

The Significance of the Peer Workforce

Most Significant Change Project - Easy Read Report



What is the Most Significant Change project?

The Most Significant Change (MSC) project set out to explore and celebrate the impact of peer support across Cardiff and the Vale, from the perspective of those who live and breathe it.

The need for this originated from the peer recovery community via Recovery Cymru and expanded to consider the local context, opportunities for greater understanding, and systems thinking.

Funded by the Cardiff and Vale Area Planning Board and led by Recovery Cymru, the project focused on capturing stories from people delivering peer support, whether in paid roles, as volunteers, services or within grassroots community spaces. We wanted to understand peer work's impact, why it matters, and how peer support shapes regional recovery.

We used a storytelling approach known as the Most Significant Change technique. Peer workers were invited to share a moment or shift that stood out from the past year, making them stop and think, "This mattered." We believe stories like these are at the heart of creating a better understanding of the peer workforce, identifying the experiences, skills, approach and challenges they currently face while working across and within the substance use system.

We gathered 22 stories from across the peer workforce. Ten were selected for deeper reflection at a panel discussion session. These evolved into the basis for sharing a published storybook and learning materials across the system.

Alongside the storytelling, we trialled three peer-led co-reflection sessions, creating dedicated spaces for peers to reflect together, explore challenges, and build shared understanding across services.

Recovery Cymru's Main Messages:

- The peer workforce is growing and brings something unique to recovery support.
- We need to recognise and protect 'what is special' about peer support and support our peer workforce in their recovery.
- Clear opportunities, training, supervision and role clarity are essential to the quality of peer support, embracing it's uniqueness and in supporting peers.
- Peer support doesn't look the same everywhere—and that's okay. But there are shared principles that matter.
- Peer support and coproduction are different. Both are important and should be understood in their own right.
- We want to help coordinate a local approach where we are stronger together, strengthening connections, and supporting areas of specialism.
- Independent recovery communities play a vital role and bring something distinct to the landscape locally. We want to champion ours.

We also set out to start visualising what peer support looks like locally: who is delivering it, where they are, and why it matters. A clearer picture helps protect specialisms, avoid duplication and build a stronger whole.

The impact of peer support is wide-ranging for both the person giving and the one receiving. Some changes are big. Others are quiet shifts—connection, confidence, a new boundary. These moments matter, even when they do not show up in data. We believe they deserve to be recognised.

For Recovery Cymru, this was also about protecting something precious. As the landscape expands, we are proud to be an independent recovery community, rooted in lived experience and led by peers. A local community which evolved from a single local support group. This project helps protect that identity while growing understanding across the system.

We brought it all together at a special event in April 2025, where peers, professionals, and partners shared insights, connected across roles, and celebrated the peer workforce.

This report is part of that journey—it captures what we did, what we learned, and what we heard, while also offering a glimpse of what comes next.

Read on for all the details!

What we did...

22 stories gathered, analysed and published in digital format

10 stories selected for deeper reflection, creating our Storybook

1 Panel attended by 13 people, peers, decision makers, academics

3 trial co-reflection sessions, attended by 30 individuals

1 regional event, 'The Significance of the Peer Workforce.' Attended by 33 people

62 participants across roles and services, contributing to one or more of these activities

Who Took Part?

This project brought together a rich mix of voices from across the Cardiff and Vale peer landscape—reflecting the diversity, depth and energy of the people delivering peer support in our region.

We spoke to people working in different ways, places, and experiences. Some were volunteers, others were in paid peer roles. Some delivered peer support for years, while others were just starting. They shared a commitment to walking alongside others, grounded in lived experience.

People who shared their stories:

- 22 peer workers took part in our storytelling process
- Stories came from across services and the independent recovery community
- Experiences included alcohol and other drug use, mental health, and family support
- Contributors included people working in the recovery community projects, treatment services, health, housing, outreach, hospital liaison, and system-level roles

People who joined the panel:

A panel of 13 professionals and peers critically reflected on ten selected stories. These included voices from mental health, substance use, commissioning, peer leadership, and academic research, people with lived experience.

From frontline peer mentors to service leads, everyone brought something different and valuable. This mix of perspectives helped us see the learning from various angles and

reflect on what peer support looks like across the whole system.

People who joined the co-reflection sessions:

- 30 people took part in three co-reflection sessions which were designed and co-facilitated in partnership with the Cardiff and Vale Recovery and Wellbeing College.
- Participants came from Recovery Cymru, Adferiad, the NHS, Cardiff Council, Cyfle Cymru, Voices Action Change, Hep C Trust, Voluntary Action Cardiff, and more. Experiences included alcohol and other drug use, mental health, neurodiversity, learning disability, and family support.
- Sessions were a mix of face-to-face and online, and open to both volunteers and staff



Why was this important?

Peer support is powerful. There has been a dramatic increase in peer support roles in various different settings in Cardiff and Vale in recent years. We love this! However, people who offer peer support to others tell us that peer roles are still widely misunderstood, at times undervalued, and despite a wonderful increase in the acceptance and growth of peer support, at times, under-supported.

This project set out to change that.

We wanted to highlight the impact of peer support from the perspective of those who deliver it, not as a token gesture or case study, but as real, complex human experiences that show what peer work is and why it matters.

Here's why this work was needed now:

1. To support the people doing the work

The peer workforce in Cardiff and the Vale is growing, but support for that workforce hasn't always kept pace. Many peers work in isolation without formal supervision, reflective space, or role clarity. If not supported properly, these roles can carry emotional weight, blurred boundaries, and risks to personal recovery.

This project gave peers the space to reflect, connect and feel seen. As one person put it:

“I work alone, and it’s so helpful to feel connected.” - Co-reflection Session Attendee

The co-reflection sessions became a much-needed sanctuary where people could be honest, feel safe, and learn from one another. This kind of space isn’t a “nice-to-have.” It’s essential infrastructure for a sustainable, healthy peer workforce.

2. To protect what makes peer support unique - and to recognise it as a specialism in its own right

Peer support isn’t the same as counselling, clinical care, or informal friendship. It’s a distinct approach, grounded in lived experience, mutuality and reciprocity.

Through storytelling and group reflection, this project created space to name and define peer work and what it isn’t. It helped surface a shared language across services and organisations without losing the heart of peer connection.

“The session looked in depth at boundaries. Just using one topic felt beneficial as more clarity was gained.” - Co-reflection Session Attendee

3. To capture learning across services

We wanted to bring together people from across the system—volunteers and staff, grassroots and statutory, mental health and substance use, Recovery Cymru and partner organisations—to learn from each other.

The peer story panel offered that space: space to pause, listen, and reflect, to understand how peer work looks in different settings, what challenges are shared, and what solutions might be transferable.

The learning that emerged was practical, human and hopeful—and it’s already sparking change.

4. To challenge stigma

Many peers still face stigma from outside services, within organisations, and even from themselves. This project helped highlight the impact of stigma and the power of visibility, trust, and belief.

“People were always up to hurt me or they always wanted something from me... but now that isn’t the case.” - Extract from ‘The Biggest Change? Belief.’ Story.

We saw how being given a chance, whether to volunteer, apply for a role, or simply be listened to, could change someone’s sense of self. When people are supported to grow, they don’t just survive—they lead, teach, and inspire others... they thrive.

How the Project was Advertised

The Most Significant Change project was promoted in stages, with tailored outreach for each part: storytelling, co-reflection sessions, panel learning, and the April celebration event. Each step built on the last, involving people across the peer support landscape in Cardiff and the Vale.

Storytelling phase

To invite people to share a story, we:

- Sent email invitations to peer workers and teams across Recovery Cymru, Cardiff & Vale Recovery and Wellbeing College, CAVDAS, Cardiff Council, NHS services, Adferiad, Voices Action Change, Cyfle Cymru, the Hep C Trust, and Voluntary Action Cardiff. The Area Planning Board support team circulated across their networks.
- Shared flyers and posters through staff teams, community spaces and group sessions
- Promoted the opportunity through volunteers, coordinators and peer leads
- Offered people a choice of formats—writing or supported conversation—and clearly explained the option to remain anonymous

Co-reflection sessions

These were advertised publicly and peer-to-peer using the above methods, plus:

- Social media posts via Recovery Cymru’s channels
- Posters in local venues, hubs and recovery centres
- Direct emails and personal outreach from staff and volunteers
- Emphasis was placed on open conversation, mutual support, and shared learning, not training.

Peer Story Panel

The peer story panel was a targeted, by-invite session involving peers, other decision makers and commissioners. It was promoted through:

- Direct, personal invitations to those already involved in the project or in roles relevant to peer leadership and workforce development

- Internal contact lists and follow-up outreach by the Recovery Cymru team
- We intentionally kept this invitation list focused to support deep reflection and a safe, honest space for discussion, following the Most Significant Change methodology.

Peer Workforce Celebration Event – April 2025

This public event—***“The Significance of the Peer Workforce”***—was widely promoted and open to all. We used the above methods, plus:

- Social media (Recovery Cymru and partner accounts)
- Email newsletters and mailing lists
- Flyers and posters across services and venues
- Phone calls, staff outreach and word-of-mouth
- Promotion through volunteers, peer leads and coordinators

This was our opportunity to bring everyone together—peer workers, staff, volunteers, managers, commissioners, supporters—to reflect, connect, and celebrate what peer support brings to Cardiff and the Vale.

The Stories and Analysis

We asked everyone who took part:

What’s the most significant change you’ve experienced in the last 12 months through delivering peer support?

In response, we gathered 22 real stories from across the peer workforce in Cardiff and the Vale. Contributors included volunteers, paid peer workers, and peer leads—each bringing their own experience of delivering peer support in different services, community settings, and stages of recovery.

Each story was shaped and owned by the person who shared it. Some were written independently, and others were created through a guided conversation with one of our team members. Everyone had full control over what they chose to include and how it would be used, including the option to remain anonymous.

Together, these stories offer a grounded, human picture of peer support in practice—from co-facilitating groups, mentoring others, and working with families to rebuilding confidence, challenging stigma, and finding purpose through shared experience.

Read the inspirational 22 stories: <https://www.recoverycymru.org.uk/stories/>

The Panel session

Out of the 22 stories gathered, six were selected to reflect a range of voices and experiences across the peer workforce—volunteers and staff, newer and more experienced peer workers, and different types of change and challenge. The goal was to choose a meaningful set that could spark shared learning and reflection.

We invited a group of people from across the system—professionals with experience in mental health, substance use, and peer support across Cardiff and the Vale. The session was facilitated by Nick Andrews from Swansea University’s School of Health and Social Care, in partnership with our team.

Over three hours, the group came together to hear and reflect on the stories. What follows is a snapshot of what stood out.

The Panel Learning

The in-person session created a space for people to connect beyond job titles and roles. Panel members included peer workers, professionals, and decision-makers, coming together to listen and reflect on the stories as a group.

Each of the six selected stories was read aloud by someone in the room. Hearing someone else’s words—especially when so personal—brought a depth of connection that caught people off guard. After each reading, the group paused to reflect on what stood out, focusing on the change described and why it mattered.

This process opened up honest, thoughtful conversations about peer support—its challenges, power, and impact. At the end of the session, each panel member was invited to ‘vote’ or advocate for the story they felt showed the most significant change for the person who had shared it.

Panel members described the experience as:

“A fantastic morning—really energising and invigorating.”

“Emotional—but in a motivating way.”

“A genuine reminder of what we’re working towards.”

The session offered a rare opportunity: people from across services sitting together, listening closely to peer experiences, and exploring what they meant, not in theory, but in real life. The reflections and conversations that followed helped shape the themes and insights captured in the next section.

What the Stories Taught Us

The panel discussion offered an opportunity for peers, providers, decision makers and leaders to reflect together on the stories, the system, and their own roles within it.

Through honest, grounded conversation, the group identified key themes about what supports or hinders meaningful peer support in practice.

The learning has been grouped under two broad headings: insights into the wider service system and reflections on the peer workforce itself.

Insights About Support

No Exit

Recovery is not a linear path, and it doesn't end at discharge or employment. The panel noted that people often experience moments of insight at unexpected points. Services need to stay open to these moments and ensure there are ongoing opportunities to reconnect, restart, or grow.

Sanctuary

A strong theme across stories was the need for spaces where people feel able to turn up as they are, without judgement. The panel reflected on the value of environments where honesty, flexibility, and emotional safety are prioritised. These 'sanctuary' spaces are rare, but essential.

Skills Development

Stories reinforced how much confidence, boundary-setting, and self-belief are built through supported volunteering, informal opportunities, and training. The panel emphasised that people need access to these pathways at different points, not just at the beginning of their recovery.

Integration

Panel members reflected positively on the progress made in Cardiff and Vale to include peer roles across services. However, they also noted that integration can still be tokenistic elsewhere. True integration, they said, means understanding what peers bring, not just where they are placed.

Trust

Trust was seen as central. The panel talked about the importance of knowing people as individuals—recognising when someone is ready to take on more, and when they need time or support. They also reflected on how trust is often built relationally, not procedurally.

Hope

Many stories showed the power of seeing someone else succeed in recovery or peer work. Panel members recognised the value of visible role models and called for more structured ways to ensure these examples are present across services and systems.

Reflections on the Peer Workforce

We are all 'Rough Diamonds'

Peers were described as bringing unique insight, trust, and value, often through the very

experiences that might disqualify them from conventional roles. The panel cautioned against over-professionalising peer work and losing what makes it distinct.

Mutual Growth

The panel recognised that peer support is never one-way. Many of the stories showed how offering support helped peers grow in confidence, responsibility and connection. This mutuality was seen as a core strength of peer roles.

Stigma

Addiction stigma was highlighted as a barrier still deeply rooted in many systems. Panel members noted the contrast with increasing awareness around mental health and called for more substantial efforts at the service and societal levels to address addiction stigma directly.

Actions and System Learning

In addition to insights, the panel discussion surfaced several clear areas for action:

- Provide multiple entry points and pathways into peer work (not just job applications)
- Maintain and fund open-access, relational spaces where recovery and connection can happen
- Invest in ongoing skill development through training, volunteering, and supported peer roles
- Equip managers and colleagues with training to support, understand and supervise peer workers
- Map out and strengthen peer involvement in the NHS and Tier 4 services
- Ensure that people's full stories—not just data points—are part of decision-making

Storybook: The 10 Selected Stories

As part of this project, we produced a digital and physical storybook featuring 10 peer stories selected from the wider pool of 22.

These stories weren't chosen as 'the best'—but as a group that offered breadth and depth: different stages of recovery, different roles, and a mix of people who had both given and received peer support. Our aim was to reflect the richness and complexity of the wider group, while making the storybook accessible and engaging for a broad audience.

To support the development of the storybook, we conducted secondary interviews with each of the 10 contributors. These follow-up conversations allowed us to dig deeper into what people wanted to share, how they wanted to be represented, and what parts of their stories felt most significant. All stories were shaped in collaboration with the storyteller and are written in their own words.

The storybook is available as a digital resource via the Recovery Cymru website. It will also be shared in print, with copies going to GP surgeries, local services and community organisations across Cardiff and the Vale. It is designed to be used in learning settings, service development discussions, and any space where lived experience can inform understanding.

We want to thank the 10 people who generously participated in the follow-up interviews and were willing to go deeper, share more of themselves, reflect on their journeys, and help us shape something that others can learn from. Your honesty and insight sit at the heart of this storybook.

Read our Storybook: <https://www.recoverycymru.org.uk/stories/>



The Significance of the Peer Workforce Event



The April 2025 event—*“The Significance of the Peer Workforce”*—was the final stage of this project, bringing everything together: the stories, the themes, the learning, and the people behind it all.

It wasn't just a launch or a showcase. It was a space to honour lived experience, explore the value of peer support across services, and invite deeper discussion about what it means to support, grow and sustain a peer workforce. The day was designed to reflect the spirit of the project itself: welcoming, peer-led, relational and real.

What We Did

Held in Cardiff, the event brought together people from across sectors—those with lived experience, peer workers, volunteers, practitioners, managers, and decision-makers. It was an intentionally mixed room, designed to spark learning and reflection across perspectives. The session included:

- An overview of the project, its stages, and who was involved
- Storytelling from Anthony, Chad and Dai, who shared their recovery experiences
- Reflections on the co-reflection and panel process
- The launch of the storybook (available in print and online)
- Breakout discussions exploring what needs to change to support peer roles
- Opportunities to connect and reflect informally across organisations



Recovery Cymru and project contributors, including volunteers and peer workers who had participated in the storytelling or co-reflection process, co-produced and co-facilitated the event.

Why It Mattered

This event created the conditions for people to sit together as equals: peers, professionals, and those wearing both hats. It gave space for connection, challenge, and shared learning, centred not around data or metrics, but around real voices and real stories.

It also had emotional significance. For those who had shared their stories—particularly Anthony, Chad and Dai—standing in front of the room and being listened to with respect and interest was powerful. It reinforced the importance of being heard and feeling understood.

Discussions sparked on the day led to follow-up conversations around practical action, including funding for co-reflection, embedding peer support in new spaces, improving supervision and development pathways, better recognition of peer roles across the system and preserving the independent recovery community.

Peer Workforce Reflections

This whole project has been a learning process - the stories, trialling new ways of working, collaborating across sectors, and centring peers ('people who offer peer support to others') at every stage. What emerged wasn't just a list of themes. It was a set of reflections on what it really takes to support and sustain a meaningful peer workforce.

Peer support needs infrastructure, not just goodwill

The value of peer support is well understood anecdotally—but it's often still seen as an "add-on." or "the same as other roles but you're in recovery". This project highlighted the need for real, resourced infrastructure: things like co-reflection, training, progression routes, and clear supervision. Without this, even the most passionate peer workers can burn out.

Lived experience must shape the system, not just work within it

Hearing 22 peer stories back-to-back—and watching how they resonated with the panel and event attendees—confirmed that lived experience is powerful and *perspective-shifting*. But for it to shape systems, it needs to be listened to consistently, not just in one-off exercises.

Storytelling opens doors

The storytelling process opened up honesty, learning, and connection for those who shared and those who listened. Whether in the co-reflection sessions, the storybook interviews, or the panel event, stories created empathy and shifted understanding in ways that policy or data often can't.

Co-production works—when done with care

From the way stories were gathered and written, to how people facilitated, presented, and hosted the event, this project modelled peer involvement as equal. That didn't happen by accident—it took intention, flexibility and trust. But it worked. People showed up, shared power, and created something richer together.

This project showed what's possible when peers are valued for their leadership, insight, and the change they can drive.

Co-Reflection: A Space for the Peer Workforce

As part of this project, we trialled three co-reflection sessions for people delivering peer support in Cardiff and the Vale. These peer-led, cross-sector spaces were designed for people to step out of their roles and reflect together, with honesty, curiosity, and mutual respect. These were trialled in partnership with the Cardiff and Vale Recovery and Wellbeing College.

The sessions weren't formal training or supervision. Instead, they offered a rare space for connection, emotional processing, and shared learning between people with special and challenging roles, some who often work in isolation or under pressure.

What came up?

The conversations were wide-ranging, honest and energising. People welcomed the chance to connect across roles and reflect on shared challenges. Common topics included:

- **Boundaries**—how we learn them, hold them, and sometimes struggle with them
- **Developing in recovery**—growing into peer roles while still navigating our own journeys
- **Difficult conversations**—how to manage emotion, triggers and conflict in peer settings
- **Sharing your story**—how much to share, when, and with whom
- **What does 'good' look like?**—when it comes to peer work, support, supervision and culture
- **Being heard and seen**, especially for those working in lone or undervalued roles

Many people described the sessions as a kind of **sanctuary**—a space where they didn't have to explain themselves and where their work and experience were understood without question.

What we learned

These sessions made something clear: **co-reflection works—and it's needed.**

Across all three trials, people asked for more. Recognition for this kind of support is vital. It's not an optional extra. It's part of the foundation for sustainable peer work.

Co-reflection was described as:

- **Preventative**—reducing burnout and disconnection
- **Energising**—building confidence, motivation and shared understanding
- **Clarifying**—helping peers develop boundaries, role clarity and language
- **Supportive**—emotionally and practically

- **Essential**—not a luxury, for the people and for the quality of peer support offered

A detailed write-up of the co-reflection trial—including who came, what we discussed, and what people told us is available at <https://www.recoverycymru.org.uk/stories/>



What's Next

This project was just the beginning. The stories, learning, and energy that emerged have opened doors, and we're ready to walk through them. Here's what we hope is next for the peer workforce in Cardiff and the Vale.

1. Make co-reflection a permanent offer

The trial sessions showed just how needed these spaces are.

We want to embed regular peer-led co-reflection into local systems across services, roles and sectors.

We're asking for support to fund and sustain this as essential infrastructure for the peer workforce.

2. Deepen the learning from the stories

We're undertaking further thematic analysis of all 22 stories to draw out learning for workforce development, service design and strategy.

Once complete, we'll be looking for help to apply and share that learning across the system so it informs real change.

3. Launch Most Significant Change Phase Two

We're asking for support for Most Significant Change Phase 2— focused on capturing the impact of peer support from the perspectives of the people receiving it. We'll be asking for support to develop this next phase, which will build on everything we've learned so far—same model, deeper reach.

We're seeking support to co-design, fund and deliver this next phase so we can capture the full picture of impact.

4. Champion, protect and fund the independent peer recovery community

Independent recovery communities bring something vital to the local landscape. We're asking partners and decision makers to recognise and support the independent recovery community, both for the 'services' we offer within the treatment system and for the role it plays in the community, assisting people to sustain change long term as part of a recovery-focused system.

Read our 'Voices From Peer Support' (22 Stories from the peer workforce), 'This is what Recovery looks like' Storybook (10 recovery stories - local people, local stories' and our Co-reflection findings here: <https://www.recoverycymru.org.uk/stories/>

Please Help Us Continue This Work!

As this project draws to a close, we seek support to take the following steps forward: co-reflection, continued storytelling, system-wide learning, workforce development, and strengthening independent recovery communities. Each strand is vital for protecting and growing the peer workforce across Cardiff and the Vale.

Thank You

This project wouldn't have been possible without the people who shared their stories, the peers who showed up for co-reflection, the partners who took part in panel conversations, and the many voices who helped shape what you've read here. Huge thanks to everyone who has been part of this journey, and to the Cardiff and Vale Area Planning Board for funding and supporting this work.



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