

# 'COMMUNITY-LED HEALING' - LET THE PEOPLE SING!

INSPIRING SCOTLAND

*Craigmillar and Niddrie, two Edinburgh communities, grapple with the highest rates of alcohol and drug-related addiction in the city. This case study unfolds an inspiring journey of two community-led initiatives to bridge a significant gap in recovery services: 'Let the People Sing!' and the 'Bothy'. It explores the pivotal role played by Link Up (known locally as Connecting Craigmillar) and local volunteers in catalysing community action, fostering partnerships, and creating transformative change.*

**Background:** Before the pandemic, five full-time recovery workers supported individuals dealing with drug and alcohol addiction in the area. In 2020, these resources were withdrawn, and the nearest recovery support hub relocated to Leith.

This was problematic for service users: many were anxious about meeting individuals they had previous negative drug-related relationships with in Leith; some had been sex workers and feared returning to the area; and several had acute mental health issues that created significant anxiety about using the two buses required to travel to Leith. In addition, the absence of private meeting space in Craigmillar and Niddrie made meetings between workers and individuals challenging, workers often resorting to meeting people in café spaces.

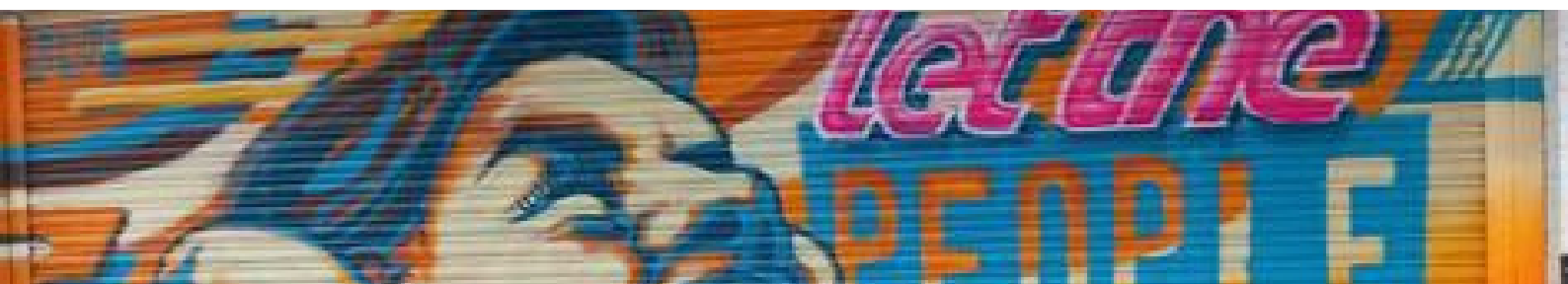
These circumstances resulted in many people removing themselves from recovery services, increasing the risk of relapse, drug and alcohol-related illnesses and death.

**The beginning of a community response:** In Autumn 2021, local residents took matters into their own hands creating two new recovery fellowship groups, Cocaine Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Simultaneously, Connecting Craigmillar (CC), Edinburgh Community Yoga and John - local community member in recovery - initiated free weekly yoga sessions at the Thistle Foundation.

For local people in recovery, these provided a much-needed community space to come together and support each other. The efforts quickly gained traction with around 20 people engaging each week; building resilience and a determination to affect wider change.

**Formation of 'Let the People Sing!' and the Recovery Forum:** In late 2021, this determination led fellowship members, John, Mikey (another local volunteer) and the CC team to initiate the 'Let the People Sing!' (LtPS) community group (became a SCIO in 2023). And following a public meeting in early 2022, CC and LtPS members collaborated to engage potential partner organisations and stakeholders to establish the Craigmillar & Niddrie Recovery Forum, a monthly gathering to enhance services, raise awareness, and establish a local recovery space. Key partners included local councillors, Edinburgh Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (EADP), Vocal, NHS, Community Police, GP Link Workers, Turning Point Scotland, fellowships, Steps to Hope, and others working in recovery.

**Securing a space, the birth of the recovery 'Bothy':** By summer 2022, the above efforts were gathering pace and were the catalyst for the creation of a dedicated community recovery hub, 'The Bothy'.



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Again, the collaboration between CC, John and other partners was pivotal in taking this idea forward, securing funding and the lease of a shop unit at a significant discount. In September 2022, the group got the keys to their own space. However, The Bothy was far from ready.

It took several months of community-driven effort to renovate the space with the support of local businesses which contributed goods and services. This coupled with a two-year funding agreement with EADP to employ a new dedicated coordinator, enabled The Bothy to formally open early in 2023.

Reflecting on this phase, one community member summed it up as follows: *[this] "has brought key players from service providers to face challenges of woeful service provision in the area from those of us with local knowledge and lived experience of addiction"*.

**Impact:** The Bothy has become a beacon of hope and resilience, serving as a welcoming space for various recovery groups and local people seeking support. As detailed below, what the Bothy offers is invaluable access to support around recovery (much of it peer-led), wider health and wellbeing as well as opportunities for personal growth.

As a direct result of the work carried out by the activists within 'Let the People Sing,' 3 mutual aid groups are established in the Bothy, led by people with lived experience: Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Cocaine Anonymous, each accommodating 10 to 20 people weekly. LtPS has also initiated a drop-in three times a week. This has operated for 16 months, welcoming up to 15 people each session. The Bothy also offers weekly seated Yoga sessions as well as Men's, Women's and Memorial Quilting (in remembrance of those that died of drugs and alcohol) groups.

Furthermore, LtPS has developed valuable connections with local GP practices and their Link Workers (including a weekly information desk in the largest practice) as well as local mental health nurses. They have also successfully campaigned for the dispensing of Buvidal (treatment for a dependence on heroin and morphine) in the local area, materially improving people's lives.

The success of the Bothy has been an important contributory factor in Turning Point Scotland, Advocard and other organisations using it for SMART recovery groups and individual and collective advocacy.

Significantly, the Bothy builds capacity, providing opportunities for individuals to undergo training and support, fostering their growth and confidence to take on new opportunities for personal development, employment and education. For example, 14 volunteers have been trained in mental health first aid and engaging with the community. And Recovery Coaching has been provided through Scottish Recovery Coaching. 8 volunteers from these initiatives have since gone on to full-time education or paid employment in the sector.

Alongside this, due to high attendance at the Weekly Men's Group and the complexity of the issues arising, a professional facilitator was paid to work with the group for 13 weeks to develop their peer facilitation skills and support group members to take on facilitation roles.





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Having successfully completed the training, group members are increasingly using their new skills to support others in and outside of the group.

A community leader summed-up what the past two years has meant to the recovery communities in Craigmillar and Niddrie: *"With Connecting Craigmillar's help, we have achieved a number of wins in gaining a return of services and reprovisioning vital prescribing services in the area which desperately needs it."*

**A difficult transition:** With the appointment of a dedicated coordinator in February 2023, the CC team gradually began to reduce its direct involvement. It was anticipated that this would further empower the community to take ownership of the LtPS Bothy. However, this transition has been challenging as LtPS faced difficulties around staffing and volunteering stability and continuity, including the resignation of the coordinator in December '23.

Despite these difficulties, the group remains optimistic about continuing the vital work in The Bothy and is focused on coming through this difficult period. CC will continue to support the group, stepping back when it is appropriate to do so.

**Conclusion:** This story exemplifies the transformative power of community-led initiatives in addressing critical gaps in addiction recovery services, and the value that peer support can bring. The passion, care, and solidarity within the recovery community, coupled with CC's integral role, have fostered valuable partnerships and positive community action to create an inspiring story of resilience and empowerment, in an ongoing journey toward holistic recovery. As individuals, once struggling with addiction, now find employment, education and peer support opportunities through the initiative, the Bothy stands as a testament to the potential for positive change when communities come together.

The challenges faced during LtPS transition away from CC highlight the need for ongoing support and collaboration to ensure the sustained success of community-led efforts in addiction recovery. Despite this, the community remains hopeful, driven by a shared commitment to overcome these uncertainties and continue the vital work of the Bothy.

