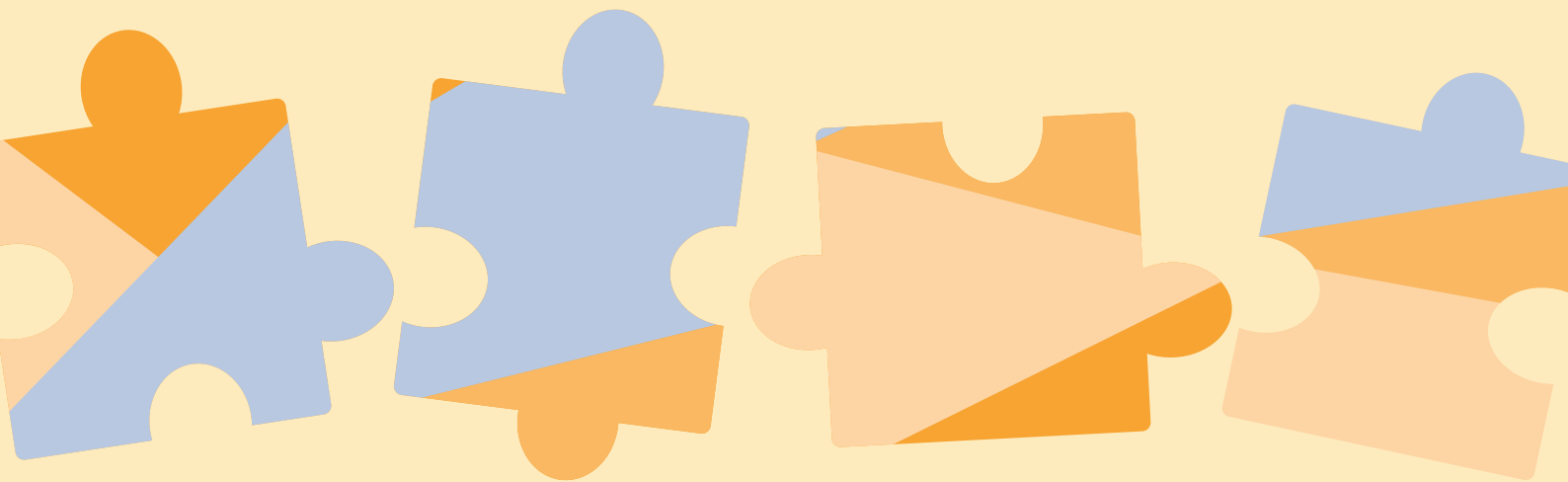


Meaningful connections

How peer support in Scotland
adapted to a digital world
during Covid-19



Message from Scottish Recovery Network



The Covid-19 lockdown and subsequent restrictions have been a challenging time for many. Peer support has long been an important part of our mental health support system. It is not always well recognised or funded but provides a way for people to participate in mutual support that helps them live a good life of their choosing. The results of this research show that peer support groups, services, and organisations stayed focused on providing support and spaces for people to come together. This required them to be flexible and adaptable and to embrace changes that were not always comfortable. Those providing peer support did not know how well the new approaches would work but also knew that to do nothing would mean that people would lose support they valued. Support that was an essential part of their recovery journey.

At a time when many mental health services and supports were being withdrawn or reduced this is a great example of what being person centred and people focused means. Taking peer support into the remote space is not always easy. It presents new challenges but offers a way for people to come together and support each other when meeting face-to-face is not possible. It also opened up peer support to some of those who found it difficult to engage in more traditional forms. This doesn't mean that we must all move to remote peer support.

It does show that we need to offer more choice for people in future and that is likely to include more use of digital platforms, telephone and other remote approaches.

The ability of peer support to adapt and change during Covid-19 lockdown should be celebrated and built on. Peer support needs to become a much more important and valued part of our mental health system. In doing this we can put lived experience at the centre of the design and delivery of services and supports. It highlights the capacity for and reality of change and the benefits this can bring to the experiences and outcomes for people living with mental health problems.

We would like to thank all of those who took the time to share their experiences of providing and participating in remote peer support with us. We can all feel busy and pressured by the challenges we are facing and the pace of change. Taking time to reflect and share is invaluable and can contribute greatly to our understanding of what is possible as we plan the future.

Louise Christie

Acting Director
Scottish Recovery Network

Background and context

The background to our project

The Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 affected everyone and we all had to adapt in our own ways.

During this time, we noticed that a lot of the peer support that had usually been taking place face-to-face was now being offered in new remote formats that people could access from their own homes. This was something that happened very quickly and that no-one had planned for! We at Scottish Recovery Network thought it would be valuable to tap into the knowledge and lived experience of people across Scotland to document what actually happened, and to find out what this was like and what we could all learn from it.

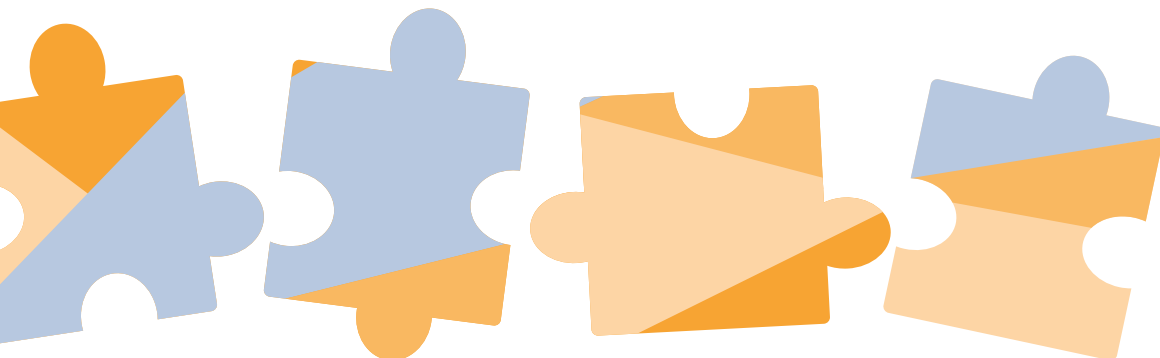
What we did

Scottish Recovery Network asked independent researcher Ruth Stevenson to gather this information.

During July 2020 we ran two online surveys (one with peer support providers and one with peer support participants) to find out exactly what had been happening. We wanted to discover how people felt and what people wanted to feed back about peer support in Scotland during lockdown. In total, 174 providers and 101 participants responded to our surveys.

In August 2020 Ruth interviewed 10 of the peer support providers and 6 of the peer support participants in much more depth. She spoke with them to help us understand some of the issues coming out of the survey findings.

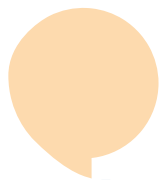
This report summarises some of the key themes that came out of this process.



What peer support was available during lockdown?

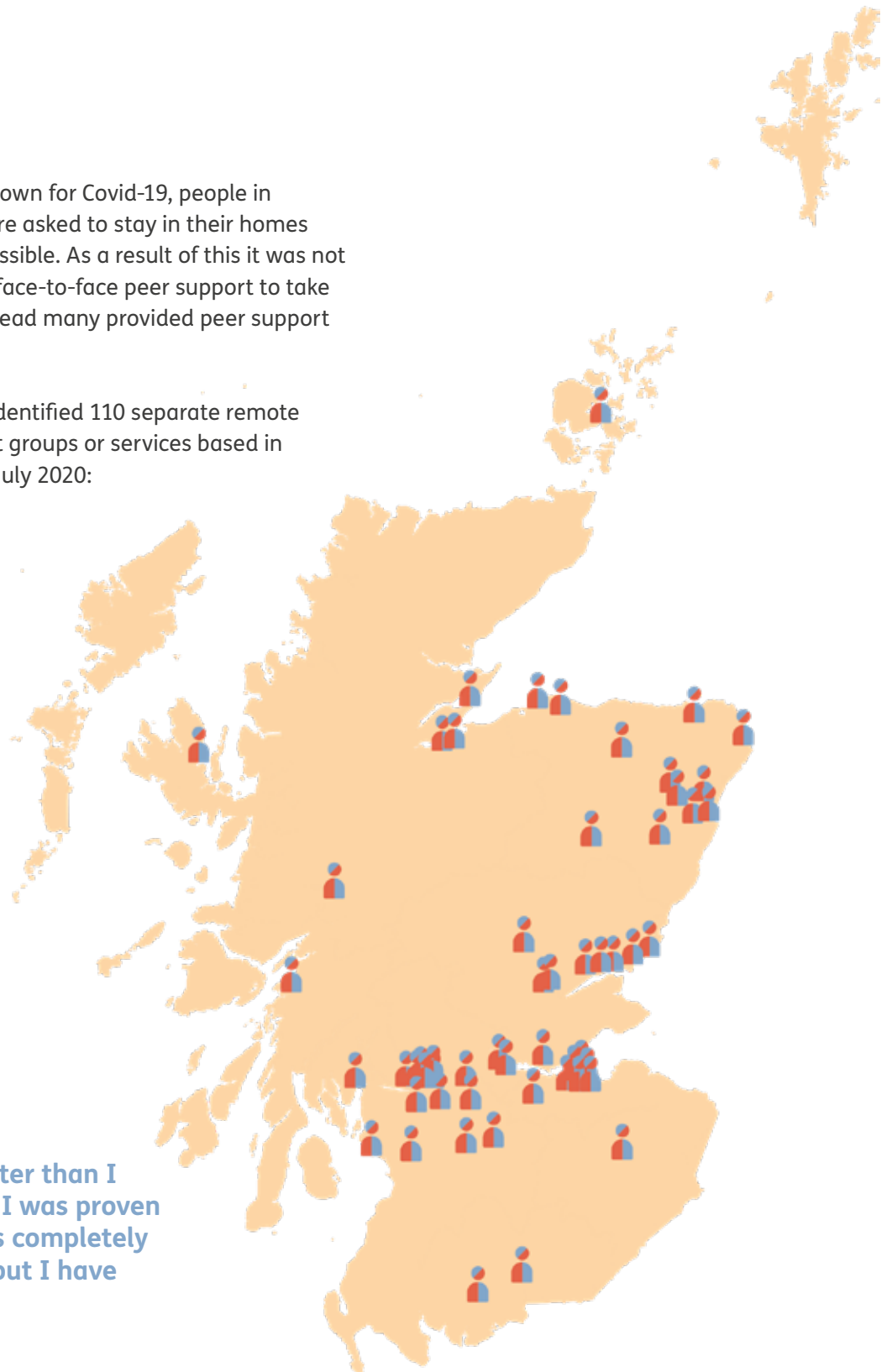
During lockdown for Covid-19, people in Scotland were asked to stay in their homes wherever possible. As a result of this it was not possible for face-to-face peer support to take place so instead many provided peer support remotely.

Our survey identified 110 separate remote peer support groups or services based in Scotland in July 2020:

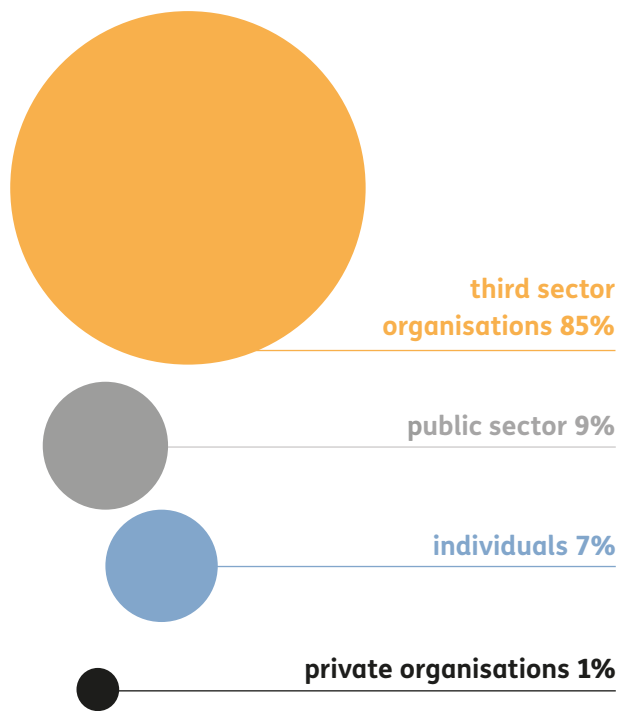


It was better than I expected. I was proven wrong. It's completely different but I have adjusted.

Provider



Remote peer support groups providers



The vast majority (85%) of these remote peer support groups or services were provided by third sector organisations, with a smaller number provided by the public sector (9%), individuals (7%), and private organisations (1%).

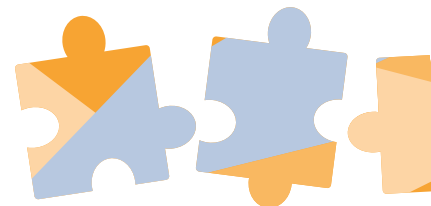
Most of the remote peer support was based around individuals or groups having a conversation at a pre-arranged time, although drop-ins, check-in calls and activity-based sessions also took place.

Zoom was the platform that was used most often for remote peer support during lockdown, but many groups used different platforms and often more than one approach.



It is about exploring different avenues and giving things a try. Some are more successful than others, some are new. We have an activity-based group, a peer support group, yoga sessions, one for children and young people, a family fitness fun session once a month, an art competition, a parent/carer toddler group.

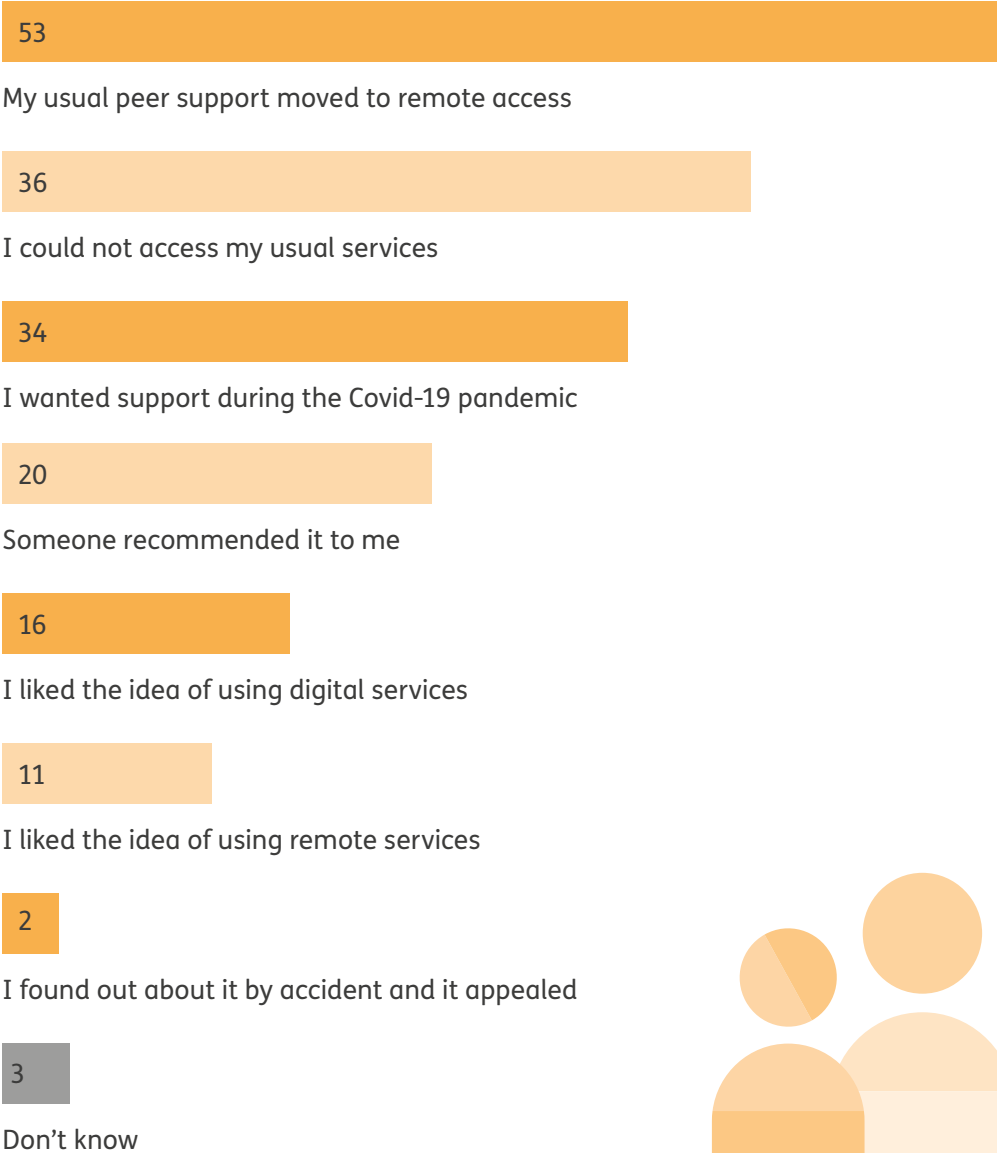
Provider



More than half (53%) of participants accessed remote peer support because their usual peer support service moved to remote access. Linked to this, more than a third (36%) of participants accessed remote peer support because they could not access their usual services.

What prompted you to access a remote peer support service?

Base size: all participants (101)



What did we learn about remote peer support?

Support during lockdown was innovative and responsive

A lot of innovation happened around peer support during lockdown, creating a huge range of services in a ‘remote’ space that was – for the most part – previously unoccupied. It is notable that most of the providers had never worked in this way before and indeed that many had assumed that it could not work. Providers moved very quickly to set up new remote services or amend their existing services. Many of these services evolved as providers tested varied approaches to supporting their participants based on changing circumstances and emerging needs. The third sector were particularly responsive and adaptable compared to other sectors or providers who perhaps have less flexibility.

Being forced to innovate during the changing landscape of lockdown resulted in providing support in completely new ways.

84% 

of Providers set up their remote peer support service because they could not provide their usual service.

When did you set up remote peer support?



Straight away



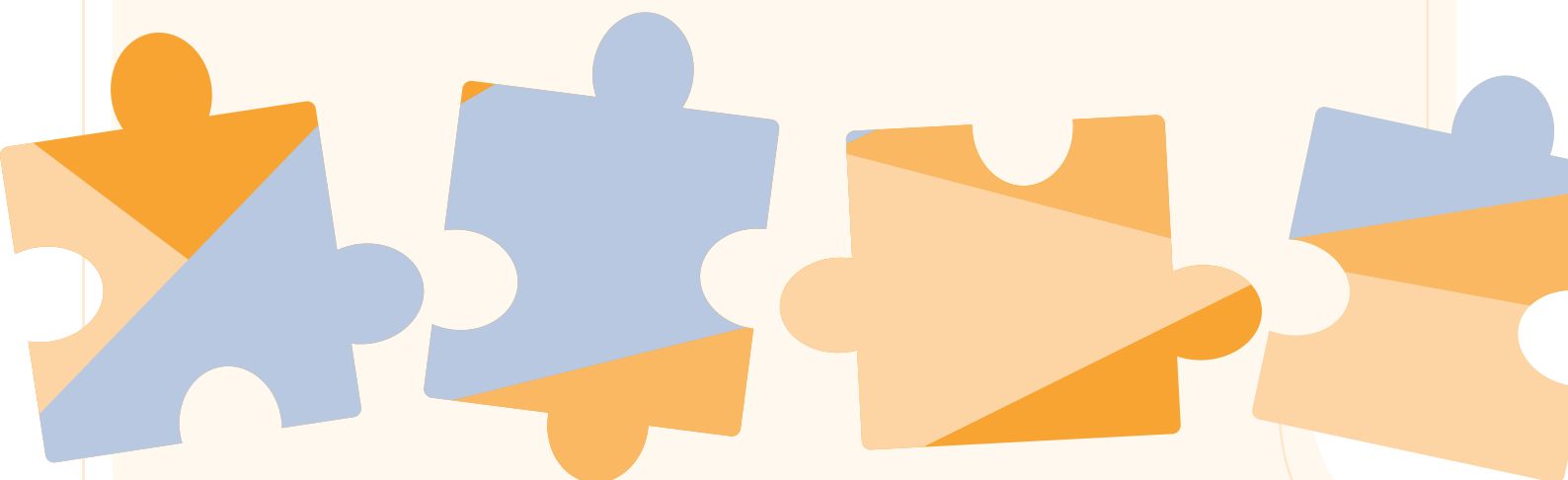
Within a month

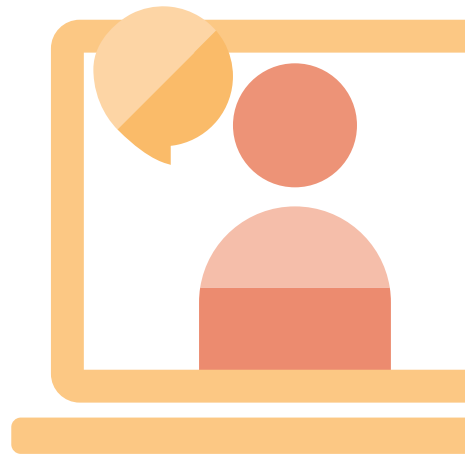




It is an online version but in many ways a new service, not something we've done before. We were learning so much all the time. Having to plan and risk assess very quickly, you just have to do it and not get too caught up in feeling anxious about it. We were basically re-learning how to do our jobs and we hadn't planned for that.

Provider





Flexibility was a key enabler of success

91%

Around nine in ten Providers (91%) agreed that providing peer support remotely is a flexible way for us to work



I could do it from home which was really convenient because I am a single parent on a low income, and driving into town is a tenner in fuel. You can cook your tea while you are at the meeting or hang up your washing or continue with life.

Participant

81%

Around eight in ten Participants (81%) agreed that this is a flexible way to access peer support.

Remote peer support proved to be a very flexible approach as it could be managed to meet the specific needs of individuals and groups. Many told us that it saved time in travel, set-up, and delivery and that it was very easy to slot in amongst people’s daily lives. Those providing remote peer support found that they could reach a broader range and a greater number of people this way. People living in remote places, people with caring responsibilities, and people who preferred to engage from home found that the remote approach suited them particularly well and allowed them to engage more regularly.



The flexibility that phone calls allow has been huge. It has been a revelation to me I don’t need to get to people and if they are out we can postpone things. And one minute later you can be talking to someone else. It has been really good, a huge time saving.

Provider

Remote peer support has the potential to reach people who are often excluded from more traditional approaches.

The digital divide was a key barrier

We found that a lack of access to technology was a key barrier to engagement with remote peer support. Some potential participants and providers did not have a phone, tablet or computer to use. Others did not have a new enough device to support the platforms or found the cost of data or minutes prohibitive. Linked to this, learning to use the platforms such as Zoom proved to be a steep learning curve for many and dealing with technical issues was a frequent challenge for facilitators and for the flow of conversation.

Challenges when setting up remote peer support



We constantly had interruptions to the Zoom meeting of people sitting trying to get in that couldn't get in. We are so busy firefighting around getting microphones to work and the audio to work or you are rustling or that you need to press this button, even now.

Provider



They may have the funds to be connected one month and not the next, which affects their ability to engage let alone keep in touch with their friends or school work. It affects all areas of their life, a huge impact.

Provider

98%

experienced at least one challenge

71%

said not everyone understood the technology

71%

found that everyone had the right technology

To provide the widest possible benefit, all involved must all have access to appropriate technology and be supported to confidently use it.



Facilitators need support to make this approach work

Facilitating peer support remotely demands a different skill set to facilitating peer support face-to-face.

To ensure that facilitators can confidently provide an excellent experience they need to be supported to develop appropriate skills around engaging with participants, managing difficult conversations, safeguarding, and using the technology.

Along with this, they need to be supported to maintain their own wellbeing and decompress from undertaking this intense role particularly if they are also delivering from a remote or isolated situation.



They were listening to people saying they couldn't cope, and they didn't get a break for their own feelings. Once we realised that was a risk we told people to take holidays, switch their phone off at night, your weekends are your own.

Provider

It is definitely different, and it is quite hard missing out on the body language. Even with a video call you are not getting a great picture or the sense when somebody is getting tense.

Provider

When asked in our survey to provide tips or advice for setting up a remote peer support service, many responses focused around providing the Peer Support Workers with training specific to that role, ensuring the Peer Support Workers understand how to use the technology, and supporting the wellbeing needs of the Peer Support Workers.

It must be acknowledged that providing a new kind of service demands a new kind of skill set and facilitators need to be supported to accommodate this so that they can provide a reliable and engaging experience for participants.

Remote peer support worked for a lot of people

81% 

Participants told us that they had felt better after accessing remote peer support.

A lot of people benefited from remote peer support during the lockdown period, and this experience was generally considered helpful, enjoyable, supportive, and positive by those that engaged. The experience of participating was typically quite different in practice compared to face-to-face peer support, but it had many of the same benefits. Many appreciated the availability and flexibility of these services during the challenges and restrictions of lockdown.



The people that come responded really positively, surprisingly positively, they seem to appreciate it and feel that sense of connection with people. I had an assumption people weren't feeling as connected, but they said they had and it had been good.

Provider

Taking part in remote peer support broadened the horizons of many participants due to the skills and experience and contacts that they gained:

- Many made new friends that they kept in touch with outside the group
- Some talked to people who lived in other parts of Scotland and even abroad
- Most became more technically literate and they used their new technical skills outside the group (e.g. using Zoom or email in their personal lives, web searching, sourcing benefits or other support)
- Some started hosting other Zoom activities with their friends and families (e.g. dinner parties, activity sessions or quizzes)
- Some found other new online interests through recommendation in their group or via their new-found technical literacy (e.g. fitness and wellness, making art, looking at zoos or museums online)





There is a social aspect, they get together and chat about coping techniques and hobbies. It went really well even outside of the structured side, they meet online in their own time. They sit on Zoom and have a dinner party. They've been doing arts and crafts on the Zoom – poetry, painting and drawing, sharing what they've been doing. It is a really really good way for them to connect.

Provider

Although many were keen to tell us that remote peer support should not be a replacement for face-to-face peer support, it is certainly another useful tool in the peer support toolkit.

From our survey, the words used by participants to describe their experience of remote peer support were mostly positive.



Future plans



We are planning to go back to face-to-face but maintaining some online. Some have said they don't feel safe going back to face-to-face, some might not have gone to the face-to-face in the first place as they were too anxious. But they will continue to go to online places.

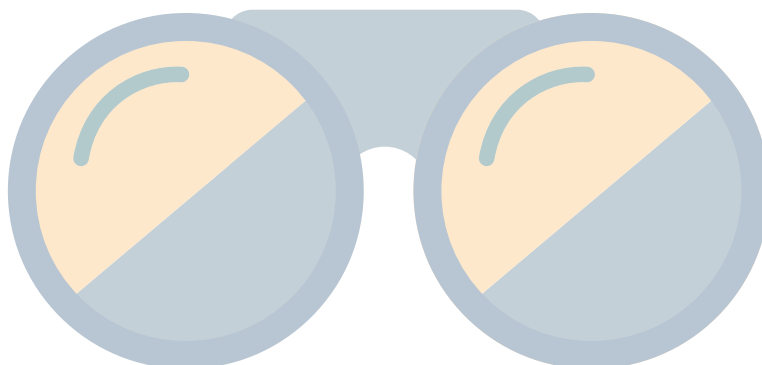
Provider

All of the providers that we spoke to in more depth told us that they planned to take a “blended” approach in the future, which would be a combination of face-to-face and remote peer support. They felt that face-to-face and remote peer support complement each other, and both have a place in their service.



61%

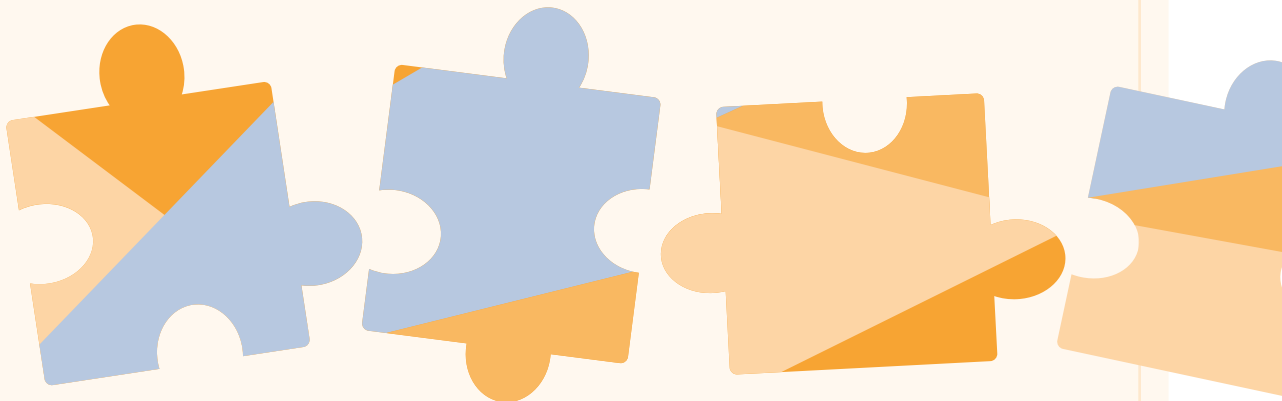
In our survey, around six in ten (61%) of the Providers said that they planned to carry on providing remote peer support after restrictions lifted, and many of the rest had not made firm plans yet.





They've said even when face-to-face groups come back they'd still like to have the Zoom groups because they've really enjoyed that connection. They've said nothing beats being face-to-face but this is something they would like to continue maybe once a month. They'd like a blended approach.

Provider



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