a Recovery College model, has been championed by people living with mental illness, substance abuse or addiction for many years.

The Discovery College has been co-developed alongside those with lived experience and in collaboration with Spirit Advocacy, Scottish Recovery Network, NHS Highland, Caithness Mental Health Group and Habitus Collective, who have all supported the planning, building, and envisioning of this new development for the Highland region.



2.1 What is Discovery College?

Discovery College is a wholly peer-based service facilitated by Centred, a leading mental health charity in the Highlands of Scotland. It supports people living in this mostly rural and semi-rural region to find connection, hope and belonging through its in-person and online services. It offers opportunities for people to both give and receive support, and to help build, and be part of a recovery community.

The Discovery College peer support team facilitate conversations, activity-based sessions and learning sessions which help build a deeper understanding of the issues facing people who live with mental ill-health and/or problems related to drugs and alcohol. Discovery College, which opened at the start of 2023, fulfilled a ten-year-old strategic ambition for NHS Highland and the long-held hopes and dreams of many people with lived experience of mental illness, addiction and substance misuse across Highland.

2.2 Who is Discovery College for?

Discovery College is inclusive of people with different lived experiences, and who are at different stages of their journey. Course availability is open to all over age 18, and students are not required to disclose any health or demographic data to participate other than the first 4 digits of their postcode. Helping and supporting people to gain confidence, life-skills and develop capacity for volunteering or employment is a fundamental part of the Discovery College aim but this is not used as a measure of success.

2.3 What does Discovery College offer?

Discovery College operates across multiple physical hubs, and in online spaces and provides:

- A dedicated programme of learning events, training sessions and support to build confidence and skills for life, volunteering or employment.
- Varied sessions and groups focusing on social connection and engagement, developing life-skills, and improving health and wellbeing.
- Sessions which are based on health and wellness topics and activities, co-developed with peers, informed by community research and tested to improve wellness and connectedness
- Training programme for people with lived experience to become peer researchers and peer support workers.
- Safe, welcoming and non-judgemental spaces to nurture hope, connection and belonging, to relax, to have a bit of a laugh, to find camaraderie - all of which have a key role in supporting people on their recovery journey.
- Some of the sessions are available to be booked and others are drop-in sessions where no booking is required.
- Free hot drinks and snacks are available and there is access to peer support during the days the College is open.

2.4 Where can I visit the Discovery College?

The Discovery College currently operates in Caithness, Inverness and to a lesser extent right now, in Lochaber with the Discovery College Manager coordinating the development of current and future DC venues, activities, sessions and Peer Support teams.

2.4.1 Inverness - Eastgate Centre

In Inverness, the Eastgate community lounge opened for three days each week, with three Peer Support Workers (PSWs) in October 2024. They offer a warm welcome and space for people to join in with others in group chats, sessions and activities, or find a quiet corner to rest, or talk on a one-to-one basis. Future plans include expanding the team to include further peers to train as peer support workers and the appointment of a Peer Mentor who delivers Peer-to-Peer training across DC venues. Currently there are also a number of volunteers who contribute to the daily activities, peer conversations and support the PSWs in creating a space where people can feel comfortable.

2.4.2 Caithness – Wick, Castletown and Thurso

In Caithness, there has been no dedicated venue. Today work is in progress to develop premises in Wick. However, DC continues to grow and thrive in Caithness with PSWs expanding the choice of sessions and activities to accommodate growing demand, using venues in Wick, Castletown and Thurso. These are hired on an ad hoc basis depending on the practical requirements of the activities and the needs and preferences of the group. PSWs created new peer led weekly sessions including Friendship Fridays and Dungeons & Dragons which are designed so that people can meet regularly, get to know each other, join in activities, have fun, and share stories.

2.4.3 Lochaber

In Lochaber, the Discovery College has delivered Peer2Peer training for a number of people and is building partnerships and connections with organisations and individuals in the area. This will enable DC to offer informal peer support and peer led sessions to people living in and around Lochaber.

2.4.4 Discovery College Online

Some sessions and courses can be delivered in an online format meaning anyone from anywhere can join by enrolling online and using a DC generated secure link.

"There's no pressure at Discovery College, that's probably what makes it feel like a place where people can help and support each other" (Peer Walk-in).

2.5 Discovery College Prospectus

All sessions and courses are co-developed with PSWs and the DC Manager who incorporate input from peer research and direct input from current and past peer students. Input from the people who access DC peer support in any way is actively sought to co-develop a programme that reflects the needs of people using Discovery College.

Throughout the year the prospectus of sessions, activities and training courses is adapted and refreshed to reflect seasonal and cultural events in the Highlands.



2.6 Significant growth, challenges and successes

To date, **Discovery College has been co-developed with over 200 community members from Highland** (Caithness, Sunderland, Ross, Badenoch & Strathspey, Inverness, Skye, and Lochaber). The Discovery College continues to work locally with communities through co-development sessions and feedback to learn, reshape, and ensure the model continues to meet community needs.

2.6.1 Growth

With further grants secured through the Ideas Fund and Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI), they went on to hire a service manager and peer supporters from the original cohort to work in Caithness and Inverness. In 2024, they began offering a full suite of sessions that students could book onto online and for 2025, they have secured operational funding to the end of 2027. The Discovery College now operates a community lounge, art room, training room and quiet room and is open 3 days per week in the Eastgate Centre, Inverness. Suitable premises have been identified in Wick, Caithness and Invergordon, Ross-shire, as well as potential partnerships in progress in Lochaber. In essence, Discovery College is laying the groundwork for a grassroots recovery community to flourish across the Highland Region.

2.6.2 Challenges

Peer support organisations across Highland face a unique set of challenges, shaped by geography, demographics and infrastructure. The Discovery College has faced and is still facing (and overcoming) these and other challenges with imagination, fortitude and a shared passion for collaboration and peer support to be within reach of anyone facing their own personal challenges.

Until DC premises in Eastgate, Inverness opened in October 2024, almost all staff communication and most courses and sessions were conducted in online spaces. While this did present a challenge in terms of team building and co-development work with peers, significant ground was covered, particularly in building the Peer Research Group (PRG) and developing plans for conducting peer research in Highland. The development of the PRG is covered in more detail in section three below.

Spring of 2024 brought staffing challenges with the need to seek and employ a new manager for Discovery College Highland. This caused some disruption in the design and delivery of peer support work, peer research, peer to peer training and the summer prospectus. However, one of DC's main collaborators, Habitus, stepped in and bridged this hiatus using their expertise in peer practice to bring stability and support in the interim.

This inconsistency in leadership for DC meant that Centred experienced challenges in incorporating peer services into an organisation that delivers traditional, commissioned support services. Building an understanding within the management team of the work that DC carries out was difficult without the manager in place. Once the post was filled Centred's CEO ensured that the manager from DC was a part of Centred's management team and had space to talk about the work and the successes of the DC. Being part of the wider team has helped to integrate DC as a valued part of the organisation, building relationships between the different parts of Centred and the individual staff.

This was key to creating an organisational understanding of DC and the role of Peer Support in Recovery. The DC Lounge space offered a welcoming space to support staff, and this was appreciated by both those staff and PWIs.

2.6.3 Successes

During this time PSW/PRs continued to co-develop and deliver online and in-person sessions across Highland for people in need of peer support. These included Self Care, a home for mental health and Peer Walks in nature. DC also welcomed a new collaboration with Mhor Collective who introduced Digital Health Starter Sessions for peers.

The new manager arrived in August and successfully steered Discovery College through the transition from the (mostly) digital realm to the physical/hybrid realm and to its current status as one of the fastest developing peer support organisations in Highland. Key to this was the new manager's experience in peer practice and her dynamic, collaborative approach to working with PSW/PRs, other DC staff, Habitus, Mhor Collective and many other organisations to design and deliver the first full autumn/winter prospectus. This was offered in hybrid fashion with some sessions online, some in rented spaces and, from October 2024, in the newly refurbished space of DC Eastgate.

Mention must be made here of the effort and imagination deployed by DC's manager in coordinating all the work needed to turn the premises at DC Eastgate into a colourful, welcoming and multi-purpose venue for delivering peer support. This development of the space whilst coordinated by the manager was based on feedback from PWIs and the PSWs. This feedback led to a significant re-organisation of the way the space is used at Christmas 2024. The space is continually reviewed and feedback from people using the space contributes to any changes that are made.

2.7 Unique approach to building community

From inception, a participatory approach was taken in developing the strategy, design and development of the College, thus ensuring people across all demographics were involved right from the beginning. Centred's commitment to working with partners to design engagement methods was crucial to creating a meaningful and transformative pathway for people to begin and maintain the recovery process.

Co-development and co-design, with the voice of community and those with a personal lived experience of mental health and substance use challenges, was central to Centred's approach to developing the Discovery College. This process developed through online lived experience groups and meetings with partners and statutory services to the point where it became clear that the lived experience groups wanted and had the capability to drive the project forward. In 2022, HUG (Action for Mental Health) delivered Peer2Peer training designed by Scottish Recovery Network to 10 people with a view to developing a team of people skilled in using peer support skills to support others into and through recovery.

Four of these people joined the team developing the college and became their first peer support workers. They chose the name Discovery College for the new venture. This name reflected the changes in identity experienced by the PSWs who completed the Peer2Peer training. These changes reshaped their identities from people suffering mental ill-health to people living in recovery through the processes of self-development and self-discovery undertaken in a mutually supportive environment. In essence, this is the power of peer support and thus began the creation of an environment in which to build and sustain a recovery community within the Highlands.

The quote below is published in SRN website from one of the peers who undertook this training, was involved with the co-development of DC and is now working at the Eastgate venue as a peer support worker and peer researcher:

“Peer support has allowed me to completely change my mindset. Now I see that everything I have been through and recovered from has made me the person I am today. My mental health no longer defines me or holds me back, instead I am using it to drive me forward, knowing I am now in a position to use my lived experiences and offer support to someone who might be a few steps behind me on their journey or even too scared to start it.” (PSW/PR)

Another PSW/PR, who was part of the Discovery College co-development team from the outset, has described how it feels now that all the work and planning has come to fruition and peer support work is happening at Eastgate and in Caithness:

“Working in Discovery College doesn't come without its challenges but often at our debriefs there is a word that crops up time and time again, that word is magic! there is a certain kind of magic that happens when someone suffering, struggling and losing hope arrives into the DC space, this may even be their last hope. When someone new arrives, we know the courage it's taken them to walk through our door, we know the challenges they may have faced seeking support and often its etched on their face. The magic happens when they realise they are amongst people who 'get it' people who genuinely understand because they have been in that very position. Facial expressions soften, sitting alone turns into sitting together and real connections are made. I've witnessed humanity on a different level in the DC, from strangers shaking hands for the first time, to snowy weather leading to an offer of a spare room to hunker down in until the storm passes. Every day I see kindness and compassion and a mutual respect that truly empowers our DC peers and installs hope in not only them but PSWs and all other staff members too. Nothing is more precious than having someone willing to weather life's storm beside you and maybe let you know what they did to recover while never seeking a hierarchy just a mutual journey of recovery. Add in a cuppa and a good laugh and I think, although not flawless, it's perfect progress.” (PSW/PR).

3. Peer Research Group

3.1 The need for peer-led research

After many years of collaborative effort, by 2023 the breadth and value of all the growth, challenges and successes, and their potential contribution to the expansion of peer support for mental health recovery in Highland was becoming apparent. This pointed to an opportunity to capture people's thoughts about, and experiences of, Discovery College for research and development purposes. This would help shape the growth of the Discovery College and help further the wider aim of contributing to system reform and shifting the current culture in mental health service delivery through research evidence which validates and promotes the adoption of peer practice.

3.1.1 Discovery College PRG definition of Peer Research

Peer research is a collaborative, reflective process grounded in lived experience. It blends ethical inquiry, creative methods and mutual support to generate meaningful insights. By valuing personal stories and co-produced knowledge, it strengthens recovery communities and informs service development with authenticity, compassion and a commitment to continuous learning.

3.2 Collaboration to fund peer research – Habitus, Ideas Fund & Centred

Peer support workers were given the opportunity, again through a collaborative effort from the above organisations, to undertake training as peer researchers. This began in 2023 with four PSWs signing up for Summer School with the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) and following this, participating in several focused follow up sessions led by two UHI Researchers. When this first phase ended the PRs joined with an Independent Community Researcher (ICR), and between them began a process of shared learning to understand the research opportunities and approaches that were compatible with peer support work and could inform further Discovery College developments.

This next phase was initially focused on relationship building between four of the PSWs from Inverness and Caithness and the independent community researcher. As there was no physical base for DC at that time (Jan 2024) the group met in an online team space and formed the Peer Research Group. This meets every Monday morning for 2 hours.

3.3 Reflection on PRG team building process

During our initial meetings, we shared and learned a lot about each other's lived experience of mental ill-health and living in recovery, of our motives for wanting to do community and peer research, work related and personal goals. We formed a very strong team where there is confidence and trust in each other. Through our open and frank, sometimes emotional and often humorous discussions we created a safe space in our Teams meetings and group chat to discuss ideas and gain understanding by being open to different perspectives and to sharing deeply personal experiences.

Decompression Sessions

We found that a Monday morning was an ideal time to reflect on, share and release any pressures still present from the previous working week. As well as being a useful way to decompress it also highlighted issues to do with working conditions, practices and the functionality of the physical spaces where peer support happens which could then be discussed and actioned.

PSWs are always fully present with the people they are supporting, which can mean that caring for their own mental health and well-being is at risk of being overlooked. Decompression sessions with the DC manager at the end of each working day, and weekly for the first half hour of the PRG meetings helps to mitigate this risk as well as performing the function of sharing knowledge and experience of important and/or sensitive information in a safe environment.

3.4 A safe environment for connection

A safe environment which nurtures meaningful social connection like this is important for people working in a peer support environment, and equally so for people entering that space looking for support. The reciprocal support, respect, and recognition generated can influence how people feel about personal, social and working lives and reinforce a positive social identity. In their weekly team meetings, the PRG were essentially practicing and modelling the behaviours they bring to their peer support work.

Practicing these processes of identity-building and social connectedness, which are core indicators of personal recovery (Leamy et al. 2011), (Karadzhov, 2021), within peer practice, is at the heart of nurturing a recovery community into being. The Discovery College offers an inclusive and enabling pathway to begin and sustain those processes for people in the Highlands. Getting on that path begins with meeting someone who is already on it and being given the time and safe space to build trust, camaraderie and meaningful connection with others. This is what happens within the peer support model of the Discovery College.

“I enjoy Discovery College because it provides me a sense of belonging, I’ve always been shunned from groups and never felt welcome, or I have to act differently around my peers. DC allows you to share your experiences with like-minded people, offers support and motivation - which I find is more like a family than a peer-to-peer group. It provides a safe space with no judgement whatsoever.” (Peer)



3.5 Finding the synergy in peer support work and peer research

3.5.1 Framing peer research at Discovery College

Peer research conducted at Discovery College has two objectives. Firstly, to learn from the lived experience of peer walk-ins and peer students during participatory research activities, and secondly to learn from the experiences of DC staff members who have the dual role of peer support worker/peer researcher. The aim of both objectives is to use this learning to enhance the support services that Discovery College offers to people with mental ill-health and/or substance use who live in the Highlands and to contribute to the creation of a framework for excellence in peer research in the Highlands.

3.5.2 Approaching the question of research

One point of discussion in PRG meetings that was returned to a few times before consensus was reached was how to refer to the people visiting DC for support on their mental health journey and who may choose to participate in future research activities. Based on the PRG members own experiences of being referred to as a 'client' or 'service user' during interactions with mental health services there was reluctance to use such depersonalising terms. The term 'peer walk-in' was settled on for people using DC Eastgate community lounge or attending Caithness drop-in sessions and 'peer-student' for anyone joining more formalised training or learning sessions.

The PRG felt that retaining the word peer was important to emphasise the equitable status which everyone enjoys at Discovery College and that 'walk-in' and 'student' would allow PRs to differentiate between people using different elements of DC services in discussions and the research outputs.

3.5.3 Approaching the question of research

It could be assumed that peer support work and peer research naturally go together. However, identity is influenced by the roles people perform, and peer support work and gathering data for research purposes require different mindsets: one involves being fully present and focused on supporting someone, while the other involves analysing information while listening. Balancing these roles can be challenging, not least around questions of ethics, data protection, and the best interests of the people being supported.

Yet when thoughtfully integrated, this dual role offers a uniquely powerful lens for gathering evidence of lived experience in mental health recovery. Peer researchers bring deep empathy, trust, and cultural insight to the research process, enabling more authentic conversations and richer data. Their shared experience fosters a sense of safety and mutual understanding, which can encourage participants to speak more openly. This approach also helps ensure that open conversations, research questions, methods, and interpretations are grounded in real-world relevance, making the findings more meaningful and actionable for service development. In essence, combining peer support and peer research transforms evidence-gathering into a collaborative, humanising process that honours the voices of those most affected.

While acknowledging both the benefits and challenges, discussions in the PRG meetings highlighted that there was tension around the idea of conducting research while supporting people who were at a potentially very vulnerable stage in their lives. In considering this, the knowledge and landscape between academic and peer research was explored. The PRG discussed what the aims of peer research should and can be, as well as the need for clarity, transparency and boundaries in that purpose when carrying out peer to peer research with individuals, groups or communities.

3.6 Key learning

Tension also existed in the idea and practice of conducting research while being present as a peer support worker with an individual or group. The PRG discussed and analysed this tension and found that there were indeed conflicting contributory factors which included the knowledge that:

- it felt morally wrong and invasive of people's privacy and dignity.
- the person they were supporting deserved 100% of their attention.
- PRGs lived experience of the early stages of a recovery journey showed how challenging it felt to repeatedly answer questions and fill in forms from statutory services about their issues, diagnoses, medications and treatments.
- people's real experiences matter and lived experience is needed in research.
- the emergence of a recovery community through Discovery College locations and sessions needs to be based on a collaboration of knowledge drawn from lived experience.



4. Development of peer research approaches

Once PSW/PRs had recognised the tension within their roles and examined it, they could begin thinking 'outside the box' for research methods that were compatible with the safe spaces and working practices of PSWs. The PRG concluded that an ethnographic approach was the most flexible and effective starting point.

4.1 Ethnography in peer research

Ethnography in peer research is a qualitative approach rooted in sociology and anthropology that involves learning about people through deep immersion in their shared culture—particularly the culture of recovery. In this context, both researchers and participants are part of the same culture and share similar lived experience, allowing for authentic, participatory exploration. Ethnographic peer research uses methods like open conversations, reflexivity, interviews, and participant observation to generate rich, contextual insights. It focuses on understanding specific communities or groups, especially those connected by common health or mental health experiences and encourages ongoing engagement with, and within, the culture being both experienced and analysed.

4.1.1 Observational

Peer, or insider, observational research is a method where the peer researcher is part of a particular social setting or group, observing behaviours, interactions, and practices while actively participating in the group's activities. These observations can then inform a variety of research outputs as well as the direction of future research.

4.1.2 Reflexivity

Reflection is a very helpful mental activity, both in our private and working lives. Learning the practice of reflection allows people to engage in a thoughtful relationship with the world, their own lives and lived experience. Reflection is a crucial cognitive practice throughout the research process. Reflexivity is largely practiced in qualitative research, where it is used to legitimate and validate research procedures.

Reflexivity directly contributes to the credibility of peer research. The self-awareness it produces brings deeper understanding of events, leading to richer and more nuanced insights. Ultimately, any findings are more likely to resonate with the lived experiences of those being studied, thus enhancing the validity and reliability of the research.

4.1.3 Open Conversations and Peer Feedback

Open conversation in peer research is an informal, pressure-free dialogue that unfolds naturally within peer support settings. It prioritizes ease of communication and authentic expression, allowing participants to share lived experiences without structured prompts. This method often yields rich, naturalistic data and is especially effective in ethnographic and reflective research contexts.

Open conversations, where there is no pressure to cover particular topics worked well for the PRG who found it practical and non-invasive as it is a more general qualitative exploration that occurs naturally in DC social settings where conversation is central to peer support work. Sometimes open conversational research is not only the best way, but the only way, to gather knowledge. Most of the quotes found throughout this document were given by peer walk-ins or peer students, with their informed consent, during such conversations or the informal style of interviewing described below.

4.1.4 Loosely structured interviews

This kind of interview is a flexible and informal method where the interviewer does not follow a predetermined set of questions. Instead, the conversation flows naturally, around relatable themes, allowing the interviewer to explore topics based on the interviewee's responses. The independent community researcher working with the PRG, trialled a number of these informal interviews with regular peer walk-ins at DC's community lounge in Eastgate. Participant feedback showed they enjoyed the process. They explained that it felt good that their experiences and opinions were seen as a contribution to knowledge about how DC was meeting people's needs, and what could be done to improve it. This is a method the PRG will build in more regularly as a valuable tool for recording the voices of those whose input matters the most to Discovery College.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

The ethics of how and why the PRG conduct research is consistently revisited whenever there is a discussion about opportunities for research and When PRs are deciding appropriate methods. PRs follow the guidelines below, compiled and made available online by the Third Sector Research Forum, part of the charity Evaluation Support Scotland.

Need - Research should only be carried out where there is clear evidence of need for the research.

Integrity - Research should have integrity and be undertaken in an honest, open, and respectful way.

Accountability - The researcher and the organisation undertaking or commissioning the research should be accountable to participants and stakeholders.

Confidentiality - Research should ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants

Safety - The researcher and the organisation should ensure the safety and wellbeing of both participants and researcher" (Third Sector Research Forum 2021) .

These, and further information on Third Sector research principles and practices can be found on ESS website (Evaluation Support Scotland 2025).

4.3 Identifying strengths, skills and talents

The PRs evaluated their own strengths and challenges in the context of conducting the research. This means they know who is comfortable with public speaking and who would rather help create a presentation than deliver it; they know who has a very good grasp of the ethical side of conducting peer to peer research; they know who leans to the creative and who leans to the logical; and they learned how to blend all this into making us a cohesive, flexible and effective Peer Research Group.

4.4 Sharing, reflecting and always learning

Below are comments from PRG members about the peer research learning experience

“I feel for me the challenges of doing research within peer settings are deciding how to conduct that research, valuing the privacy of the peers and how to remain seen as a fellow peer and not an academic. My feelings on peer support have grown even stronger now I can see it in action. I am aware of how valuable peer research is to keep things moving and developing. I feel that research in this area needs to be as unique as peer practice is to make it truly authentic.” (PSW/PR)

“As a lived experience researcher, being part of the PRG is showing me that passion, to use what they learned from difficult personal experiences to help others, is why my colleagues chose to become peer support workers. This passion to turn hard times into useful experiential knowledge, as this report shows, is what gives peer support an edge over more formalised mental health services. The generosity and good humour they have shared with me as we worked through the processes described in the sections above is greatly appreciated. They helped me to broaden my perspective towards how research can be done less formally and still be as valid and important to shaping knowledge as academic contributions. Our job as the PRG is to continue to design, conduct and deliver research that help the ‘edge’ produced by peer support work, and peer research, be recognised and valued as an integral part of mental health recovery services in Highland and further afield.” (ICR)

4.5 The supporting role of the independent community researcher

The Independent Community Researcher (ICR) role is funded through the Ideas Fund, a grants programme with the British Science Association and funded by Wellcome, which supports more equitable community-researcher collaboration with a focus on mental wellbeing in rural and/or deprived areas. At Discovery College the ICR role is focused on supporting PSW/PRs and co-producing peer-led design, conduct, analysis and delivery of a wide variety of research projects.

4.6 PRG collaborative outputs

Through collaborative work in the peer research group the DC research team have carried out work covering the following areas.

4.6.1 Designed research tools:

The list below shows some of the practical ways that PRG have been developing skills in peer research while producing usable research tools. Creating the research tools below gave us an opportunity to learn and train together as we shared skills and knowledge to produce the following:

- **Survey to peer students**
- **Research briefs**
- **Research proposals**
- **Workshop conduct guidelines**
- **Consent forms**
- **Participant Information Sheets**
- **Peer Storyboard guidelines**
- **Informal interview guidelines**

These and other peer designed research tools will be available as examples in a collaborative lived experience research toolbox. Other peer support organisations across the region will be invited to both use these tools and contribute their own examples, as part of the drive to collaboratively create a 'living toolbox' and framework for excellence in peer research, and other aspects of peer practice, in the Highlands and Islands.

4.6.2 Co-analysed data:

This is a key part of the PRG weekly meetings where events from the previous week, along with reflections and insights are anonymised into 'data' and analysed together. This data has been used to inform various research outputs, including this report.

4.6.3 Presented new knowledge:

Summary peer research report for visiting MSP and Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy of Scotland, Maree Todd.

Community Knowledge Matters Conversation Station (available at [Conversation Station – Community Knowledge Matters](#) – Discovery College PRG.

Peer Storyboard/Digital Newsletter (in progress)

The DC peer podcast (planning stage)

PRG Report 2024 (This report)

4.6.4 Supported development of Discovery College:

Peer research informs quarterly Development Days as PRG gathered and implemented direct inputs from peer walk-ins/peer students. DC recently introduced gender-based groups as a response to requests from peer walk-ins.

4.6.5 Fieldwork in the community

- Fieldwork proposals and presentations
- Survey/questionnaire design
- Interview questions guide

5. Descriptions of PRG activities and focus areas

The following sections offers more detail on a few of the ways the PRG began to work as a research team, practice co-operation and collaboration between us as a peer research group, and out in the community.

5.1 An exercise in building community research skills

PRG designed and sent out a survey to a small database of past peer students.

- **PRG meetings to cover practical and ethical considerations of how much personal information PSW/PRs would ask for.**
- **Collaboration to compile questions** **Peer led**
- **Collaboration on Intro to survey** **Peer led**
- **Learning new software** **PRG**

The purpose of this exercise was to define who the PSWs are, what they do and why lived experience stories and wisdom that peers (students and walk-ins) are willing to share with PSW/PRs is important. It is this lived experience which helps drive the development of the Discovery College for everyone. **The survey was live during June 2024 and drew a response rate of 8% approx. and from these the key findings were that**

- **most respondents had completed treatment with NHS prior to enrolling in a DC course**
- **the course content was rated from fair to very good by all respondents**
- **People's reasons for enrolling ranged from wanting knowledge to support their rural community to seeking knowledge about aspects of mental ill-health they were experiencing themselves**
- **Two thirds of respondents had faced barriers to attending courses in person (lack of DC physical venues and poor public transport options) but had joined online and felt satisfied with this option.**

Anonymised feedback from survey responses:

“I would love more well-being courses. With maybe gentle movements, meditation and mindfulness.”

“Mental health courses can be too heavy and quite depressing, however doing things that make you smile, chat to others without pressure are excellent, just getting out and thinking about other things are good.”

“I think courses doing very simple craft type classes would be good. As long as its fun, interactive and interesting, without any pressure.”

These responses were taken into consideration in the Prospectus development process and helped to shape mindfulness, nature walks and photography and crafting conversations sessions.

5.2 Peer research in Discovery College, Eastgate

The purpose of the Community Lounge is to have a comfortable, warm, safe space where peer support work can happen. And it is, with very positive results. Many of the first wave of peers to ‘drop-in’ since opening in October 2024, are now regulars and the Discovery College are welcoming new people regularly. Quantitative data collected by a trainee PSW since opening day shows that on average, 50 adults per 3-day week were coming through the doors.

“People can take their own time to get comfortable in the space, but I’ve noticed that those who come in regularly have become more sociable, more open and chatty with others, and more relaxed in the community lounge.” (trainee PSW)

Supportive relationships are being built, needs are being identified and pathways co-created, meaning that the DC offer of Connection, Hope and Belonging is being delivered. Peer support within the lounge includes, listening and sharing, helping with benefits, bills etc, tech issues, supporting peer to peer conversation, having a laugh, comforting distress, matching peers with DC sessions and activities, digital support sessions and much more.

Having a dedicated space where people drop-in looking for support without appointments means that PSW's cannot plan and predict how the day will go, they absorb and process a lot of information throughout their day and deal with multiple demands on their attention and presence at any given time. Their focus is on the people needing their support and being present for them. This means that ‘gathering data’ cannot and should not happen, in a formal way, at the same time. This is where observational, reflective research, and creativity have been used effectively as research methods in a number of ways as outlined below.

5.3 Table talk



There are quiet areas in the community lounge in both Eastgate, Inverness and the venues selected for peer support in Caithness, but many people choose to gather around a large, central table. There are always, pens, paper, fidget gadgets and small crafting items in the middle for people to pick up and use while they're chatting to other peers and PSWs. During a day many relevant observations can and have been made by PSW/PRs and recorded in reflective notes and conversations in PRG meetings to inform our research.

We were given permission to quote this feedback from a peer who regularly enjoys communal sessions at the 'big table':

"A few of us get healthy debates going, good conversations you know, I enjoy that. It's important to be pro-active in finding company and Discovery College is a good space where you can speak freely and explore interesting topics with others."

5.4 Question boards

PRG created question boards as interactive tools to facilitate reflections and gather insights from PWIs, and these were just left on the table for people to write on in their own time. The first three boards were around the topics of Connection, Hope and Belonging:

"Lots of the peers engaged with the boards, some used it to express their feelings about the DC." (PSW/PR)

5.5 Crafting Conversations

The Discovery College has a great crafting space and recently peers tried out macrame, some ceramic painting and making winter wreaths. Ideas for learning new or using familiar crafts or expressing creativity are welcomed from those joining the sessions.



“From the beginning of the craft sessions, I have made it clear, that I am not an expert in the activities, what I have is a curiosity and personal experience of how creativity improves wellbeing. In this group people put forward activities that are of interest to them and we try to accommodate them, to date we have played with card making, wild foliage winter wreaths and table centres, ceramic painting, air dry clay, vision boards, jewellery making, macrame and more.” (PSW/PR)

Creativity brings people together and has the power to foster personal growth and meaningful connections with others through shared experiences, inspiration, collaboration and community building.

“I feel unable to share some of the individual changes I have witnessed in people, without identifying them, in general my observations have been of people becoming more aware of how their actions impact on others, an openness to sharing about themselves both verbally and visually through their creations.” (PSW/PR)

PSWs apply reflexivity to their observations of people, and this was an instance where witnessing people becoming more open and willing to share with others in the group could also be applied to themselves. The text contributed below demonstrates the mutuality and reciprocity in peer relationships that becomes a natural, and key, element in the safe spaces where peer support work is practiced.

“Over the last few months, I have been coming up against some tensions with my own health, as I experiment and learn how to adjust and accommodate new things in my life, such as being a peer supporter, driving to and from Inverness for work,(which takes about two hours on top of my working day), and the impact on my physical, mental and social wellbeing.

5.6 Mutually beneficial relations

The mutuality, or reciprocal exchange, between PSWs and the people they are supporting, and between the peer walk-ins/peer students themselves, described above by one of our PSWs, is consistently cited as one of the key reasons PRG members choose to do peer support work.

There is indeed great reward to be had in this relational support method, for all involved, as can be seen in the quotes, gathered during peer research activities, which enhance this report. Indirect reciprocity during a peer support conversation leaves both parties feeling they have given and gained something of benefit to them.

5.7 The Unseen skills in Peer Support Work

The skills required for good peer practice also include PSWs being able to handle emotionally charged situations, hear distressing stories and in critical moments, being able to remain calm, analyse situations quickly and take appropriate action. PSWs do all of this while remaining focused on the wellbeing of the person being supported.

These skills and the energy required to draw on them when needed are often invisible to those outwith peer support organisations as are the personal qualities drawn on by PSWs over an ordinary day at Discovery College. These include patience, compassion, energy, focus and the ability to adapt quickly to changing situations and to smoothly transition how they present themselves to the person they are supporting.

In discussions during PRG meetings, PSWs talked about how they needed to be able to pivot between giving light-hearted encouragement to one PWI and in the next minute be fully tuned into another PWI sharing something distressing. They were aware of this as an expected, and natural part of the work they choose to do, but also a challenging aspect of that work in the 'drop-in' spaces of Discovery College. PSWs/PRs related stories of suddenly noticing at the end of the day how much energy can be spent in this way.

All PSW/PRs felt that their 'Decompression Sessions', breaks during the day and ability to share with other DC staff members were crucial to their resilience and ability to 'bounce back' after a busy day. The end of day debrief sessions ensure that PSWs and PSW/PRs are able to speak about the challenges and successes of the day.

These sessions are important in ensuring that emotions and concerns are not carried through to private lives and personal spaces. The PSW/PRs skillfully navigate their roles within the community, providing unique perspectives while balancing objectivity and emotional investment, thus exemplifying a core skill in conducting peer research.

6 Conducting long-term research in marginalised and under-served communities.

Peer research in marginalised and under-served communities offers a vital opportunity to co-produce knowledge that reflects lived experience and local realities. By embedding peer researchers within these communities, Discovery College can build trust, cultivate inclusion, and generate insights that inform meaningful service development. The following case studies illustrate how long-term engagement and collaboration have the potential to provide transformative outcomes in two distinct settings.

6.1 Recovery Unit, Porterfield Prison, Inverness

‘What happened’:

Two Peer Support Workers/Peer Researchers (PSW/PRs) initiated a long-term collaborative research project with the Recovery Unit at Porterfield Prison. Through multiple field visits, they built relationships with staff and inmates, focusing on understanding the fears and needs of prisoners approaching release. The aim was to compare these insights with existing support structures and co-design sessions to address identified gaps. The next phase will involve data gathering through workshops, coordinated with prison staff and management.

‘Why it is significant’:

This initiative demonstrates the potential of peer research to humanise and enhance recovery-focused support within custodial settings. By engaging directly with inmates, the PSW/PRs fostered a sense of value and inclusion, laying the groundwork for more responsive post-release services. The vision of training long-serving prisoners in peer support reflects a powerful shift toward non-hierarchical, peer-led care within the prison system—offering both rehabilitative value and transferable skills for life beyond incarceration.

“For me the biggest thing I took away from the prison is how well I think peer support would work within the establishment. Even within the prisoners themselves the dream would be to have long serving prisoners trained in peer support to help support each other while doing their sentence and to influence others to do the same. This would give them a key skill upon release. The support in the prison on a ‘normal’ non-hierarchical level doesn’t exist and I think it would be so valuable.” (PSW/PR)

6.2 From Rainbow Group to Friendship Fridays, Caithness

‘What happened’:

Peer support workers collaborated with LGBTQI+ individuals in Caithness to identify barriers to participation and co-create inclusive support groups. Initial engagement led to the formation of the Rainbow Group, which evolved into Friendship Fridays—multi-group meetups that now include diverse activities such as Dungeons & Dragons, Christmas crafts, and nature walks. This grassroots initiative has sparked increased demand for peer-led sessions and inspired new volunteers to join the Peer 2 Peer training programme.

‘Why it is significant’:

This case highlights how peer research and support can catalyse community transformation in rural areas. By responding to stigma and isolation with creativity and compassion, PSW/PRs helped build safe spaces where connection, hope, and belonging could flourish. The growth of Discovery College in Caithness, driven by local voices and lived experience, exemplifies how inclusive peer-led initiatives can reshape mental health recovery landscapes—especially in regions where formal services may be limited or inaccessible.

There were many reflections from both PSW/PRs and peer participants about DC in Caithness so together we have created the vignette below to paint a picture of how peer support activities can bring connection, hope, and belonging to people dispersed across this beautiful and rural area of the Highlands.

“The wind was bringing the snow in sideways, and everyone could have stayed at home but in the end 12 folk made the effort to get to the venue in Wick and it was a brilliant session. Two peer volunteers helped sign everyone in and get hot drinks and biscuits shared around. Once we got warmed up, we all helped unpack boxes full of colourful and fun craft things and set up the table for Christmas wreath making. The creativity was amazing – and so was the chat! There were people who didn’t know each other before, starting to really connect and talk freely. Two peers found they could help each other with something personal that was happening in their families because the chat was easy when we were busy doing something creative. There was an easy atmosphere too even though there was a very diverse group of people there and it showed us all that these kinds of mixed gatherings, in a safe space are really important in rural areas. Because it means that people are exposed to the lived experience of other people and groups that they might not normally have the chance to get to know and understand. And several folk, who’d made the journey from another town to join in asked us if we could help organise events where they live – we were all delighted with that idea and will get to work on it together. Two peer volunteers are doing the Peer 2 Peer training that means DC can do more in these rural communities with them to help.”

7 Collaboration and co-evolution of the Discovery College

As this report has shown, knowledge and expertise gained by members of PRG through all the peer support/peer research activities described above, influences how Discovery College sessions and activities are created, modified and delivered. One of the ways the group gives this input is through quarterly Development Days where the whole peer support team meets together at a venue in Caithness or in DC Eastgate.

“Our development days give us a chance to refresh our practice and discuss ideas brought to us by peer walk ins. A board was created to ask what PWIs would like to see delivered in the DC and this cemented arts and crafts as clearly important to the walk ins as was the launch of both a men's and women's group. Some of the peer walk ins are just happy to use the lounge space where they can develop their confidence and connect with other peers.” (PSW/PR)

The collaborative work that happens on our development days is then transformed into refreshing, updating and evolving what the Discovery College can offer to people needing support with their mental health and/or substance use across the Highlands of Scotland.

This approach has brought the Discovery College from the dreams of people with such lived experience to being the vehicle for the realisation of those hopes and aspirations. In this report the PRG have tried to tell the story of this journey while at the same time being fully aware that words and even pictures on a page cannot convey the ‘magic’ that can happen when peer support work and peer research is enabled to flourish in such a way.



Closing Threads and Future Invitations

This report is more than a record of activities, it is a testament to what becomes possible when lived experience is placed at the heart of service design, research, and recovery. **The Discovery College peer research group (PRG) has shown that peer support and peer research, when thoughtfully integrated, do not simply complement each other, they transform each other. Together, they create a relational infrastructure that is ethical, creative, and deeply human.**

Throughout this report, we have seen how Discovery College has grown, not just in size or reach, but in depth. It has evolved through co-production, reflexivity, and responsiveness. It has adapted to the realities of rural life, systemic gaps, and the emotional labour of recovery. And it has done so by listening, really listening, to the voices of those most affected.

The PRG's work reveals that peer research is not a detached exercise in data collection. It is a practice of transformation. It is rooted in mutuality, trust, and the courage to ask questions that matter. Whether through crafting conversations, question boards, or fieldwork in prisons and LGBTQI+ communities, the PRG has demonstrated that research can be relational, inclusive, and action oriented. It can be a way of holding space, not just gathering evidence.

This matters' not only to the peer support and peer research community, but to funders, policymakers, and professional bodies. The insights generated here are not abstract, they are grounded in real lives, real places, and real relationships. They offer a blueprint for how mental health recovery can be supported in ways that are ethical, effective, and emotionally intelligent.

Discovery College is not a static model to be replicated, it is a dynamic, evolving movement. Its emphasis on co-evolution, through Development Days and ongoing feedback, ensures that services remain responsive and relevant. It is a living system, shaped by those who use it, and sustained by those who believe in it.

For funders and professional bodies, this report offers a clear invitation: to recognise peer-led initiatives not as peripheral, but as central to the future of mental health support. To invest not only in programmes, but in people. To support the infrastructure of trust, creativity, and care that makes recovery possible.

For peer communities, this report is a celebration of what you already know: that lived experience is not a limitation but a source of wisdom. **That recovery is not a solo journey, it is a shared path. And that peer research, when done with care and courage, can be a tool for healing, connection, and change.**

As we close this report, we do so with gratitude, for the stories shared, the relationships built, and the futures imagined. And we do so with an open invitation: to join us in shaping a recovery landscape that is inclusive, relational, and rooted in the transformative power of lived experience.

8 References

- Barr, K., Townsend, M., Grenyer, B. (2020). Using peer workers with lived experience to support the treatment of borderline personality disorder: A qualitative study of consumer, carer and clinician perspectives [online]. *Borderline Personality Disorder and Emotion Dysregulation*. 7(20)14. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/2281184320938154>
- Bravata DM, Kim J, Russell DW, Goldman R, Pace E. (2023) Digitally Enabled Peer Support Intervention to Address Loneliness and Mental Health: Prospective Cohort Analysis [online]. *JMIR Form Res*. 2023 Available at <https://doi.org/10.19197/jmfr.2023.11.1>
- Cheesemond, N., Davies, K., Inder, K.J. (2020) The Role of the Peer support Worker in increasing rural mental health help-seeking [online]. *The Australian Journal of Rural Health* 28(2) 203-208. Available from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32281154/>
- Cowan, N. (2020) "Our Lives, Our Solutions: The Annual Report of the Get Heard Scotland Project 2019/2020". Glasgow, [The Poverty Alliance Our Lives: Our Solutions: Get Heard Scotland annual report 19-20.pdf](https://www.getheardscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Our-Lives-Our-Solutions-Get-Heard-Scotland-annual-report-19-20.pdf)
- Evaluation Support Scotland. (2025). Homepage - Evaluation Support Scotland. [online] Available at: <https://evaluation.supportscotland.org.uk/>
- Fuller, S. M., Kotwal, A. A., Tha, S. H., Hill, D., Perissinotto, C., Myers, J. J. (2022). Key Elements and Mechanisms of a Peer-Support Intervention to Reduce Loneliness and Isolation among Low-Income Older Adults: A Qualitative Implementation Science Study [online]. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 41(12), 2574-2582. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/034643221204554>
- Gill, A. (2025). Lifesaving mental health charity at risk of partial closure due to funding cuts - Deadline News. [online] Deadline News. Available at: <https://www.deadlinenews.co.uk/2025/05/19/lifesaving-mental-health-charity-at-risk-of-partial-closure-due-to-funding-cuts/> [Accessed 3 Jun. 2025].
- Highland Community Planning Partnership (2024). 2024-2027 Highland Outcome Improvement Plan. [online] Available at: <https://highlandcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2024-2027-Revised-HOIP-Approved-HCPP-Board-1st-March-2024.pdf>
- Karadzhov, D. (2021) 'Personal recovery and socio-structural disadvantage: a critical conceptual review' [online]. *Health* 27 (2) 201-225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363453211041250> Available from <https://journals.sagepub.com/en-gb/doi/full/10.1177/1363453211041250>
- Joo, J.H., Bone, L., Forte, J., Kirley, E., Lynch, T., Aboumatar, H., (2022) The benefits and challenges of established peer support programmes for patients, informal caregivers, and healthcare providers [online]. *Family Practice*, 39 (9), 903–912. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/cnab004>

8 References

- Leamy, M., Bird, V., Le Boutillier, C., Williams, J., Slade, M. (2011) Conceptual framework for personal recovery in mental health: systematic review and narrative synthesis [online]. *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 199(6):445-52 Available from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23130746/>.
- Lyons, S. (2019) "The link between rural poverty and levels of mental wellbeing" Inverness, HUG (Action for Mental Health)
- MacNeill, A. (2022). Annual NHS Highland report focuses on mental health and suicide. [online] [www.highland.gov.uk](https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/14476/annual-nhs-highland-report-focuses-on-mental-health-and-suicide). Available at: <https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/14476/annual-nhs-highland-report-focuses-on-mental-health-and-suicide>.
- NHS Highland Freedom of Information Team (2025) Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 – Request Ref 24353 Waiting Lists for Psychiatry Treatment [Letter] to Todd, P. (7th April 2025)
- Scottishhumanrights.com. (2024). Concerns on basic human rights in Highlands and Islands. [online] Available at: <https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/news/concerns-on-basic-human-rights-in-highlands-and-islands/>.
- Scottishrecovery.net. (2024). [online] Available at: <https://scottishrecovery.net/story/debbi-peer-support-and-me/>.
- Third Sector Research Forum (2021) Guide to Applying Ethical Research Principles [online]. Available from [FINAL: TSRF-guide-to-applying-ethical-research-principles.pdf](https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/media/1388897/TSRF-guide-to-applying-ethical-research-principles.pdf)
- Sun, J., Yin, X., Li, C., Liu, W. and Sun, H. (2022). Stigma and Peer-Led Interventions: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, [online] 13, p.915617. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.915617>.



The Scottish Highlands first recovery college

Authors:

Noreen Grant, Susan Lyons, Debbi McMurdo, Karen Mohan, Sarah Galloway.

connection | hope | belonging

centred.scot/discoverycollege