Healthcare Improvement Scotland

Understanding the experiences of people in recovery: Findings and analysis

Partnership working with Harbour Ayrshire and Healthcare Improvement Scotland

May 2026

NHS SCOTLAND

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Introduction

Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) works to make alcohol and drug services safe, of good quality and shaped by the people who use them. The *Improving Quality and Safety in Alcohol and Drug Services* programme (2025-26) helps services work better together and focus on what people need. The programme aims to reduce harm caused by alcohol and/or drug use through recovery-oriented practice, connecting the services that achieve this and support Scotland's ambition in embedding human-rights based approaches. Within this context, recovery is increasingly recognised as a long-term process that is different for everyone.

Recovery-oriented practice focuses less on clinical management of substance use alone, such as detox or medicine, and seeks to include long-term wellbeing. This approach looks at the whole person not just their alcohol and/or drug use and aims to help people feel included, supported, and able to keep moving forward in their recovery. This includes support for families and communities to thrive. Recovery communities are increasingly pivotal in driving this change. Recovery communities are a group of people who are involved in addiction recovery. They provide an environment where people can meet others with similar experiences. People can access interventions such as harm reduction, employment and job training, recreational activities and activities designed to help people in or seeking recovery from alcohol and/or drug use.

Recovery communities can play a key role in ensuring that people with lived and living experience can meaningfully shape and influence the design, delivery, and improvement of services that support others. These communities create safe and inclusive opportunities for participation. Support is often led by peers who understand and empathise because they have lived similar experiences. Trauma-informed and peer-led approaches help people to contribute meaningfully in ways that are person centred and meets their needs. Having practical and emotional support helps people to feel confident to be involved and shows the value of their experience.

As equal partners in the alcohol and drug system, recovery communities can help to build better support systems that listen to people, focus on individuals and stay strong over time. This kind of support can enhance long term recovery outcomes. However, recovery communities face significant challenges. Services are hard to join up and do not always work well together; there is a lack of care coordination across the alcohol and drug system. Funding is often short term, which makes future planning difficult. Recovery communities are not always recognised for the important role they play in shaping policies and services.

Recovery-oriented practice is guided by frameworks such as **CHIME** and **Recovery Capital**. CHIME stands for Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment. It helps us to understand how people feel and experience recovery. Recovery capital looks at the supports people have in their lives, such as personal strengths, relationships and community resources that enable recovery to be initiated and sustained. Together, these frameworks focus on what people are good at and what helps them to recover. They give a clear and shared way to understand how recovery-oriented practice can deliver impact.

We would like to thank the people with lived and living experience who generously shared their time, insights and reflections with us. Their contributions were central to this work and provided understanding of how recovery-oriented practice is experienced by the people it supports. We are grateful for the openness, trust, and expertise shared. Their contributions played a vital role in shaping the learning and findings set out in this report.

Scope

This report looks at how recovery communities contribute to a recovery-oriented alcohol and drug system. It focuses on the experiences of people who are supported by Harbour Ayrshire, a recovery community based in Ayrshire. Harbour Ayrshire is known for its peer-led support and holistic recovery opportunities for individuals, families, and local communities affected by alcohol and drug use.

The scope of this work is focused on:

- Understanding the role recovery communities play within alcohol and drug care pathways.
- Demonstrate the impact and positive outcomes people experience when they take part in recovery support.
- Highlight how recovery-oriented practice such as CHIME and recovery capital, help people to build-term wellbeing, stronger connections, and resilience.

The report does not aim to evaluate all aspects of Harbour Ayrshire's service model. It does not represent everyone's experience across the whole system. Instead, it shares a focused set of insights from 40 people who took part in the activities and kindly shared their stories and experiences.

Approach

The engagement activities were planned and delivered in collaboration with Harbour Ayrshire. Working collaboratively with Harbour Ayrshire helped to keep activities trauma-informed, meaning they were done in ways that helped people feel safe and supported. Harbour Ayrshire helped design the activities and was there to offer emotional and practical support before, during and after the sessions. This helped build trust and make sure people benefited from taking part, not just by sharing information.

Harbour Ayrshire already had strong relationships with the people involved, which helped create a feeling of safety and trust. This is important because some people may have experienced trauma, stigma, or harm from services in the past. Undertaking sessions in familiar and welcoming spaces helped people feel respected and understood.

Working together also meant people had choice and control. Participants could decide if they wanted to take part, how much they wanted to share, and when to step back. The activities were

flexible and voluntary, with clear information given beforehand. People could pause or stop at any time, helping them feel more comfortable and in control.

Two engagement methods were used for this project:

Recovery journey mapping: Harbour Ayrshire invited people to share their recovery story with the HIS Alcohol and Drug team in a way that felt right to them. Before the session, Harbour Ayrshire organised an online meeting so people could meet the team, ask questions and help plan how the activity would work. During this meeting, everyone agreed to use a visual road map to show their recovery over time. Symbols were chosen to represent different types of recovery capital, such as relationships, services, peer support, education, work, health, money, and achievements. Using pictures and symbols helped make complex experiences easier to understand and allowed people to share their stories in ways that felt safe and meaningful.

CHIME mapping: Harbour Ayrshire invited the HIS Alcohol and Drug team to join peer support groups to facilitate CHIME mapping workshops. CHIME is a way of understanding recovery using five domains: Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment. The activity used a picture of a tree. Each part of CHIME was shown as a fruit growing on the tree. Participants wrote their own thoughts and experiences on the fruit and placed them on the tree. This helped everyone build a collective reflection of recovery while retaining individual voices. The activity allowed people to take part in ways that felt right for them. Participants could choose what to share and how much they wanted to say. This helped people feel safe and supported. It also focused on strengths and positive experiences, rather than problems, which is important for trauma-informed engagement.

Data collection

In total, we listened to the experiences and views of 40 people who had received support from Harbour Ayrshire.

Four individual recovery journey mapping activities were carried out. These included two men and one woman who were in recovery, and one family member. A family member is someone who is close to someone who is in recovery and is affected by their recovery journey. This activity helped us to explore people's personal recovery experiences in more detail.

CHIME mapping activities were also run in groups. These included a men's recovery group with 13 people, a women's recovery group with 7 people, and a family support group with 16 people.

Participants were given information sheets and consent forms that explained the project in a clear way. These included details about what the project was for, how their information would be used, and how they could contact the team if they had questions or wanted to change their mind.

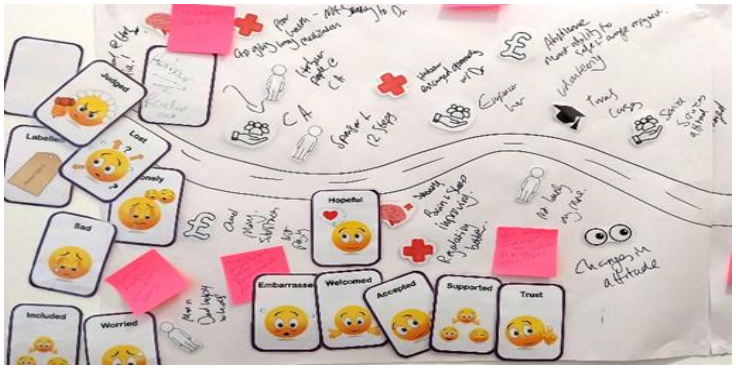
This helped make sure everyone understood consent, privacy, and what information would be shared. Participants were also reminded that they could take a break, step back, or stop taking part at any time if they wanted to.

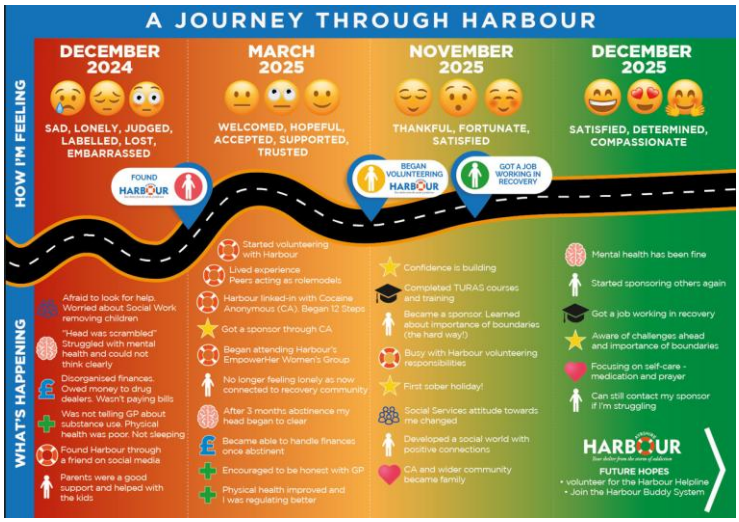
During the information-gathering activities, Harbour Ayrshire provided ongoing peer support to help make sure people felt safe and supported. Peers were available to offer emotional support and reassurance if anyone needed it. After the activities finished, Harbour Ayrshire continued to support participants through existing peer relationships and access to recovery support, so any concerns could be followed up.

After the first activities, digital copies of the work were created and shared with participants. If changes were needed, these were made until the final version was agreed with the participants.

Recovery journey mapping:

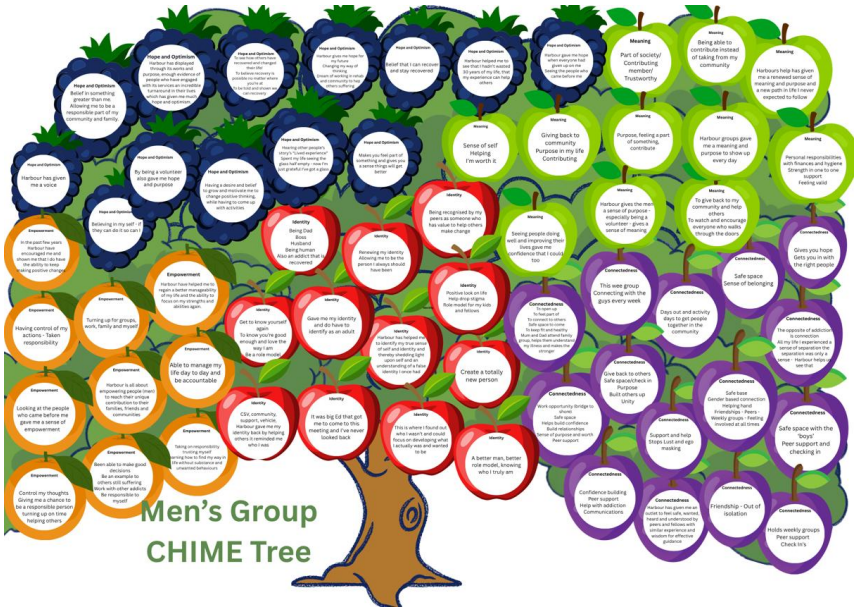






CHIME mapping:





Findings

This section shares the main themes that came from the engagement activities described earlier in the document.



The themes are based on what people chose to share during the engagement activities. They do not cover everything that Harbour Ayrshire offers. The findings are meant to support learning and improvement and should not be seen as representing everyone's experience across the wider alcohol and drug system.

Quick and easy access

People can access support from Harbour Ayrshire quickly because it has a low threshold and welcoming. Support is available through trusted relationships, being visible in the community, and responding quickly when someone needs help. This means people can get support when they feel ready to seek help.

People described reaching out to Harbour Ayrshire at points of crisis or heightened motivation. Many were able to connect quickly through people they already knew, informal ways of getting in touch such as sending messages on Facebook, or by seeing Harbour Ayrshire active in their local community.

'My (substance) use was out of control, I first saw Harbour (Ayrshire) on an old friend's social media, I know she really struggled with addiction. I was always curious about the progress she had made and was promoting online. She is very good at social media still.'

In several recovery journeys, people shared that they had direct contact with Harbour Ayrshire staff or peers while out in the community. This often led to quick follow-up, practical help, and being linked to group or one-to-one support without long waiting times.

'He (family member) had experienced drug induced psychosis so was admitted to hospital. Harbour (Ayrshire) left us a leaflet to contact them if we wanted their support. I invited them round to the house to speak to my son. I finally felt some relief that he was going to get the support he needed. I was shattered when their worker took me to one side and said he wasn't

ready for recovery at this time. However, they invited me to start attending their family group so I could get support myself.'

The engagement also showed that when people already knew Harbour Ayrshire or trusted someone who worked there, they felt more comfortable getting in touch. This helped people to reconnect quickly when things changed, such as after a relapse, changes in health or changes at home. People described receiving immediate check-ins, regular contact and practical help during critical periods, even outside of planned appointments.

Harbour Ayrshire's peer-led and community-based approach also made it easier to access support. People did not need to go through long assessments before getting help. Instead, they could start informally and become more involved over time. This flexible approach helped people get the right support quickly and change how they engaged as their needs changed.

'Harbour (Ayrshire) contacted me because my son (who was receiving support from them at the time) asked them to. I wasn't interested in recovery at the time. I was drinking 25 cans and half a bottle of brandy a day. My Harbour (Ayrshire) 'buddy' would call me every day, just for a chat, I couldn't leave my flat because physically I was in a bad way. I was in so much pain I asked the GP for a home visit, but they refused. I didn't meet the eligibility criteria even though I was housebound. Harbour (Ayrshire) advocated for me, eventually two nurses came to visit me and wanted to call an ambulance. I had built such a report with my buddy that I promised him when I get better, I would start to attend the groups. I did and I haven't looked back since.'

Peer support and opportunities to give back

Across both individual recovery journeys and group CHIME mapping activities, people said that peer support was one of the most important parts of the service. It felt meaningful because it helped people feel understood, recognised, and like they belonged, sometimes for the first time.

Peer support was not felt as something formal or clinical. Instead, it was about building caring and trusting relationships with others who had lived through similar experiences. People said they felt listened to, accepted, and encouraged by peers who understood the challenges they were facing.

"***Harbour (Ayrshire) has given me an outlet to feel safe, wanted, heard and understood by peers with similar experience and wisdom for effective guidance***.'

'It was so helpful that every story I told at the group the other family members could relate to it. They were all experiencing the same issue. I felt less alone.'

Peer support was not considered passive to many of the people we spoke to. They described a desire to '***give back***'. As individuals progress in their recovery, many choose to mentor and share their own stories with the intention of providing hope to others. People perceived this as a positive use of their experience which helps them to develop purpose.

'***Harbour (Ayrshire) helped me to see that I hadn't wasted 30 years of my life, that my experience can help others***.'

These opportunities are flexible and led by the people taking part. This means individuals can get involved at a pace that feels right for them. Some people start with small roles, such as welcoming new members or sharing their experiences. Others choose to take on bigger roles, such as volunteering, becoming peer mentors, or joining in community activities.

'I started volunteering at the groups, I began training modules to develop my confidence and facilitation skills, I am now in a position to be a sponsor myself.'

Structure and routine

People are invited to attend the peer support groups on an ongoing basis. The groups played an important role in helping people feel more stable and organised in their lives. Many people said these groups helped them rebuild daily routines, develop healthier habits, and stay accountable in their recovery.

'I started attending the Harbour (Ayrshire) men's group. I wanted to walk but after being in hospital I wasn't very fit. Harbour (Ayrshire) at first would pick me up and take me to the group. When I started to get stronger, I wanted to walk. It was only a 10-minute walk from my house, but it took me about 40 minutes the first time I did it. I started walking more regularly to the group which helped me get my fitness back.'

Groups aim to help people connect with each other and feel less lonely. They are designed to feel friendly, relaxed, and like normal everyday social spaces. Simple rituals such as sharing tea, eating together, chatting, and using humour help people feel comfortable and safe. This makes it easier for people to join in and be themselves as part of their recovery.

'Coming here I don't have to hide or pretend that I am not ok, I can be truthful. Harbour (Ayrshire) allows me to take the mask off and just be me.'

Groups are facilitated by a peer which reinforces a sense of safety. Safety is critical to willingness to engage and remain involved in recovery. Safety is linked to the ability to speak openly, share experiences honestly, and express vulnerability without fear of stigma or consequences.

Although many people said they found regular group support very helpful, some also shared that this type of support may not be right for everyone. Recovery-oriented approaches understand that everyone is different. They offer flexible, person-led options so people can take part in support in ways that match their needs and where they are on their recovery journey.

'The meetings are not for everyone. My younger son was offered to go to the group, but he declined.'

Fellowship programme

Our engagement highlighted the fellowship programmes as an important part of long-term recovery for many people at Harbour Ayrshire. People spoke positively about how fellowship supports them over time.

Fellowship is often linked to the 12-Step programme, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. This is a structured approach to help people to recover. Fellowship often includes sponsorship, which is a voluntary one-to-one support relationship. A sponsor is someone further along in recovery who offers help and encouragement to someone earlier in their journey.

People shared feeling very thankful for their sponsors. They explained that sponsors often notice changes quickly, can adapt to what someone needs, and offer support early, helping to prevent small problems from becoming bigger crises.

'My sponsor is like a closed mouth friend. I can contact them whenever necessary'

For people who chose to take part, the fellowship programme was not seen as a quick fix. Instead, it became more important over time. People shared that it helped them think about their past, take responsibility for change, and stay focused on their recovery in everyday life.

'The fellowship helped me with my mental health whilst I was supporting my son in active addiction'

Harbour Ayrshire plays an important role in introducing people to the fellowship at their own pace. People are encouraged to explore fellowships at their own pace and only take part when they feel ready.

'It felt like Harbour (Ayrshire) offered a bridge, I can still contact my sponsor now if necessary (after long term recovery)'

The findings from the engagement at Harbour Ayrshire show that the fellowship is one important option within a wider range of recovery support. For many people, fellowships works alongside other support, such as community recovery spaces, one-to-one support, and family programmes. Other people choose to engage with recovery support without taking part in a fellowship.

This reinforces why it is important to offer choice, flexibility. Having different recovery options means people can choose the type of support that fits their needs, values, beliefs, and life situation.

Structured Learning

People shared that they learned new information that changed how they understood addiction, their relationships, and their role in recovery, either for themselves or for others.

It has helped people to develop a clearer understanding of addiction as an illness rather than a moral failing, breaking down barriers such as stigma and feeling less judged. Understanding

addiction in this way gave participants a more accurate and compassionate framework for their experiences and enabled them to engage more constructively with recovery. Recognising that "***addiction is an illness***," has helped people to reduce shame and supported the rebuilding of personal identity.

'It has helped me in realising that my addiction is an illness, and it does not define who I am going to be. I am a valued person again. I realise people's perception of addiction is far from reality.'

Structured learning happened through planned programmes, such as the 8-week family programme, or one-to-one support. Structured learning helped people feel stronger, manage their emotions better, and cope more confidently in everyday life. It helped people learn important skills, such as setting healthy boundaries, recognising unhelpful behaviours, understanding addiction, and taking better care of themselves.

'***Gaining knowledge and understanding regarding addiction. It is not a choice it is an illness. I am feeling stronger about enforcing boundaries and enabling which ultimately benefits the addict'***

Volunteering and skills development

People talked about volunteering as a way to give back, but also as a chance to learn new skills and feel more confident. Volunteering helped people build practical skills, manage their emotions better, and feel valued again. It also helped them believe in new possibilities for their future.

Volunteering gave people a sense of purpose and meaning. Moving from receiving support to helping others was an important step. It showed a change from just coping with the effects of addiction to actively building a positive future for themselves and others.

In the men's group, many people shared a strong wish to be positive role models. Volunteering at Harbour Ayrshire gave them a way to show that recovery is possible, support others to make changes, and prove their recovery through their actions.

'I want to be a role model for my kids and peers.'

The skills people learned through volunteering were helpful not only for recovery, but also for everyday life and getting ready for work.

Employment

During the recovery journey mapping activities, people shared that feeling more stable, confident, healthy, and believing in themselves helped them move towards paid work. Volunteering and peer roles helped people build skills, grow in confidence, and feel more ready for work. For some, this even led directly to paid jobs within recovery services.

Being involved with Harbour Ayrshire also helped people access more training and opportunities linked to work and employment.

'I went to a job fair with (my peer), (Harbour Ayrshire) helped me to realise a job working in recovery could be a possibility, I had only worked in construction previously, but I had to leave this behind, it was hard at the time, but I needed to do that to get better.'

Improved confidence and self-esteem

Increased confidence and self-esteem are key indicators of growing personal recovery capital. This includes inner strengths like believing in yourself, coping with problems, managing emotions, and feeling able to make your own choices.

Through the recovery journey mapping, people shared that as their confidence and self-esteem grew, they felt more able to manage their recovery, make decisions, and deal with challenges. This helped them stay well over time by relying less on crisis support and becoming more resilient when things were stressful or changed.

Across the groups, people also talked about feeling more confident in daily life without using substances. Many described moving away from feelings of shame or failure towards feeling valued, capable, and proud of themselves.

'Harbour (Ayrshire) have helped me to regain a better manageability of my life'

For family members, feeling more confident was linked to healthier relationships, better understanding of themselves, and learning how to set clear boundaries. It also helped them focus on their own wellbeing without feeling guilty.

'My happiness was very dependent on his happiness. I had to cancel plans with friends. When I first started attending the (family) group he didn't like me going, I started to change my behaviour. I was learning how to not enable his addiction. He accused us of 'getting in the way'. I learned that if I worked on my own behaviour it would start to influence his behaviour.'

Relationships

People shared that their relationships with services improved over time. Being involved with a recovery organisation like Harbour Ayrshire improved how they were perceived by other services. This made professionals feel more confident and reassured, which led to more respectful and supportive conversations.

'I have two teenage children and I always was afraid that addiction would result in losing them. It felt different interacting with social work once they knew I was being supported by Harbour (Ayrshire)'

Building relationships helped people move from feeling alone to feeling connected. Many people said they felt very lonely before joining Harbour Ayrshire and had pulled away from social networks and their community. Taking part in groups and activities helped people re-build friendships, feel a sense of belonging, and reconnect with others socially.

'I have made some friends for life, we have just been on our first sober holiday abroad.'

'I have met my bestie, I no longer feel alone in the chaos. I have gained a sense of community'

Changes in attitude and beliefs

People described shifts in attitudes and beliefs over time. These included changes in how addiction was understood, how recovery was viewed and how individuals saw themselves and their futures.

'I am taking on responsibility, trusting myself, learning how to find my way in life without substance and unwanted behaviours'

People shared that they learned how to challenge negative thoughts, think in more hopeful and kind ways, and better accept themselves and others.

'I feel worthy, my opinion matters, I've learned to care differently.'

For family members, changes in beliefs included understanding that they could not control everything, learning how some behaviours may unintentionally support addiction, and focusing more on caring for themselves.

'I can live without gripping onto my loved one. I have a sense of freedom... through detachment, we are more understanding of our loved ones.'

'I now know it wasn't my fault.'

Reduced stigma and judgement

People described Harbour Ayrshire as a place where there was no blame or judgement, and where everyone was treated as equals. People felt that their own experiences were valued and respected. This helped reduce feelings of shame and helped people accept themselves more. It also made them more comfortable connecting with others.

Family members also shared that they felt less shame and embarrassment. Hearing that others had similar experiences helped them realise they were not alone. Feeling less judged made it easier for people to be honest, build connections, and continue taking part in support.

'Everyone in this group understands the stigma attached to addiction. I feel valued and respected coming here.'

'When I found my son was in addiction, I never spoke to others about it as I was embarrassed by coming to a meeting. I have since realised it's an illness and now I don't care what other people think'

Outcome

Our engagement with Harbour Ayrshire set out to better understand the role or recovery communities along alcohol and drug care pathways. As set out in the scope, we did not aim to

review or evaluate Harbour Ayrshire's work, or to represent everyone's experience across the wider system. Instead, the focus was to listen to the stories of people in recovery and learn what was important to them based on their experience of being supported by the service.

Working in partnership with Harbour Ayrshire meant that activities took place in familiar and trusted spaces. This helped people feel safe, respected and comfortable to share their experiences. The activities were flexible and people had choice about how much they wanted to take part and what they wanted to share. Using visual tools such as recovery journey mapping and CHIME mapping activities made it easier for people to explain their recovery in ways that felt meaningful to them. This helped us gain a deeper and clearer understanding of recovery and the positive impact it can have on individuals and families over time.

Future engagement could build on this approach by involving a wider range of recovery communities, groups and individuals across different stages of recovery, locations and service contexts. This would help deepen understanding of how recovery communities operate across the wider system and where connections, coordination and integration could be further strengthened. The understanding built from this opportunity to engage with a recovery community has informed future planning for HIS to support the new Preventing Harm, Promoting Recovery Scotland's Alcohol & Drugs Strategic Plan 2026 – 2035.

Overall, this shows that how we talk with people is just as important as what we learn from them. Using a kind, safe and shared way of working helped people explain their recovery clearly and honestly. This helped us understand recovery-oriented practice better. The learning shows that recovery communities are important partners in recovery-oriented systems of care and that good engagement should be based on respect, listening, choice and helping people feel confident and valued.

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