

PLAIN LANGUAGE VERSION

# What We Learned from the Discovery Programme

March 2025



## Executive Summary

The Discovery Programme is a powerful support programme for all areas of life. It is created and led by Autistic professionals for Autistic adults. This report shares research showing that the programme had a positive and meaningful impact in the lives of the people who took part.



## ■ Key Results:

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

**93%** felt more connected  
to other Autistic people

**73%** experienced  
improvements in wellbeing

People reported **greater self-understanding, confidence, and reduced isolation**

This success is because the programme was designed and created in a respectful way that recognises and values different ways of thinking, learning, and experiencing the world.

The people who took part felt safe, seen, and supported in a way that most had never experienced before. For example, one person shared that they felt "finally understood without having to explain themselves."



# Introduction

## About Thriving Autistic

Thriving Autistic is a neurodivergent-led organisation — meaning it is run by people whose brains work differently from what is considered typical, such as Autistic people, people with ADHD, dyslexia, or other differences.

It was founded in 2020 by Autistic psychologist Tara O'Donnell-Killen. We offer support and advocacy to Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent adults in 19 countries. Our services include coaching, therapy, resources, advocacy, and professional training



## About the Discovery Programme

The Discovery Programme goes beyond traditional courses.

It combines:

- Live workshops led by Autistic professionals
- On-demand learning materials in a variety of formats, including video, text, and visual guides
- A peer community forum
- One-to-one support
- AI-supported advocacy services
- This programme supports all areas of life, helping Autistic adults feel more confident, connected, and ready to succeed in life.
- In 2024 and 2025, Thriving Autistic got funding from Rethink Ireland and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. This money gave 136 people free tickets to Discovery.



# Methodology

## (How we measured results)

The evaluation was co-produced by a neurodivergent team in partnership with the people who took part in the programme. This way of working together respected Autistic knowledge and lived experiences.

### Methods used:

- Surveys (45 responses)
- Interviews (11 people)
- Flexible formats to meet different access needs, such as written surveys, video calls, and typed interviews



## Programme Reach:

**136** people  
took part

**62** received one-to-one  
support

**119** used the  
advocacy service



# Key Findings

## 1. Power of Neurodivergent Facilitation

People felt safe, respected, and truly understood. Many said this was their first time being supported by someone who “gets it”.

- 100% of people to who took part were satisfied with programme delivery.
- The facilitators’ lived experience really matter.

## 2. Growth in Self-Advocacy and Disability Awareness

People said they had developed a clearer understanding of how internalised ableism affects them, how masking impacts their wellbeing, and where their needs were not being met.

They also felt more confident in asking for adjustments, and became more aware of their own sensory and emotional needs.



# What We Found

## 3. Wellbeing & Belonging

**73%** experienced improved wellbeing

**51%** felt a stronger sense of belonging

**82%** felt more positive about their Autistic identity



# What We Found

## 4. Taking Part in Society

The programme helped people in the following ways:

- They were more able to connect socially
- They could join community life more confidently
- They felt empowered to take part in everyday settings and better able to advocate and manage in work, education and healthcare



# What We Found

## 5. Meeting Everyday Needs

Participants used what they learned in the following ways:

- They could improve their relationships with other people.
- They could take part in workplace and education more successfully.
- They could make sure they get the help and adjustments they need, including in healthcare.



## One-to-One and Advocacy Support

**65** people accessed sessions with Autistic therapists and coaches.

The sessions focused on work, relationships, sensory needs, and emotional health.



## One-to-One and Advocacy Support

**119** people accessed sessions with attended drop-in clinics.

People took part in **77** personalised support sessions.

The topics covered in the sessions were employment, housing, education and healthcare.





# Recommendations & Future Directions

People asked for:

- Longer sessions or more time for discussions
- Smaller groups for comfort
- More content on ADHD, relationships, and burnout
- Better tech guidance and accessibility
- Continued connection and follow-up options



# Our Strategic Response

## (What we're doing next)

Thriving Autistic will:

- Train more new facilitators each year
- Create more learning resources
- Improve accessibility and digital tools
- Build global and local partnerships

# Sharing Our Learning Through Film

Two short films were co-created by Autistic writers and creatives:

1. "Discovering You're Autistic" – explores identity and belonging and connecting with others
2. "Lightbulb Moments: Being Autistic" – showcases shared insights and growth of inner Autistic experiences that often get missed

These films are publicly available tools for education and community engagement.



# Conclusion and Next Steps

**The Discovery Programme shows that Autistic-led, neuro-affirming support works.**

We are committed to:

- Improving based on feedback
- Scaling access worldwide
- Strengthening community and long-term supports
- Ensuring sustainable funding and partnerships

**Our heartfelt thanks to Rethink Ireland and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, who helped fund the programme, the films and this research.**

