



**THRIVING  
AUTISTIC**

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# **Discovery Programme**

## **Evaluation Report**

**March 2025**

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**A participatory impact evaluation of  
The Discovery Programme**

A holistic, wraparound support initiative developed and delivered by Autistic professionals, designed to empower Autistic adults through neurodiversity-affirming, neurodivergent-led support.

*Empowering identity, wellbeing, and self-advocacy through neurodivergent-led support.*

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# Foreword

When we launched the Discovery Programme, I knew we were creating something special. But I couldn't have imagined just how profound its impact would be - not just on our participants, but on all of us involved in this work and the wider community.

As an Autistic mental health professional, my vision for Thriving Autistic was always to create a space where Autistic people could be supported by Autistic professionals - a place built not on an “us and them” model, but an “us and us” approach. A multidisciplinary community of practice where Autistic psychologists, therapists, counsellors, and coaches could learn from one another—and from the people we serve.

The Discovery Programme is a living example of that vision in action.

It's beautiful to witness: a model rooted in solidarity, underpinned by the science of the Double Empathy theory, and aligned with the principle of “nothing about us without us.” A place where communication barriers are removed, where universal design is embedded in every layer, and where the human rights of both the people we support—and the people we work with—are respected and uplifted.

This report, shaped through a participatory and neurodivergent-led evaluation captures much of what we've learned over the past year. Beyond the statistics and outcomes, what moves me most are the shared stories. Stories of people who, sometimes for the first time, felt truly understood. Stories of newfound confidence and self-advocacy. Stories of isolation broken and connections formed.





One of the most meaningful outcomes of this work was the co-creation of two short animated films - crafted in collaboration with our neurodiverse team of creatives and inspired by shared lived experience. These films are a powerful extension of our learning and a way of sharing Autistic insight with the wider world.

None of this would be possible without our incredible multidisciplinary team of Autistic facilitators, professionals, and community builders who pour their expertise and lived experience into making the programme what it is. Nor would it exist without the trust and courage of our participants, who show up authentically each week, ready to share, learn, and grow together.

We are deeply grateful to Rethink Ireland and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) for making this work possible, and to all the partners and individuals who contributed along the way. Full acknowledgements can be found at the end of this report.

We are proud to share this evaluation as a reflection of that collective journey—and a blueprint for what is possible when support is co-created with those it serves. This is just the beginning. We look forward to working with others to grow this model and continue building a movement rooted in trust, solidarity, and shared purpose.

**Tara O'Donnell-Killen**  
**CEO, *Thriving Autistic***



# Our Team

The Discovery Programme is made possible through the dedication, expertise, and lived experience of our extraordinary team:

## Leadership & Programme Direction

- Tara O'Donnell-Killen, CEO & Programme Lead

## Programme Development and Delivery

- Gem Kennedy, Lead Facilitator & Content Developer
- Teri Kansted, Facilitator

## Community and Advocacy

- Helen Edgar, Community Manager
- Barbara Melville, Advocacy Specialist

## Professional Support

- Ayhan Alman, Psychotherapist
- Catherine Flynn, Counsellor
- Claire O'Neill, Coach
- Gem Kennedy, Coach
- Jessica Andexer, Psychotherapist
- John Pendal, Coach
- Kathy Carter, Counsellor and Hypnotherapist
- Lisa Mulvihill, Occupational Therapist
- Marina King, Coach
- Nic McMullen-Klein, Occupational Therapist
- Silvia Plaza Martin, Psychologist
- Teri Kansted, Coach and Psychologist

## Operations

- Kristiina Kolberg, Operations Lead
- Joanie Moral, Admin Lead
- Alfonso Tan, Community Care

# Our Team

The Discovery Programme is made possible through the dedication, expertise, and lived experience of our extraordinary team:

## Animation Team

- Helen Edgar, Project Lead and Writer
- Laura Buckland Mason, Writer
- Jessica K Doyle, Writer & Sound Director
- Sonny Hallett, Writer & Art Director
- Fergus Murray, Writer
- Iara Abigail: Animation
- Paulo Beto: Vocal treatment and mixing
- Somebody Someone (AKA Aubrey Hays): Composer and Musician

## Programme Evaluation Team

This evaluation was co-led by a neurodivergent team with lived experience and professional expertise in psychology, coaching, and occupational therapy. Their participatory, inclusive approach ensured that Autistic voices shaped the design, analysis, and meaning of this report - upholding our commitment to epistemic justice and authentic impact.

## We are deeply grateful to:

- Claire O'Neill
- Nic McMullen-Klein
- Silvia Plaza Martin

# Executive Summary

The Discovery Programme is a multi-component support initiative designed by and for Autistic adults. It goes far beyond the boundaries of a typical course. It is a holistic, wraparound ecosystem that integrates structured psychoeducation, one-to-one sessions with neurodivergent professionals, an intelligent AI-supported advocacy service, peer community, and ongoing support - all working together to create lasting, meaningful change for participants.

This report evaluates the programme's impact based on participatory research conducted by a neurodivergent-led research team. The findings demonstrate transformative outcomes for participants, including:

**95%** of participants felt more **positive** about being Autistic

**93%** reported feeling more connected to other Autistic people, helping to reduce isolation

Participants highlighted the Autistic-led design and facilitation as **key to their sense of trust and safety**

**73%** experienced moderate to significant improvements in wellbeing

Many described a **profound sense of being seen and heard** for the first time, reflecting a powerful experience of epistemic justice.



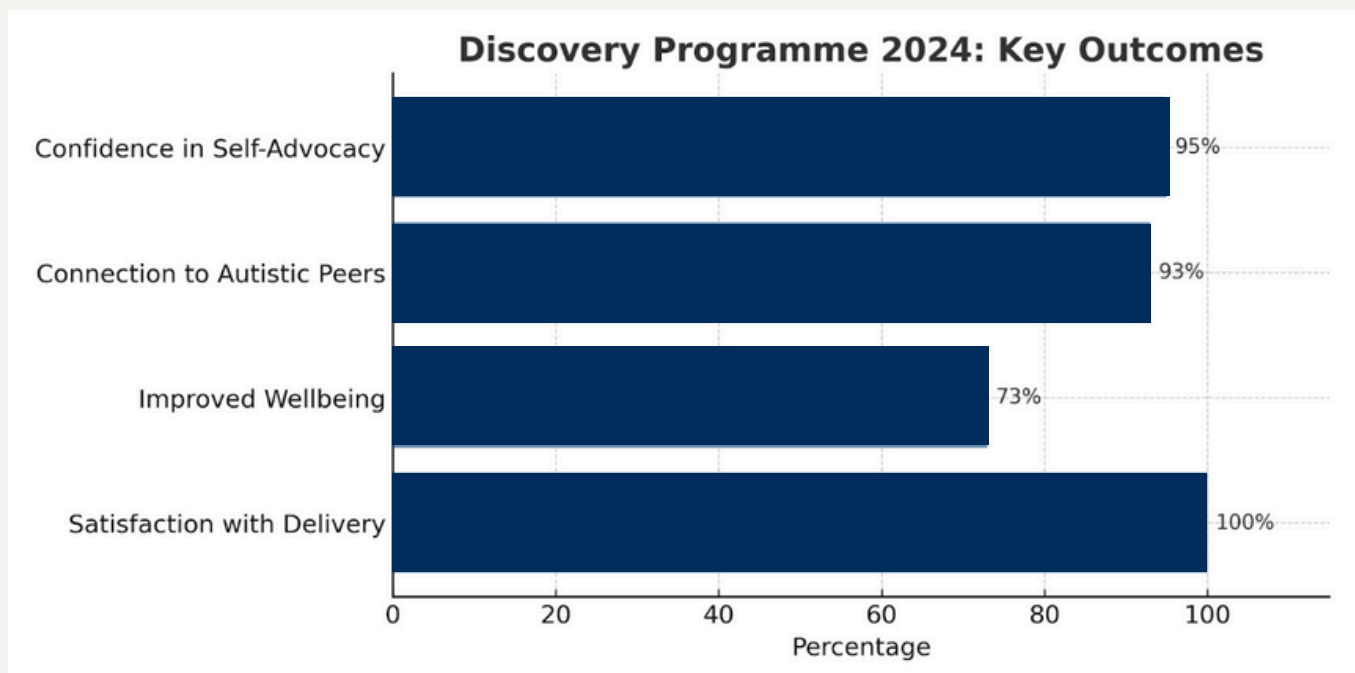
# Executive Summary

The Discovery Programme is a cornerstone of Thriving Autistic's mission to support a growing community of practice. It brings together lived experience, professional insight, and mutual learning to drive systemic change and support long-term empowerment.

With over 700 practitioners in 19 countries, including Ireland, the UK, the USA, and Canada, where most of our community is based, the next phase is to scale and localise Discovery in partnership with others, while deepening the core components that make it impactful.



## Discovery Programme 2024: At a Glance



*"It helped me find my place in the world more easily than I had in the previous 40 years."*



# Introduction: Thriving Autistic and the Discovery Programme

## Thriving Autistic: the Organisation

**Thriving Autistic** is a neurodivergent-led social enterprise founded in 2020 by Autistic psychologist Tara O'Donnell-Killen. Based in Ireland and working internationally, we advocate for the rights, dignity, and inclusion of Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people.

We are a **living, multidisciplinary community of practice**—bringing together Autistic psychologists, therapists, coaches, counsellors, and advocates. Our team supports the community while also supporting one another, modelling the values we seek to grow in the world: collaboration, mutual respect, and co-learning.

Through one-to-one support, group programmes, advocacy services, resources, and workshops, we empower Autistic adults directly. At the same time, we train professionals across sectors—advancing neuro-affirmative practice, universal design, and systemic change. From individual wellbeing to policy influence, our work spans support, education, and transformation.

In 2024, we were awarded funding from **Rethink Ireland** and the **Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth** to launch the Discovery Programme—a multi-component support initiative for Autistic adults. This programme reflects our mission in action: creating a future where Autistic people are not only supported but empowered to lead and shape the systems that affect their lives.

## Empowering Autistic Adults through Holistic, Wraparound Support

The Discovery Programme is a comprehensive, multi-component support initiative developed by Autistic professionals for Autistic adults. Far more than simply an online course, it offers a holistic ecosystem of support that includes structured learning, professional guidance, peer connection, and ongoing community engagement. It is designed to foster self-understanding, build confidence, and reduce the barriers that often limit social participation, inclusion, employment, health and well-being.

### Target Audience:

Our target audience is Autistic adults seeking to deepen their understanding of their neurology, develop self-advocacy skills, and connect with peers in a supportive, neuro-affirming environment.

### Programme Components:

- **Live Weekly Workshops:** Six 90-minute interactive sessions covering topics such as understanding Autistic neurology, communication styles, self-advocacy, and navigating systemic barriers. Sessions are led by trained Autistic facilitators and accessible via video and voice or text-based participation.
- **On-Demand Learning Materials:** Professionally developed psychoeducational content - including videos, transcripts, and downloadable resources - all are available on a secure online platform to support self-paced learning.
- **Community Forum & Peer Connection:** A dedicated online forum provides space for participants to share reflections, ask questions, and build peer support throughout the programme and beyond.
- **Personalised Professional Support:**
  - One-to-one sessions with Autistic therapists, coaches, or psychologists offer tailored support based on individual needs.
  - An intelligent AI assisted advocacy letter-writing service, supported by an Advocacy Specialist, assists participants in articulating access needs.
  - Monthly advocacy drop-in clinics provide ongoing opportunities for support and guidance.

# The Discovery Programme

- **Post-Programme Continuity:** Following completion of the structured component, participants join a sustained support community with:
  - Facilitated monthly peer meetups
  - Ongoing access to programme resources
  - Opportunities to deepen connections through special interest groups

## Social Impact:

The programme addresses a significant gap in services for Autistic adults. While many existing supports are child-focused or based on deficit models, the Discovery Programme offers a neurodiversity affirming and strengths-based approach within a continuous support ecosystem. It helps participants overcome social isolation, underemployment, and the lack of appropriate mental health and advocacy support.

By equipping Autistic adults with knowledge, tools, a professional support network, a peer community and a sense of belonging, the programme contributes to long-term outcomes in self-advocacy in the workplace and healthcare, community participation, and overall well-being.

In 2024, the Discovery Programme was fully funded by Rethink Ireland, ensuring cost-free access for participants and enabling broad reach and impact.





# Evaluation Approach and Methods

## Introduction

This evaluation focuses on participants' lived experiences and the Discovery Programme's real-world impact. Rather than measuring outputs alone, it explores the depth of personal and collective transformation that took place through participation in a neuro-affirming, Autistic-led environment.

The evaluation was co-produced within Thriving Autistic by a team of neurodivergent staff and collaborators, in partnership with programme participants. The process was intentionally participatory and aligned with best practices for research with the Autistic community (e.g. Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Pickard et al., 2021). <sup>1</sup>

All members of the evaluation team are neurodivergent, reflecting our commitment to epistemic justice (ensuring that Autistic knowledge and perspectives are valued equally), and ensuring that Autistic perspectives guided both the design and interpretation of findings.

Data was gathered using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys and in-depth interviews. Feedback was invited in multiple formats, with flexibility in communication and timing to ensure accessibility and autonomy for all participants. The evaluation process was aligned with universal design principles, ensuring that diverse cognitive, sensory, and communication needs were proactively considered throughout.

## Program Reach

- **136 people** participated in the Discovery Program
- **62 people** accessed professional one-to-one support
- **119 people** utilised our Advocacy service
- **11** in-depth semi-structured interviews took place (participants were thanked with gift cards for vendors of their choice)
- **45 people** completed an online feedback survey

<sup>1</sup>Nicolaidis, C., Raymaker, D. M., Kapp, S. K., Baggs, A. M., Ashkenazy, E., McDonald, K. E., ... & Joyce, A. (2019). The AASPIRE practice-based guidelines for the inclusion of autistic adults in research as co-researchers and study participants. *Autism*, 23(8), 2007–2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319830523>  
Pickard, H., Pellicano, E., den Houting, J., & Crane, L. (2021). Participatory autism research: Early career and established researchers' views and experiences. *Autism*, 25(8), 2296–2310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211019594>

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# Findings

## The Power of Neurodivergent Facilitation

*"Getting the autism diagnosis pointed me towards knowing who I am; the Discovery Programme helped me to learn what that means."*

Participants consistently highlighted the vital role of neurodivergent professionals in leading, designing and facilitating the Discovery Programme, and shaping its safety, relevance, and emotional impact. Across interviews and survey responses, facilitator identity and lived experience emerged as central to the programme's effectiveness.

*"So much is said about Autistic folk by allistic experts who don't represent me. To have someone like me, talking to me - gently - was ace."*

The authenticity and resonance of Autistic facilitators - particularly their personal reflections and flexible, respectful delivery - created a profound sense of validation. For many, this was their first time being supported in a space not only made for Autistic adults but by them.

*"The lived experience anecdotes...were as precious and weighty as the neuroscience!"*

This neurodivergent-led model didn't just meet expectations - it exceeded them. A striking 100% of the respondents reported being satisfied with the way the programme was organised and delivered, with **71.11% of participants being extremely satisfied**, and the remaining **28.88% also satisfied**, underscoring the impact of having Autistic professionals leading the process. Participants frequently linked this satisfaction to the sense of psychological safety and authentic understanding they experienced.

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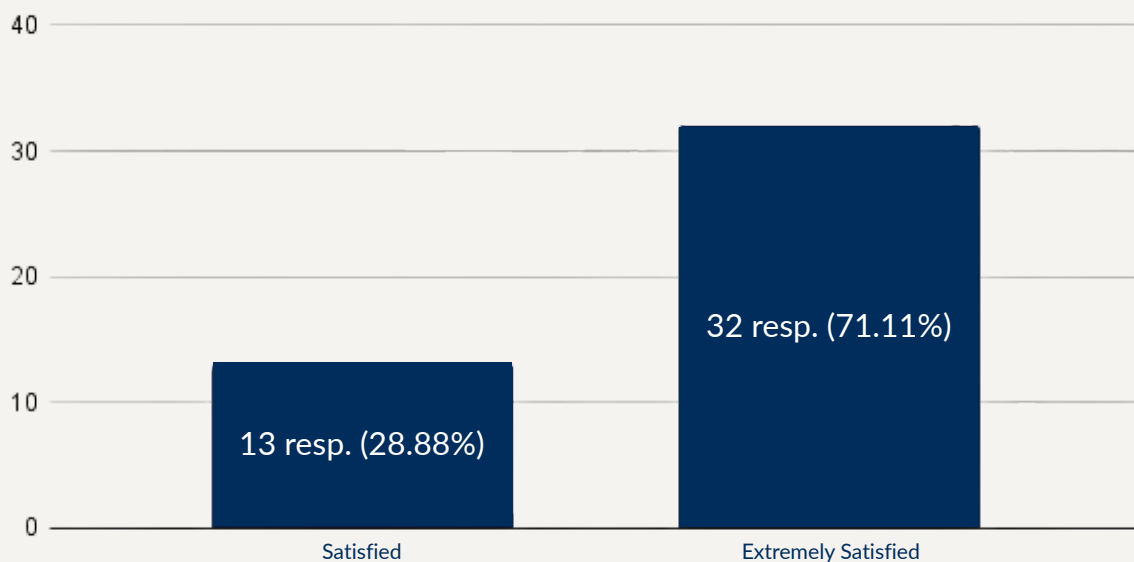
# Findings

**"The context of being Autistic-led and neuro-affirming gave safety."**

By centering lived experience, flexible communication styles, and shared identity, the facilitators modelled what respectful, empowering support can look like. These findings reaffirm that Autistic-led design and delivery isn't just preferred - it's essential for creating programmes that resonate deeply and support meaningful change.

**"Meeting Gem as the facilitator was special for me... I'd always felt like an observer in the world, rather than a participant."**

How satisfied are you with the way the programmes was organised and delivered?



## Growing Disability Awareness and Self-Advocacy

A key outcome of the Discovery Programme was the deepening of participants' understanding of disability, particularly in relation to internalised ableism, masking, burnout, and sensory regulation. These shifts were not just intellectual; they translated into real-world confidence, self-compassion, and self-advocacy.

**"I'd always thought maybe I shouldn't do that - maybe I'm just bad."**

A constant theme throughout the live workshops was "I thought it was just me!". This was reflected in our professionally produced short animation of the same title.

**"The concept of internalised ableism was difficult - but powerful. It unlocked self-care and gave me a base to build from."**

Participants described a significant change in how they saw themselves and their access needs. For many, this was the first time they had permission to see their sensory differences as valid, or to advocate for equitable adjustments without shame; recognising and affirming their own needs, boundaries and rights. Each cohort had differing accessibility needs and our specialist facilitators worked to create an environment that suited all, aligned with the principles of universal accessibility.

**"The information was - WOW! - it was so in-depth and it was amazing!"**



## Growing Disability Awareness and Self-Advocacy

This shift was clearly echoed in the data:

- **Confidence in self-advocacy** rose dramatically, with **95.55%** of participants reporting they felt more confident, somewhat more confident, or much more confident in advocating for themselves.
- **75.55%** felt better **supported in understanding their Autistic identity** - a foundation for recognising needs and asserting boundaries.
- **Overall well-being** improved for a majority, with **33.33%** reporting significant positive change and **40%** moderate improvement, often linked to reduced burnout and improved emotional regulation.

Participants also gained clarity around workplace and daily-life adjustments, with several noting they were already applying their new knowledge to advocate for fairer, more accessible environments in various aspects of their lives: work, home, relationships, education, healthcare needs and relationships.

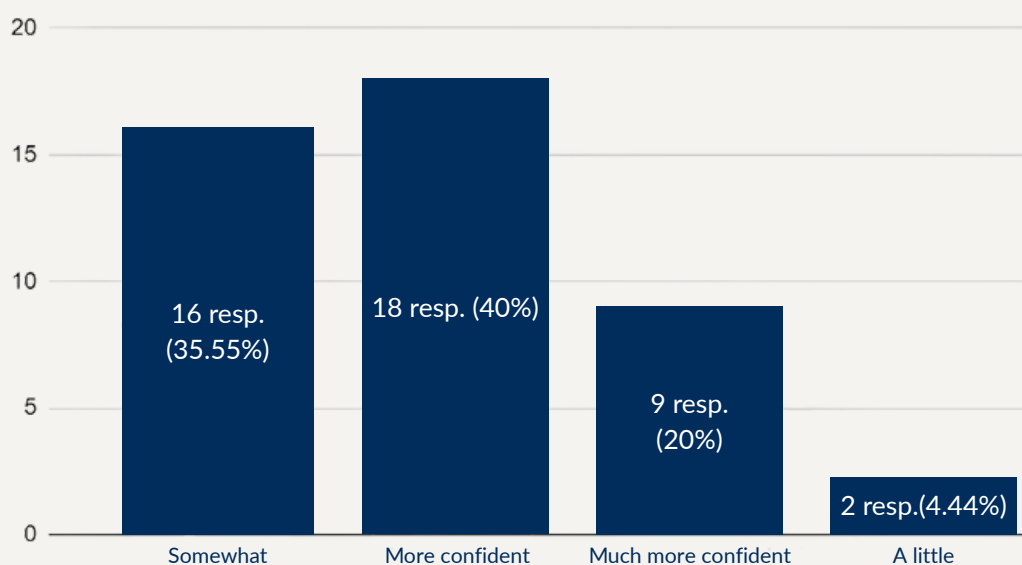
“ What’s helped me is reinforcing that it’s okay for me to be outwardly Autistic. ”



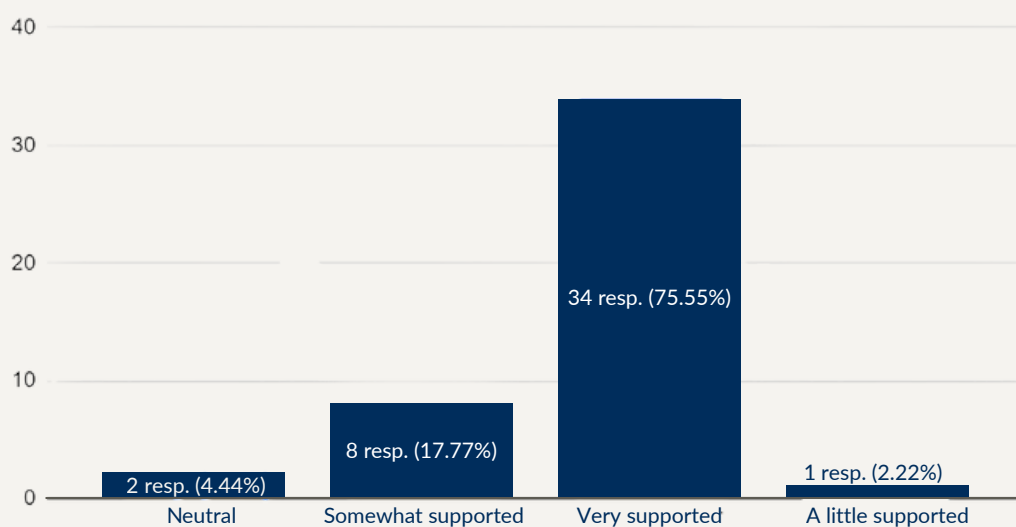
## Growing Disability Awareness and Self-Advocacy

The Discovery Programme didn't just inform - it transformed. By naming harmful narratives and replacing them with self-affirming truths, the programme supported Autistic adults to reclaim their space, their voice, and their right to thrive.

Has the programme helped you feel you would be more confident in advocating?



Did the programme help you feel more supported in understanding your autistic identity?





## Wellbeing: Reclaiming Self through Belonging and Validation

One of the most profound outcomes of the Discovery Programme was its impact on participants' overall wellbeing. Many described tangible shifts in how they viewed themselves, coped with stress, and navigated the world—with key themes of belonging, authenticity, and self-acceptance appearing throughout.

**"It's allowed me to speak my voice more authentically - and that's helped with my wellbeing."**

Participants spoke of a renewed connection to themselves and others, often after years - if not decades - of disconnection. The programme provided not only practical insights but also emotional refuge: a place where it was safe to explore identity and imagine new ways of being.

**"It feels quite profound. It helped me find my place in the world more easily than I had in the previous 40 years."**

**"The programme opens a window."**

## Wellbeing: Reclaiming Self through Belonging and Validation

The data reinforces these experiences:

- **73.33% of participants** reported positive changes in wellbeing - 33.33% significantly, 40% moderately - pointing to meaningful internal shifts.
- A strengthened **sense of belonging** was reported by **51.11%**, a key factor in emotional and mental wellbeing.
- Increased **connection with other Autistic people** was also noted, with **93.33%** of participants feeling very or somewhat connected after the programme.
- The majority (**82.22%**) felt **more positive about being Autistic**, a core indicator of improved self-image and reduced internalised stigma.

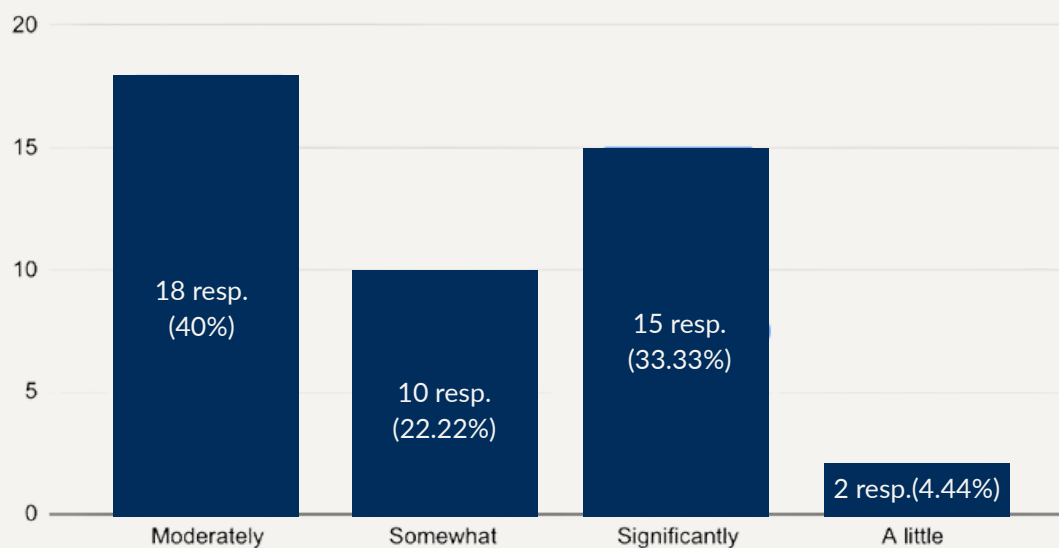
*"This has significantly improved my mental wellbeing."*

*"I came out the other end with validation, self-esteem, and new knowledge - not just about autism, but about myself."*

## Wellbeing: Reclaiming Self through Belonging and Validation

The Discovery Programme did more than educate—it offered a safe space for participants to feel seen, heard, and valued. In doing so, it planted seeds of healing that many described as “life-changing” and “transformative.” For Autistic adults who’ve long lived without this kind of support, these aren’t just personal breakthroughs—they’re vital steps toward lasting wellbeing.

Do you feel that your overall well-being has improved as a result of the programme?



## Increased Participation in Society: Finding Belonging, Stepping Forward

*"It felt like it was my tribe. There was a safety in it."*

For many participants, the Discovery Programme marked a turning point in how they related to others - and to themselves as social beings. The sense of community fostered in the sessions wasn't just a "nice-to-have"; it marked a profound shift in their experience of connection. Participants described the space as uniquely affirming, safe, and unlike anything they'd encountered before.

*"Suffice to say I wanted to be there, every time. Rarely have I wanted to be anywhere, other than on my own, for a long time now."*

Belonging was a recurring theme. For those who had long felt isolated, the programme offered a rare and powerful opportunity to connect with others who truly understood. This validation wasn't abstract - it had immediate emotional and relational impact that reshaped how participants connected with others.

*"Not feeling so alone in all of this was incredible."*

*"It's just mind-blowing, and I don't think outside of Thriving Autistic I would ever have access to a community like that."*

The data strongly reflects this transformation:

- **51.11% of participants** reported a stronger sense of belonging after completing the programme.
- **93.33%** felt either **very or somewhat connected** to other Autistic people - highlighting the programme's success in facilitating meaningful peer relationships.
- And notably, **more than half (55.55%) felt more positive** about being Autistic - a shift that directly supports increased confidence in social spaces.

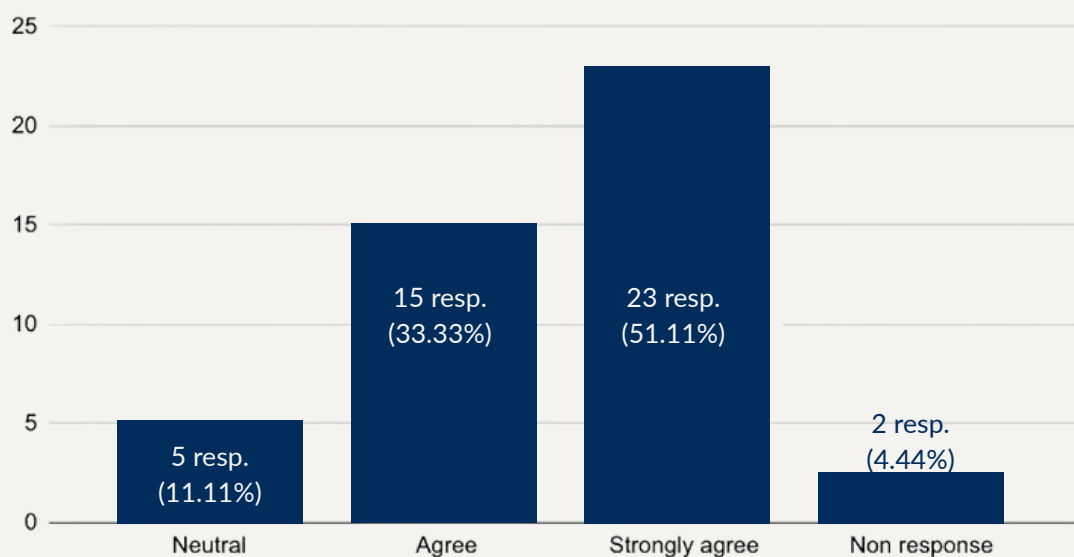
## Increased Participation in Society: Finding Belonging, Stepping Forward

**You get all this positive reinforcement... even if people couldn't say it out loud, you could feel the support."**

Participants spoke of their reawakened desire to participate - not just in the group, but in wider society. Being seen and understood created a foundation of trust and confidence that extended far beyond the six weeks, with each cohort forming networks to stay in touch with one another following the programme.

**"I think the most helpful thing was knowing there was a group of people like me - because I didn't... I still don't know many Autistic people."**

Did you feel a sense of belonging as a result of this programme?



## Meeting Specific Needs: Relationships, Workplaces & Everyday Life

The Discovery Programme created space for participants to reflect on and articulate their unique needs - often for the first time. Whether in family dynamics, romantic relationships, educational environments, or the workplace, participants reported that this self-understanding had a tangible ripple effect.

*"By learning more about myself through the Discovery Programme, I've been able to better articulate what I need in our relationship."*

Participants described how insights gained during the programme helped them communicate more clearly, set boundaries, and engage more authentically. This was especially powerful in family settings, with some noting a newfound ability to relate to and support their neurodivergent children.

*"The Discovery Programme gave me the confidence to say, 'If you want the best out of me, here's what I need.'"*

*"It gave me more understanding... and helped my kids have words for things - to understand what they're doing and why."*

In workplace settings, the impact was particularly pronounced. Participants spoke of how confidence in self-advocacy translated directly into access to adjustments and improved relationships with colleagues and managers.





## Meeting Specific Needs: Relationships, Workplaces & Everyday Life

The data backs this up:

- **55.55%** of participants felt they better **understood their Autistic traits** after the programme, with an additional **31.11%** stating they understood them **very well** - laying the groundwork for self-advocacy in daily life.
- **95.55%** reported increased **confidence in self-advocacy**, a key factor in securing adjustments in both personal and professional relationships.
- **75.55%** felt more supported in **understanding their identity**, which many linked to their ability to navigate interpersonal and systemic challenges more effectively.

**"It's enabled me to be more effective at work - and more authentic. That's made my participation more meaningful."**

The wraparound nature of the Discovery Programme proved particularly valuable, with participants highlighting how its interconnected components worked synergistically to meet their needs. Many appreciated how the combination of structured learning, personalised professional support, and peer connection formed a comprehensive safety net - addressing both immediate challenges and longer-term growth.

These outcomes show that a strengths-based, identity-affirming approach does more than support wellbeing - it equips Autistic adults to participate more fully and confidently in every area of life that matters to them.

## One-to-One Support

The Discovery Programme provided personalised 1-1 support services with Autistic psychologists, therapists and coaches, ensuring that participants were met with both professional expertise and lived understanding. This individualised approach complemented group sessions and ensured that participants received targeted, respectful guidance throughout their journey.

### Support Snapshot:

- 65 individuals accessed one-to-one support
- Key areas of focus included:
  - Workplace accommodations
  - Relationship building
  - Sensory adaptations to environments
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Identity and self-understanding



"I felt heard and supported for the first time."

This component proved especially impactful for participants navigating complex or sensitive issues, reinforcing our commitment to meeting neurodivergent individuals where they are - with tailored, respectful, and accessible support.

# Advocacy Support

As part of Discovery's wraparound approach, our **Advocacy Support** service provides free, neuro-affirming assistance to Autistic adults navigating complex systems such as employment, housing, education, healthcare, and disability services.

Led by Autistic professionals, support is offered in both group and individual formats:

- Self-advocacy letters
- Personalised referrals
- Direct representation (in limited cases)
- Monthly drop-in clinics

Between September 2024 and March 2025:

- 6 drop-in clinics supported 119 attendees
- 33 individuals received personalised support through 77 sessions

## Key areas of support:

- Workplace accommodations – 26%
- Housing – 21%
- Education – 18%
- Disability benefits and healthcare – 12% each

## Client outcomes included:

- 100% of people expressed positive feedback
- 14% of cases were resolved successfully
- 83% are currently active or pending
- The remainder were either outside remit or impacted by systemic delays

“This is so refreshing for me as I seem to have been fighting the health system to no avail for a few years now. Not being understood being the norm of course, so the acknowledgement I have been getting lately through Thriving Autistic has made me feel so much better about myself. Thank you all for the work you are doing here.”

“It's been amazing at work. I've been able to articulate what I need - and that's led to adjustments that have really helped.”

This component of the Discovery Programme continues to fill a critical gap in accessible, identity-affirming advocacy. The consistent message from participants is clear: when advocacy is delivered with respect and understanding, it creates real change - and a powerful sense of being seen.

# Participant Recommendations & Future Directions

While the Discovery Programme was deeply valued - described as life-changing, validating, and empowering - participants also shared thoughtful suggestions to strengthen its structure and expand its reach. These recommendations reflect a strong desire for more: more time, more depth, more connection, and more ways to continue the journey.

Importantly, these insights align with Thriving Autistic's vision to scale the programme globally by developing additional resources and training new facilitators across our network of over 700 practitioners in 19 countries.

## What Participants Suggested

### Programme Structure & Duration

- Extend the duration of the programme or offer a follow-up series
- Create smaller group options for those who benefit from more intimate settings
- Provide additional time for discussion within sessions

**⚠️ Note:** These points suggest that while many participants found the current structure impactful (e.g. 71.11% were extremely satisfied), some would welcome a slower pace or deeper dive. This speaks to the diversity of needs, not a contradiction - offering flexibility or multiple formats could meet both.

# Content Expansion

- Include more on ADHD-Autism overlap
- Enhance our toolkit for stress management, emotional regulation, and navigating relationships
- Explore more deeply topics like monotropism (single-channel attention focus) and social isolation.

These suggestions reinforce the programme's role in deepening identity work and equipping participants for daily life - a theme echoed throughout participant reflections.

# Accessibility Enhancements

- Improve clarity and ease of navigation for the online platform
- Offer clearer setup support and instructions for tech tools

These enhancements would ensure broader inclusion, especially for those with fluctuating energy, executive functioning barriers, or limited tech confidence.

# Facilitation & Group Dynamics

- Ensure balanced participation in group discussions
- Offer optional breakout rooms for more focused conversations

⚠ Note: While participants overwhelmingly appreciated Autistic-led facilitation and group connection, this highlights a desire for flexible engagement styles - something that could be incorporated into facilitator training moving forward.

# Long-Term Support & Sustainability

- Further strengthen the continuity between programme components for a more seamless support experience
- Expand the post-programme community engagement opportunities beyond monthly meetups
- Ensure ongoing access to advocacy support and professional guidance as needs evolve
- Secure sustainable funding to maintain the holistic support model while expanding access

These recommendations point to the programme's deep emotional resonance - and the need to support continued connection and growth after the initial six weeks.

# Our Strategic Response

Based on participant feedback and our organisational goals, we are developing a three-year expansion plan (2026-2029) that will be implemented contingent upon securing appropriate funding. Subject to funding, our strategic priorities include:

- **Capacity Building**
  - Training 25 new facilitators per year across our international network
  - Developing an advanced certification for Discovery Programme facilitators
  - Creating localised adaptations for regional needs while maintaining core principles
- **Programme Enhancement**
  - Building modular follow-up courses on specific topics (relationships, workplace, Autistic burnout, menopause, pregnancy and birth, parenting and sensory needs)
  - Developing a digital resource library accessible to all programme graduates
  - Creating tiered participation options (standard, intensive, and personalised pathways)
- **Community Sustainability**
  - Establishing ongoing peer support structures with trained volunteer moderators
  - Creating a mentorship programme connecting programme graduates with newcomers
  - Building strategic partnerships with employers, educational institutions, and healthcare providers and other community stakeholders

Our commitment to the wraparound support model remains central to our expansion strategy. Rather than treating programme elements as standalone services, we will continue to build an integrated ecosystem - where structured learning, professional support, advocacy services, and community connection reinforce and strengthen one another.

Subject to funding, these developments will enable us to support over 500 Autistic adults annually through Discovery, while amplifying our impact by sharing resources freely across our social media and practitioner networks. At every stage, we will uphold the high-quality, neurodivergent-led approach that makes this programme so effective.



# Our Strategic Response

## Sharing our Learning Through Film

To complement and extend the impact of the Discovery Programme, we brought together an international neurodiverse team of creatives to co-create two original short films exploring Autistic identity through a neuro-affirming lens.

These films emerged directly from the insights and shared experiences of Discovery participants. They are the product of a living community of practice—one that reflects, creates, and contributes to the wider conversation around Autistic identity and inclusion.

Our first film, “**Discovering You're Autistic**” explores what it means to be Autistic from a neuro-affirming perspective. Many of our participants grew up feeling different without knowing why. This short film explores the journey from feeling out of place to finding belonging and embracing a neuro-affirming, strengths-based Autistic identity.

Our participants frequently had “aha” moments of shared recognition. Centred on the theme “I thought it was just me”, our short film “**Lightbulb Moments: Being Autistic**” offers a unique insight into the strengths and challenges of being Autistic - while intentionally reframing the historically pathology-based view that often surrounds Autistic experiences.

We hope these films open up conversations that lead to deeper understanding and personal journeys of self-discovery for Autistic people.

We are proud to offer a neuro-affirmative perspective on Autistic experiences and identity—one that we hope resonates not only within our community, but also with the wider world.

*Credits for both films are included in the “Our Team” section.*

# Our Strategic Response

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The Discovery Programme represents a significant innovation in Autistic-led support. Our evaluation confirms that this holistic, wraparound approach creates meaningful, sustainable change for participants by addressing both immediate needs and long-term wellbeing.

The programme's strength lies in its comprehensive framework of support - connecting structured learning with professional guidance, peer connection, and ongoing community engagement. This integrated approach has proven particularly effective in helping participants navigate relationships, workplaces, and everyday challenges.

Building on these overwhelmingly positive outcomes, we are committed to:

- **Refining our current model** based on participant suggestions, particularly around session pacing, resource accessibility, and community continuity.
- **Scaling globally** through our growing network of partners, while developing culturally-responsive adaptations that maintain the quality and integrity of our approach.
- **Advocating for sustainable** funding models that recognise the value of neurodivergent-led professional support.
- **Building strategic partnerships** with organisations and systems changemakers to grow, embed, and sustain this work.

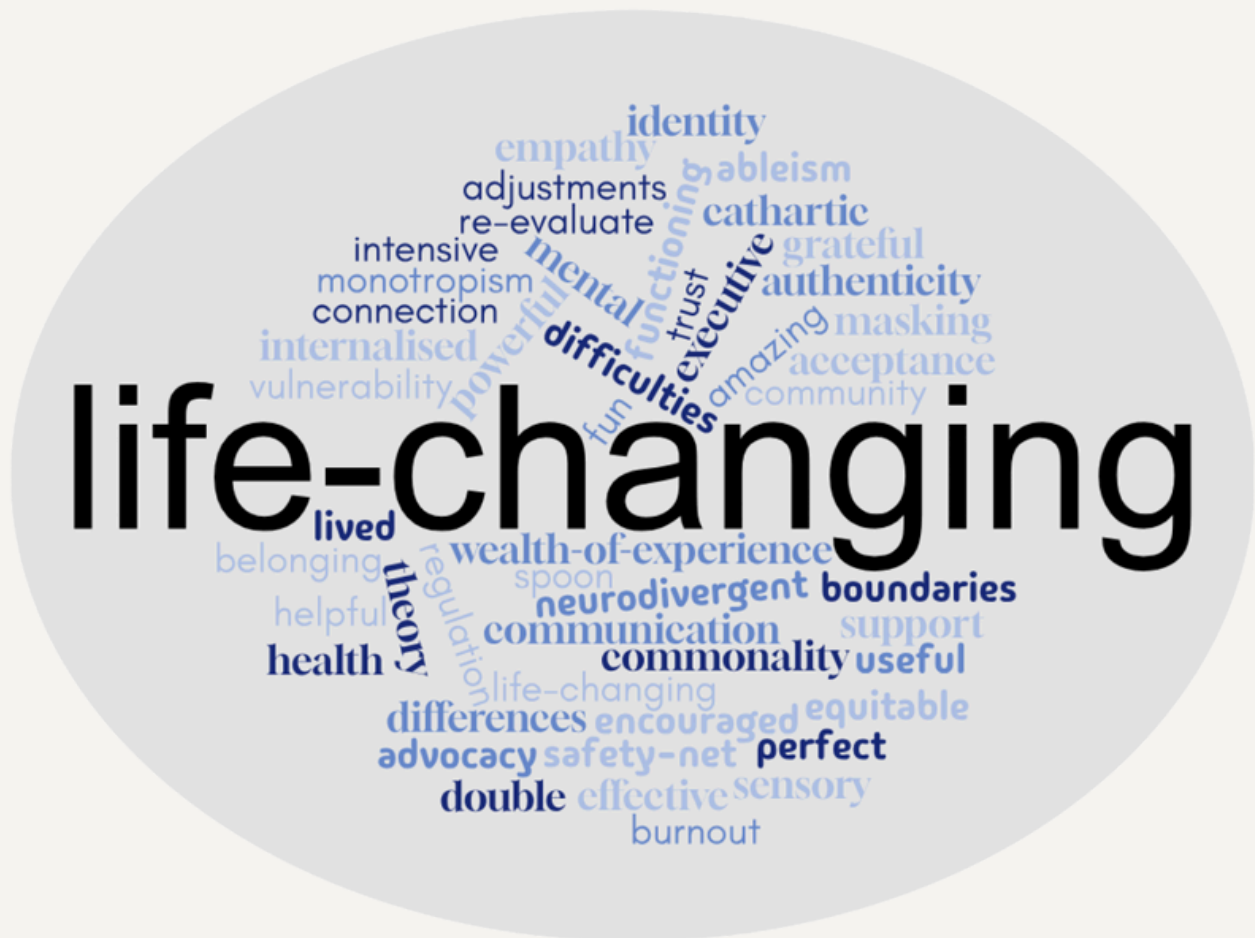
With continued investment and collaboration, we can extend this transformative experience to thousands more Autistic adults worldwide who still lack access to appropriate support.

The Discovery Programme demonstrates what is possible when Autistic people are met with the understanding, tools, and community they deserve: they flourish.

**For further information or to discuss partnership opportunities, please contact:**

Kristiina Kolberg, Operations Lead

[kristiina@thrivingautistic.org](mailto:kristiina@thrivingautistic.org)



Word cloud comprised of keywords from participant interviews (Right click on image for ALT text).

# Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful to **Rethink Ireland and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)** for their funding and belief in our work. Their support made the Discovery Programme possible.

Special thanks to our fund manager, Karen Galligan, and the wider Rethink Ireland team, including Jacqui Walsh and Tanja Buwalda, for their insight, encouragement, and ongoing support throughout the programme.

We are especially grateful to Emma Lane-Spollen, our strategic consultant through Rethink Ireland's non-financial supports, whose clarity and guidance helped shape our long-term vision and sustainability.

To every partner, collaborator, and community member who contributed along the way—thank you for being part of this journey.

A special thank you to **Gem Kennedy**, who poured so much of themselves into the creation of our core content, and to **Teri Kansted**, whose sensitive and skilled co-facilitation helped bring the sessions to life. To **Helen Edgar**, who gently and generously held our community—offering kindness, connection, and resources far beyond the weekly sessions. To **Kristiina Kolberg**, who joined us first as a participant and is now our Operations Lead—your presence is one of the greatest gifts this programme has given us. And to **Joanie Moral**, our lead administrator, who supported both the team and participants with care, clarity, and unwavering steadiness throughout—it would not have run as smoothly without you.

We also wish to thank our brilliant **animation and creative team**, whose artistry helped bring the heart of Discovery to life through film. These short animations—*Discovering You're Autistic* and *Lightbulb Moments: Being Autistic*—were co-created by a talented, multidisciplinary, neurodiverse team of writers, animators, composers, and sound designers. Their work beautifully reflects the shared insights of our community and extends our learning into the wider world.

And to our **Discovery participants**—thank you for your trust, honesty, and courage. Your insights, reflections, and shared experiences have shaped this programme at every stage. We are honoured to walk alongside you.