



# **THE DROP IN CENTRES ACROSS HIGHLAND**

**(The views of 131 people on the benefits of  
Drop In Centres within Highland Region)**

**December 2007**

**Highland Users Group can be contacted through Graham Morgan,  
Highland Community Care Forum, Highland House,  
20 Longman Road, Inverness IV1 1RY**

**Telephone: (01463) 723560 / Fax: (01463) 718818**

**email [hug@hccf.org.uk](mailto:hug@hccf.org.uk)**

**[www.hug.uk.net](http://www.hug.uk.net)**

## **CONTENTS**

<b>What is HUG</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Drop In Network</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The overall problem that Drop in Services face</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Drop In Centres</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Stepping Stones (Thurso)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Haven (Wick)</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The Gatehouse (Golspie)</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Campanas Cottage (Alness)</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>The Mid Ross Drop In and NSF Outreach</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Cairdeas Cottage (Inverness)</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The Gardeners Cottage (Nairn)</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>The Richmond Fellowship (Kingussie)</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>The Glengarry Centre (Fort William)</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Am Fasgadh (Portree)</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>The West Ross Outreach</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>31</b>

## WHAT IS HUG

HUG stands for the Highland Users Group, which is a network of people who use, or have used, mental health services in the Highlands.

At present, HUG has 349 members and 14 branches across the Highlands. HUG has been in existence now for 11 years.

HUG wants people with mental health problems to live without discrimination and to be equal partners in their communities. They should be respected for their diversity and who they are.

We should:

- ◆ Be proud of who we are
- ◆ Be valued
- ◆ Not be feared
- ◆ Live lives free from harassment
- ◆ Live the lives we choose
- ◆ Be accepted by friends and loved ones
- ◆ Not be ashamed of what we have experienced

We hope to achieve this by:

- ◆ Speaking out about the services we need and the lives we want to lead.
- ◆ Educating the public, professionals and young people about our lives and experiences.

Between them, members of HUG have experience of nearly all the mental health services in the Highlands.

### **HUG's aims are as follows:**

- To be the voice of people in Highland who have experienced mental health problems.
- To promote the interests of people in Highland who use or have used mental health services.
- To eliminate stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems.
- To promote equality of opportunity for people with mental health problems irrespective of creed, sexuality, gender, race or disability.
- To improve understanding about the lives of people with a mental health problem.
- To participate in the planning development and management of services for users at a local, Highland and national level.
- To identify gaps in services and to campaign to have them filled.
- To find ways of improving the lives, services and treatments of people with mental health problems.
- To share information and news on mental health issues among mental health service user groups and interested parties.
- To increase knowledge about resources, treatments and rights for users.
- To promote co-operation between agencies concerned with mental health.

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2007 two HUG workers set off for Alness to hold the latest round of HUG meetings. The topic was peer support which is a subject of growing importance and referenced in detail in the Scottish Executive document 'Delivering for Mental Health', which will play a large part in the development of mental health services across Scotland in coming years.

However, when they arrived for the meeting, which usually involves four or five people, they found nearly 20 people crowding the room. Half of this number were from the TAG (Training and Guidance) Centre indignant about its uncertain future, and the other half from Campanas Cottage (a local Drop In Centre), equally indignant about the fact that a shortage of money has meant that it had had to cut some of its service. Once everyone had found a place to sit, whether it be a chair, desk or huddled on the floor, we changed the discussion subject and discussed TAG and the Drop In Centres instead.

The report about TAG is contained in a separate document. This report is about Drop In services and was created by talking about each Drop In Centre across the Highland area through group discussion based on a few key questions. These discussions were then written up and form the following report, which has been ratified by the HUG Committee (the HUG Round Table).

*This report is not meant to be a formal evaluation. Instead it is a way of finding out from our members, and other users of mental health services, just how important the service is to them. We did not seek out the views of people who do not use these services and we didn't look for any of the negative views people may have about Drop In services. It forms part of a campaign by HUG members and others to secure a sustainable long term future for such services.*

In this report we describe each Centre and then give the views expressed at our meetings about their value to service users.

## **THE DROP IN NETWORK**

### **The overall problem that Drop In services face**

There is a network of Drop In Centres spread throughout Highland Region. The first Drop In's were established around fifteen years ago and have over this time provided a safe place that people with mental health problems can go to relax, meet people in similar situations, find activity and things to do, get away from the isolation of home and gain support in a warm friendly environment.

The Drop In Centres across Highland have a considerable amount of their costs met by the Mental Illness Specific Grant. This grant has been running for a long time and was initially intended to jump start community services as hospital beds were closed.

However, over the years the grant has become a key component of the way some voluntary services are funded. Two thirds of the grant comes from the Scottish Executive with the rest being provided by the Council.

For some considerable time the grant has been frozen which has, in effect, meant that projects have had to make savings because the cost of living has increased while the grant has remained static. Over time this has meant that some Drop In Centres have had to rationalise and reduce some services.

This situation became very clear earlier this year when some (but not all) of the Drop In Centres had to reduce services prompting considerable anxiety amongst staff and users.

Some people had the impression that there was a real possibility that some services would ultimately have to close and were understandably alarmed. This is not the case, but HUG members and other users have written to the local statutory services and the Scottish Executive about their anxieties.

Over the past few months we have received encouraging reports of the efforts that the local Social Work Services have put into resolving these problems and hope that this report will assist in settling some of the issues that some Drop In Centres are facing.

### **The Drop in Centres**

The following is a series of descriptions of users' views about each Drop In Centre in the Highlands. Naturally, as they all have a similar function there is some similarity in each picture we draw but it seemed to us that it was important that we gave users' views directly about their own services rather than services in general.

## **Stepping Stones in Thurso (run by the Caithness Mental Health Support Group)**

This is a purpose built Centre sited near the centre of Thurso by the river. It is an attractive building based around an enclosed courtyard with a striking slate floor. It has a kitchen and dining room that leads into a large sitting room with music stations, arm chairs and tables for games. In addition there is a pool room, an office and an arts and crafts room, a quiet room a shower and a large garden area.

There are activities on offer and staff to talk to but equally people are not expected to do anything they don't wish to do and can if they wish spend every day drinking coffee and relaxing.

It is open 365 days a year.

### **The challenge:**

It is often said by people at these Drop In's that the Caithness Drop In Centres are two services run on the funding of one. The Thurso Drop In Centre was built with a capital grant from the National Lottery but this was not matched by recurring funds for its day to day running.

Last year the Caithness Mental Health Support Group was given a one off grant by Highland Council to help offset some of its running costs but it still suffers from a precarious funding position and has recently had to close half an hour earlier every day.

### **The views of its members:**

***"This is the only place that I get support from. It's very valuable and very important. It's literally life saving."***

The people who attend Stepping Stones were free with their praise for the Drop In. It provides a greatly valued service:

- It is a place to talk about how people are feeling, both with staff and other members. This chance to talk in a safe and what feels like a therapeutic environment is very much appreciated.
- It is a place to meet friends and acquaintances who have an understanding of each others needs. It is especially important as members feel that there is nowhere else to go to meet other people with mental health problems in Thurso.
- By being accessible on weekends and some evenings it also provides an alternative to the pubs which is welcome.
- Most members are unemployed but Stepping Stones doesn't cost money to go to and also provides good, cheap but high quality meals. There is no other equivalent in the area. Members were keen to emphasize that when unwell they can struggle to cook and that this particular aspect is very important.

- It is open seven days a week which is very important to people. The fact that people still have somewhere to go to even at Christmas and New Year when so many people can be lonely was praised.
- There are activities and games to get involved in (such as pool, darts and scrabble) which help people keep occupied and stops them 'stagnating' and improves their concentration. At home many people have nothing to do at all but Stepping Stones provides an alternative. There are also occasional outings.

***"It helps me to socialise. Because I suffer from agoraphobia I can be a recluse. It helps me to interact with other people. I can be very low in confidence but there is always someone there to lend an ear and listen and to understand, which is more important than anything else."***

- Just knowing that people can walk in at any time and to know that they will feel wanted and respected, understood and not judged makes a big difference to members.
- People talked about the feelings of empathy, solidarity and the hugs and companionship they got when returning from absences such as hospitalisations as making a great difference. To some people going into the Centre feels like coming home.
- Many people praised the building and felt that it was very well designed. The fact that it had full disabled access was also appreciated.
- It is also used by other related organisations for meetings and activities.

***"It's a refuge and a sanctuary from everyday life outside."***

**The things that would improve the Centre are:**

- Although big inroads have been made in challenging stigma, and the community is more aware of the Centre, there is still some prejudice and some people will not attend because of this. Members were keen that the profile of the Centre was raised so that no one feels any shame in crossing the threshold. This work could usefully start in schools.
- It would be good if it could be more actively promoted by health professionals such as doctors.
- It would be good if there was a more secure funding base.

***"It's a place of excellence."***

## **The Haven in Wick (run by the Caithness Mental Health Support Group)**

This is a large bungalow sited near the Community Mental Health Team and the General Hospital.

It has a kitchen and dining room, two quiet rooms, an office, a washing machine room, a large sitting room and a pool room/activity room. It also has a garden.

There are opportunities to speak to the staff whenever needed and games and activities to join in if people wish to.

It is open 365 days a year.

### **The challenge:**

It is often said that the Caithness Drop Centres are two services run on the funding of one. The Thurso Drop In was built with a capital grant from the lottery but this was not matched by recurring funds for its day to day running.

Last year the Caithness Mental Health Support Group was given a one off grant by the council to help offset some of its running costs but it still suffers from a precarious funding position and has recently had to close half an hour earlier every day.

### **The views of its members:**

***“I know I can come in and feel safe. Sometimes I can feel anxious and panicky and I know I can come in and staff and members will keep me safe.”***

- It provides a place to go to, to get support when people aren't well.
- It provides a place to socialise with other people.
- It is a good way of getting people out of the house and away from the isolation many people experience (especially those who live alone.)
- It is source of peer support where people listen, speak and try to understand each other. It's a place where people can help each other out and provide an informal source of counselling.
- It is its own mini community where people with similar experiences and problems can meet each other.
- It provides a multitude of different supports ranging from reassurance and encouragement, the inspiration to look forward in life or a place to chill. It can also be a source of spiritual comfort. It is especially important that people who have also been ill usually understand what fellow members are talking about and can therefore help.

***“When I've been really ill, it's been a lifeline. I would come here first rather than go to my G.P. If it wasn't for here I don't think I would be here today as it's helped me so much in the past.”***



- The shared experience that can be found here means that people build up their self esteem by attending. People feel encouraged by seeing each other getting better and by coming to the Centre find hope and the first steps of the road to recovery.
- It doesn't focus on illness; instead people can have a laugh and, in each others company feel more 'normal'.
- It acts as a safety net for when people struggle.
- It is a source of assistance where staff can summon outside help for those that need it.
- It's a place where staff and members are quick to pick up on the warning signs of someone getting ill again and because they have a good relationship they are able to encourage people to seek help without confrontation.
- It's a place where the staff genuinely care. Where they are supportive and welcoming and because of this, members trust them.

***"It's warm which is good, especially when you are on benefits and can't heat your home. There are all the basics of what you need. It's cosy with plants and games to play. It's a relaxed atmosphere."***

- It is a place that allows people to relax and just be themselves without having to pretend that they are OK.
- It helps people develop good social and support networks.
- It feels like a home from home and almost functions as a big welcoming extended family. This is especially important for those without family nearby.
- The fact that it is open 365 days a year is extremely important to members who emphasised that they can't choose when they become ill and therefore need access to services on any day of the week.
- It can be the first place people go to for help which can be a critical time.

***"It's our own little private calm."***

- It's very important to people that it's open at Christmas and at times when other services are closed.
- It is especially important as a source of help to those people who get ill but do not have the ability to ask for help. The staff can help people agree to the need for help and then get help for them.
- It is a source of support and advice for dealing with systems, forms and issues such as housing or benefits which can intimidate people. With the support of staff and the extra 'clout' they have, people find it easier to get what they are entitled to and also find it easier to navigate the system.
- It is a source of support to people who arrive alone in the town having escaped from trauma elsewhere.
- Staff can help people keep a sense of perspective when troubles arise and they get things confused.

***"I've been physically and mentally ill and stopped looking after myself but by coming in here I get something, a bowl of soup. By getting up and coming down here and making the effort to come here it shows I'm trying to look after myself. It's very important; it's so much more than a bowl of soup."***

- The fact that there is good quality nutritional food is welcomed by everyone who also praised the atmosphere that exists when people eat together around the dining room table.
- It helps people believe in a future and the possibility of recovery.
- It stops loneliness and provides activity and connections with other people.
- It gives people the encouragement to do things that they would otherwise be nervous about.
- It is a place to go for people who can't face 'mainstream' society.

***"I used to be isolated, I wouldn't open the door or go out but then I started coming here and I began to come forth and gradually began to blossom again and started to do the things that other people take for granted."***

**Things that would improve the Centre are:**

There were few suggestions for improvements except for the overriding wish for secure and sustainable funding. There was recognition that Social Work Services had helped with this locally but still a degree of anger over the pressure an uncertain funding position creates for people.

***"We get great value for money. It's unbelievable what is achieved here. They would never get something like this again."***

## **The Gatehouse in Golspie (run by NSF Scotland)**

This is a fairly roomy building at the entrance to the Lawson Memorial Hospital which acts as a Drop In for three days a week and a TAG unit for two days.

It is bright and airy with comfortable chairs in a big sitting room which is decorated with a large mural painted by one of the members. It also has a quiet room, art room, kitchen and office. It has a large garden.

There are often activities on offer ranging from arts and crafts to outings or advice and information on a variety of subjects provided by several agencies.

### **The challenge:**

The Gatehouse is one of the few services that doesn't have huge financial worries. Its worker has been successful and very active in seeking funds for the general running of the service and for specific projects that clients can get involved with ever since it started.

### **The views of its members:**

#### ***"It stopped me from doing myself in"***

- It provides activity and diversion from boredom.
- For some people it feels like the only place that they can go to locally.
- It is often the first place that people turn to when in crisis.
- It is a place that people can go to and discuss any problems that they may be having.
- It has a friendly atmosphere.
- It can be used when people need it and returned to again and again.
- It provides security – a backbone.
- It can be very helpful in the early days of illness when people feel that they have nowhere else to turn.

#### ***There is a good buzz and a nice atmosphere"***

- The staff are a good source of support and advice and highly committed to their work. They go 'the extra mile'.
- There are activities such as gardening, quizzes and computer games.
- There are ways to contribute - for instance by doing the cleaning.
- There are health related activities such as outings to the gym, badminton and golf.
- There are mental health activities such as 'mind over mood' courses.
- People find that being in the company of others is excellent.

***"I did mind over mood; if I'd kept at it, it would have been better but I had a set back. But the seeds were planted and now I'm going forward in life. If it works for me it can work for anyone."***

- It is open out of hours on some evenings which is appreciated.

- It has good links with other agencies (such as Welfare Rights) which is welcome and some agencies share the use of the building at times when the Drop In is not running.
- There are more young people using it as a result of contact with Barnados.
- People are entitled to a personal assessment with help in finding areas of their life that they want to work on.
- There are frequent quiz nights which people enjoy and can be a good way of getting used to the centre.
- Everyone is involved in discussing and deciding what will happen.
- Disputes are settled between users with staff support and the involvement of other users of the centre if necessary.
- People also move on to new things which is good.
- The focus is on normality rather than illness.
- It is a place where people can enjoy themselves and laugh.

***“You come here and get your spirits lifted”***

**Things that would improve the Centre are:**

- It would be good to have bigger premises, there is a big room but when there are a lot of people even it can feel cramped.
- It can sometimes feel too busy.
- The Centre Manager is highly valued and the time she needs to spend administering the Centre is seen as detracted from the hugely valuable time she offers clients.
- There is a feeling that it could benefit from more workers.
- It would be good to have more funding to do more things.
- Christmases and weekends when it is shut can be lonely times.

***“Since I’ve moved on I feel as if I’ve got my self worth back and yet I can come back if I want to.”***

## **Campanas Cottage in Alness (run by NSF Scotland)**

This is an attractive converted house on the Alness High Street. It has a kitchen/dining room, a sitting room and some other activity rooms as well as two offices. It also has a garden. A charity shop is run by users of the Centre a short distance from the building.

### **The challenge (now partially resolved):**

A shortage of resources had meant that the Drop In had to close on Fridays. Since then savings have been made (the loss of one worker post) which have allowed it to re-open on Fridays.

### **The views of its members:**

***"It's very welcoming. I always get a hug when I walk in. They are very friendly and it's a chance to have a laugh."***

- It provides a place for companionship and stops people becoming alone and isolated.
- There are staff available for members to talk to privately about problems that they having.
- It's somewhere to go to and can act as a source of support and information about coping with life.
- It's a place to meet other people and is so welcoming that it feels like a second home to many members.
- It provides guidance and help with filling in forms which are so difficult for some people to do themselves that they can become ill when faced with them.
- It's a place to meet people with similar problems.
- It's a place where people can offer support to each other.
- It's a place where people can do voluntary work.
- It provides trips and holidays which people really look forward to.
- The garden is appreciated and the building is a pleasant one.

***"It's a way of meeting people and getting out. It gives a reason to get out of bed and to mix in company."***

### **Things that would improve the Centre are:**

- There could be better publicity about it as some people reported that, despite being ill for a number of years and in contact with services, they only found out about it by accident.
- It would be good if it were open longer and if the Friday opening times were reinstated (which they have been) and even Saturday opening times created as the weekend can be a lonely time.
- The worry about its future is causing people a lot of anxiety and incomprehension as the service is so valued and, to many people, is one of the main reasons they are not admitted to hospital more often.

*"It's a place where we are accepted and not judged. There is no stigma. We often have similar problems. It's where we are understood. They are there for you."*

## **The Mid Ross Drop In and NSF Outreach (run by NSF Scotland)**

The Mid Ross Drop In is held two half days a week in the Youth Café in Dingwall.

It consists mainly of a room with access to a kitchen and games room. It is facilitated by the East Ross Outreach Worker who also makes connections with people in the community who may not be able to or wish to attend a Drop In.

### **The challenge (now partially resolved):**

The effect of cutbacks meant that the Outreach Worker's hours had been cut by four hours a week. These have now been reinstated following savings in another post.

### **The views of its members:**

***"The fact that there are other people with mental health problems makes the place. It's because mental illness is the norm rather than the exception. You don't feel out of place or uncomfortable. You're not judged."***

- It is a way of getting out of the house and a way of socialising and providing mutual support to each other.
- It is a way of getting one to ones with the Outreach Worker when needed.
- it's a way of dealing with horrible events with humour. The banter and lightness can really help to cheer people up.
- There are free cups of tea and coffee which are welcome.

***"I used to just sit and look at the wall. The woodchip gets boring after a while but the chance to get out stopped this."***

- It's a place to meet, especially with other people with similar experiences.
- It provides a safe place that is always open at a set time.
- It provides something to look forward to and can be one of the few outside events people experience in the week.
- It is a place to have good conversations and to meet new people.
- It is mainly attended by men which they welcome as there are few opportunities like this.
- Many people cannot mix in mainstream society but the understanding they get in the Drop In makes it accessible to them.
- The Outreach Worker visits people at home and hospital and helps them get out which clients value greatly.

***"Being taken out was great. Then other people who had more need were seen by her. She was a great support and I had no problem with***

*her then going on to the others. She gives a huge amount and works way over the hours. She is so kind."*

**Things that would improve the centre are:**

Ideally there would be more activities available. Sometimes in winter it can feel a bit cold but the main wish is to know that it will continue in the future without lack of funding being a constant issue.

*"If we didn't have it I would climb the walls. I would wreck the house with frustration. If I can't get out then I get really frustrated. There's too much time to think and chew things over."*



## **Cairdeas Cottage in Inverness (run by NSF Scotland)**

This is a house by the side of the river in Inverness. It is warm and homely with a sitting room, kitchen and dining room downstairs and two quiet rooms and an office upstairs. Various activities take place throughout the day which people can join in with if they wish and there are also activities held outside the Centre. It is possible to volunteer there and in the evenings there are sometimes sessions held by self help and support groups.

### **The challenge:**

The shortage of finance has meant that twenty staff hours have been cut a week resulting in it being shut all Tuesdays and on Friday mornings. It is also hard to keep up with some of the basic maintenance requirements any building has.

### **The views of its members:**

***“It’s been successful, some people come in here everyday, others just come in during times of trouble, while others are just glad they can use it if they want to.”***

- It provides a safe and pleasant place to go to after discharge from hospital.
- It is somewhere to get help when needed and can assist people to get help from other services if necessary.
- It acts as a place that provides a sense of security.
- It offers people a cheap (and sometimes free) meal which is especially helpful to those that can’t cook or are homeless or have lost the motivation to shop and prepare food. Members said that it is good that people can eat in company.
- It provides a safety net where people may not attend for months but can do so if they get into difficulty.
- It’s open 6 days a week which is welcome.

***“When I first started going I had been reclusive and scared to step out. The first introduction was good as they don’t have to refer you and it’s a warm welcoming atmosphere. The staff are really well prepared and versed in mental health problems. They are really supportive and non judgemental. It’s a safe environment which they will act to keep safe.”***

- It offers friendship, comradeship and mutual support.
- It helps people who are also homeless by providing food and contact with appropriate services.
- It encourages people, increases their confidence and helps them realise that they have something to offer.
- It’s a place where people can talk about things that other people wouldn’t understand.

- It offers volunteering possibilities which helps provide a way of filling in time and makes people realise that they can be useful.
- It is a place where people feel welcome.
- It's a friendly place of fun where there is a lot of humour.
- It is somewhere that some people use everyday which they feel not only provides them with a social life they wouldn't have otherwise, but also keeps them out of hospital.

***"I've moved beyond the need for Cairdeas Cottage so I could be seen as a success but success can just be getting out of bed and coming to Cairdeas Cottage. I know I would be welcomed back at any time."***

**Things that would improve the Centre are:**

- For some people an ideal would be being able to reverse the ban on smoking in public places and make the smoke room a smoke room again.
- Funding for more activities such as music and art would be especially welcome.
- There has been real worry and concern about its financial situation with a great desire to know that it will have adequate stable funding.

***"I have depression. What is life worth? Coming here is a real life saver."***

***"The feeling of it not being open gives a really empty feeling."***

## **The Gardeners Cottage in Nairn (run by the Community Mental Health Team)**

This is a large wooden building in the grounds of the local hospital in Nairn. It has a sitting room, kitchen/dining room, an arts room and a garden and is run by the Community Mental Health Team for its clients.

### **The challenge:**

This building is about to be demolished as part of the redevelopment of the hospital site. Clients of the Drop In have campaigned for around three years with the support of HUG and the Local Community Care Forum for an alternative once they lose the Cottage for which they have great affection. They have been promised alternative premises which they hope to move into in early 2008.

### **The views of its members:**

***“If you are having a rough time you know you can come here and talk about it.”***

- It acts as a place to meet people.
- It provides very good food.
- It provides staff that people can talk to.
- By coming to the Drop In it helps keep people well.
- It provides a reason to get out of bed and something to look forward to.
- It helps provide people with purpose.
- It provides a break from peoples problems.
- It provides something to talk about.
- It feels like a big family where people are close to each other and provide mutual support to each other.
- There is no pressure so people don't have to talk or do anything if they don't want to.
- It helps with skills such as cooking, gardening, arts and crafts and fosters creativity.
- It's relaxing and homely and comfortable in secluded beautiful surroundings.
- It picks up on people getting ill in the early stages.
- It helps motivate people.
- The staff are very nice.

***“It gets you out of the home and gives you something to look forward to.”***

### **Things that would improve the Centre are:**

There were a number of suggestions for improvement:

- It would be good to have new furniture and decoration (which is not likely as the building is about to be knocked down).
- Having more places where people can speak with workers in private.

- Having more activities (although clients recognise that a wide range are already provided) and providing more therapies such as aromatherapy and relaxation.

***“It’s welcoming - the people and the atmosphere. Everyone is pretty laid back.”***

## **The Richmond Fellowship Drop In in Kingussie**

The Richmond Fellowship runs a series of Drop In opportunities across Badenoch and Strathspey which are open at set times in the week. These are held in Aviemore, Grantown and on two days in Kingussie. The Kingussie Drop In is held on a Friday morning in a church hall and on a Tuesday evening in Caberfeidh House on the High street.

### **The views of its members:**

***“For people like me the Drop In is one of the highlights of the week because I can meet with people I feel connected with, blether about things and talk about any problems I’m having.”***

- For some people the Drop In provides the only chance they have to socialise with other people during the week.
- It also provides a place that is neutral - meeting in a safe environment is sometimes better than meeting in people's own homes.
- It provides something different and a different place to be, instead of remaining at home.
- It is a place where there is always an interesting conversation going on and news of the outside world passes round the group which is welcome.
- There is a chance for a one-to-one with workers if needed which is helpful.
- It promotes inclusion and the prevention of problems. By meeting together as a group people interact and grow and regain lost skills.

***“The evening session is almost better. There are more people there and it’s a better location and it has a relaxing atmosphere at the end of the day and people are also freer to come along then.”***

- It provides a relaxed, safe environment where people can just sit and chat and raise any issue that they want to.
- It is a way of building and creating friendships.
- It is also a place where staff can pick up on any developing crises and get help before it gets too bad.
- It helps people regain their confidence.
- It’s a place to go to when people feel they need help.
- It's a place where people with similar experiences can meet.
- It’s a way of promoting wellbeing rather than concentrating on illness.

***“People sometimes say “why not go to a normal group?” But if you have poor self esteem then you don’t feel comfortable with this, whilst here, you are all at ease.”***

### **Things that would improve the Drop In are:**

- It would be beneficial if there were more Drop In sessions and that they were open for more hours in different communities. Maybe increase the

drop in sessions in Grantown by one more evening session and the same in Aviemore.

- It would be good if there was enough money to do new things. A little money invested locally and targeted at things that users needed could make a big difference; at present the lack of finance means that the Drop Ins and associated activities cannot develop.
- It would be good if we could address the stigma that stops some people coming to the Drop Ins and get other professionals to encourage new people to the Drop Ins and maybe accompany them there on their first visit.
- It would be helpful if the expertise of local grass roots workers were more readily recognised as it feels like any improvements could be far more easily achieved if they were really embedded in local communities.

***“We need more Drop Ins, they are really good. We need to encourage more people along to them.”***

## **The Glengarry Centre in Fort William (Run by NSF Scotland)**

This is the ground floor of a building close to the Fort William High Street. It has a sitting room, kitchen/dining room, another sitting room with a pool table and an office.

### **The challenge**

Although the Centre has not had to cut its hours at all, money is always a concern and needs to be managed carefully. The main problem that it faced until recently was that it actually did have some resources set aside for Saturday opening but was unable to attract staff willing to work these hours. That has now been resolved.

### **The views of its members:**

***“The staff know us and if you do come in in pieces they know which pieces to gather to put you back together.”***

- The Centre is a safe place to go to especially when people are ill. It's a place where people feel free to be themselves. It can be a safe quiet space.
- It's a place where people feel able to communicate and mix with other users and staff.
- It's a place that encourages people to get up in the morning and make the effort to come along to the centre.
- It's a place where people can recuperate and regain the ability see things in perspective.
- By going to the Centre it's possible for users to realise that they are still important and to appreciate how far they have gone on the road to recovery.
- It's a place where users know that they can talk about anything with staff without fear of being judged.
- It's not authoritarian and there is a great feeling of trust both of staff and fellow users.

***“We get support from each other - it's a strength and helps us recognise that we are not the only ones and that we can offer help to new people.”***

- It's a place where people know that they can talk in ways that wouldn't be accepted on the 'outside'.
- The emphasis on confidentiality is very much appreciated.
- Staff pick up on early signs of illness and can either offer help themselves or summon help.
- Some users phone in each morning to talk to staff which they find very helpful, especially if they are feeling too ill to get out of the house.
- It helps promote confidence, strength and wellbeing.

- The very fact that it exists is a strength, as then people know that if they get ill again they only have to walk through the door and they will get help.
- It provides activity groups which are welcome and which enliven people's time there.

***"I no longer feel fear of admitting I have a problem between my ears. It's those that are scared of me that are the problem and that's down to the Centre."***

- By finding the confidence to believe in themselves users of the Centre find the courage to do new things such as voluntary work or college courses.
- People are welcomed as they come through the door even if they have been away for a time and this is appreciated.
- Users also support each other but without there being any pressure.
- It can be especially important at key points in people's lives - such as when they are discharged from hospital.
- Staff can be very helpful when users are faced with situations they find hard to face - such as the benefits system.
- It's a place where users realise that they are not alone with their problems.
- It provides good cheap meals that can be eaten in company.
- It provides occasional trips out which are very much looked forward to.
- By providing somewhere to go to and help when ill it keeps people out of hospital.
- It's a place where users can find acceptance and the willpower to face society again.
- It's a place where people feel that they are facing problems together instead of alone.
- It helps people find the ability to speak out.

***"I was lost and down. I didn't know what to do or where to turn. I came through that door. The staff were good. It's important that they are there for us."***

### **Things that would improve the Centre are:**

There were a lot of suggestions to improve the centre:

- It would be good to have more activities and also more visits out of the Centre.
- It would be good to have the Centre open on the weekends.
- It would be good if the local community understood the Centre better and were more involved with it.
- A dedicated vehicle could make trips easier.
- If there were enough resources then staff could be more flexible in the work they do.
- The staff do a great job and this should be reflected in the wages they get. There is a feeling that they don't get as much as they deserve.



- It would be good if there was more publicity about the Centre which emphasises that it is a resource for everyone.
- it would be good if outside agencies referred more people along to the Centre.

***“We should name and shame the people who are not fighting for this. Communities across Scotland should support good mental health for the good of the planet.”***

***“It’s not pounds, shillings and pence. It’s our lives, our spirit, our being.”***

## **Am Fasgadh in Portree (run by Skye & Lochalsh Association for Mental Health)**

This is a converted hostel not far from the centre of Portree. It has a huge attractive sitting room/dining area with comfortable chairs and dining tables. The centre piece is a large log fire which is frequently burning. There is also a kitchen, office, computer room, quiet/TV room and a number of other rooms used by other agencies. There is a covered area outside for smokers and a garden.

The centre is now open 365 days a year.

There is also a Drop In provided in the community hall at Kyleakin once a week.

### **The challenge**

At present the Centre is in a relatively stable situation but in the past funding problems has meant that an outreach service to the Skye and Lochalsh area had to be withdrawn.

### **The views of its members:**

***“You can confide in the staff and lean on them when in trouble. We are especially lucky with the staff. All of them go beyond the call of duty....they treat us as individuals. I can't rate them highly enough.”***

- It provides support, help and advice which is very welcome.
- It provides cheap and nutritious high quality food which is sometimes all the food that members get in a day.
- It stops the isolation many people experience and increases social networks.
- It acts as a centre for recovery by allowing people to recharge their energy in a safe place until they reach a point where they can regain control over their lives.
- It provides access to the internet.
- It provides emotional support and advice.
- It provides information and advice about things like benefits and housing.

***“The building is wonderful. It is almost like it was purpose built with the big lounge and fire and other rooms.”***

- It is a place to go to when in crisis and by fulfilling this function prevents many people's problems from escalating to the point where they need hospital.
- It is a place where there is a sense of humour.
- The staff are dedicated to their jobs and do far more than they are paid to.

- The building represents a warm safe environment which is especially appreciated in winter.
- It is a welcoming place where people who walk through the door are greeted and welcomed and, if people are suffering, then people reach out to help.
- It is not always needed but people know that even if they haven't been in for months or years that they will be welcome if they choose to return.
- By having the Centre a real alternative is provided to stop people spending their time in the pub.

***“It’s shocking that there is no safehouse, although in some ways here is a daytime safehouse. When you are frantic you can come here and spend all day with tender, loving care and support.”***

**Things that would improve the Centre are:**

- Ideally there would be more staff.
- It would be good to have more entertainment, especially in the evenings where the focus could be on social events with fun things to do.
- Perhaps there could be a music club or money put in for other activities.
- Clients could maybe play a bigger role in organising activities and some of these might be better done outside of the building.
- Links with other organisations and people could help everyone. Perhaps there could be occupational therapy on offer or links to the TAG unit.
- It would help if there was secure long term funding and adequate security for the staff.

***“The fantastic thing is that staff don’t put it on us. They don’t display any anxiety. The staff protect us. We wouldn’t know about this unless we asked. Here, if you walked through the door we would never hear of any problems.”***

## **The West Ross Outreach (run by NSF Scotland)**

This provides an outreach service to people within West Ross. It provides home visits and individual one-to-one's in a variety of settings but also runs a number of groups using recreational art as a focus for the meetings. These groups meet in Lochcarron, Gairloch and Ullapool. In addition some people travel between areas and groups.

### **The challenge**

This service has been cut by four hours a week. This has since been reinstated after savings were made through the loss of another post in Ross-shire.

### **The views of its members:**

***"The very fact that it is always the day when I am doing nothing when she phones and she'll suggest something and it turns into a whole brand new day when she speaks."***

- Visits to people promote their social skills and combat the isolation they often feel.
- The service is very flexible and as such responds directly to individuals with new things happening every week, depending on the needs of the people the worker is visiting.
- It provides up to date reliable information.
- It helps people to learn about and talk about their experience and through this gain an articulacy about their lives and condition.
- The approach is very free and warm in a way that some people don't feel they get with doctors.

***"I find getting out and doing something that ordinary mortals do all the time is, for me, like going up Everest. It's like a challenge to get out."***

- It provides social contacts.
- It can provide purpose.
- It is adaptable so if one week the most important thing to a person is to get the shopping then that is what will happen.
- It is independent which can be very helpful for those that are suspicious of statutory services.
- It provides a break for carers.
- It provides phone contact if people are not in touch, which is welcome if people are down.
- The one-to-one chat is really important.
- The character of the worker as a kind, bright, bubbly energetic person is especially appreciated.

***"It's brilliant having her (and the people from the Mental Health Team) - we couldn't do without her now. It gives me a break to go out and***

***get a break knowing he is looked after. I can go out now or just do nothing."***

**Things that would improve the service are:**

The only improvement that people suggested was to reinstate the lost four hours of funding. There was comment that funding is often put into new and innovative projects which is fine but it shouldn't be at the expense of more established projects that have clearly shown their worth over the years. On a more general level there was a plea to promote good mental health for everyone not just concentrate on those with a mental illness.

***"She was the first person I ever saw. It makes a big difference. It was like seeing light at the end of the tunnel."***

## CONCLUSION

A quick read of this collection of views should amply demonstrate the huge regard that many users of mental health services have for the network of Drop In Centres and services that are spread across Highland Region.

Conventional thinking about resources such as this tend to say that they are all about providing a form of social support for a group of people who are often excluded from society. However it can be seen that they are also wellsprings of therapy that motivate and inspire users onto the road of recovery. They are places where people can regain confidence and make friends and with this increased wellbeing begin to engage with life again. They are places where peer support in its purest form has been operating over many years and are sources for the early detection of and prevention of future problems.

They provide feelings of inclusion and belonging to members and staff often act as advisers and guides and informal advocates.

At a minimum they provide a healthy meal every day but they do so much more than this. They prevent many hospital admissions and, hearing from our members, we know that they have saved lives and given people the ability to believe in themselves again in a safe, warm and welcoming place where people share experiences and offer mutual support to each other.

As our members say, they offer great value for money but usually operate on a shoestring budget. If there were more long term sustainable funding a great deal of reassurance could be provided and Centres could make longer term plans. If modest increases in funding beyond basic survival of the service happened then the services could become more flexible and innovative and find new and innovative ways of responding to clients' needs and by continuing to act as a valuable complement to the work of statutory services.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to all the members of HUG, and other mental health service users, who contributed to this report.

*Please feel free to photocopy this report. The report can be supplied in large print or on tape.*

*However if you use this report or quote from it or use it to inform your practice or planning please tell us about this first. This helps us know what is being done on our behalf and helps us inform our members of the effect their voice is having.*

For more information on HUG, or an Information Pack, call:

Graham Morgan  
Highland Users Group  
c/o Highland Community Care Forum  
Highland House  
20 Longman Road  
Inverness  
IV1 1RY

Telephone: (01463) 723557  
Fax: (01463) 718818  
E-mail: [hug@hccf.org.uk](mailto:hug@hccf.org.uk)  
[www.hug.uk.net](http://www.hug.uk.net)