

Collaborating for change: Improving care from Psychiatrists in response to lived experience

Instigated by VOX Scotland members' experiences, research and desire for change, we conducted a piece of mixed methods research in summer 2024, reaching 469 people with experience of psychiatrists across every health board in Scotland. We collaborated with our group member, Spirit Advocacy and some individual members to co-create the questions in our online questionnaire, which included quantitative and qualitative questions. We also nurtured a partnership with the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland who had similar concerns.

Background

VOX Scotland identified from member feedback that the quality and continuity of care received from psychiatrists is an important issue for our members and for many other people in Scotland. We had been made aware of some of the challenges in the current system in terms of recruitment and retention of permanent psychiatrists and the use of locum psychiatrists in many areas of Scotland, some of whom do not have standardised qualifications, training and conditions, while incurring high costs for health boards. A member contributed their FOI findings about NHS expenditure which gave context to this research.

We also heard about these challenges from the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland in their State of the Nation Report and we were keen to work in partnership with them to make improvements. Crucially, VOX Scotland members had also raised concerns about the impact these challenges are having on the continuity and quality of their care under psychiatrists in Scotland.

The purpose of this research questionnaire was to find out what adults (18 or over) with recent experience (in the last five years) of care under one or more psychiatrist(s) in Scotland think about the quality and continuity of care they have received. The questions were developed based on lived experience and alongside Spirit Advocacy in the Highlands and were clearly linked to the core mental health standards. Our intention in undertaking this research was to gain a clearer and more comprehensive picture of people's experiences in all areas of Scotland and to work collectively to influence change, amplifying the voices of lived experience and support workforce development.

Who We Engaged With

We wanted to gather information on experiences of care from psychiatrists from a wide range of people in every health board area of Scotland. This was important so we could hear and report on views from across the country and be able to identify any issues particular to certain areas and any issues in common.

To this end, while we promoted the research within our VOX Scotland membership, the questionnaire was open beyond that to anyone over 18 with experience of care under one or more psychiatrists in Scotland in the last five years. These stipulations were to ensure we gathered views on recent care from psychiatrists in Scotland.

We promoted the research through networks and social media advertising and tried to gather views from as representative a sample as possible, recognising that it may be harder to reach some people with experience of psychiatrists (particularly current inpatients) and that people may be hesitant to engage or report on their experiences for various reasons.

The questionnaire was open for seven weeks and, as will be seen in the findings, we heard from people in every health board area and had a large number of responses (469). The equalities monitoring questions demonstrate gaps in responses particularly from people from minority ethnic backgrounds and from men.

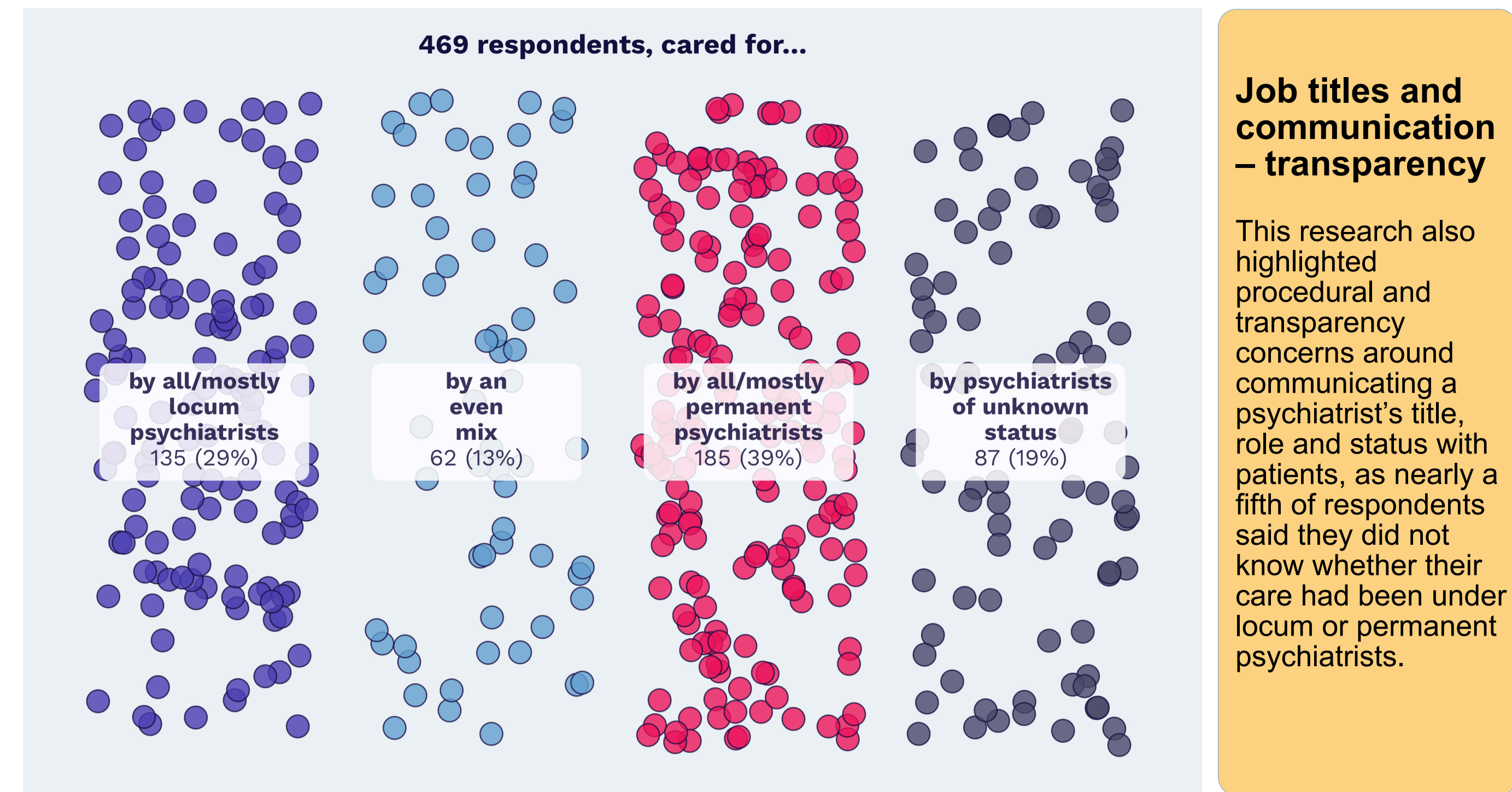
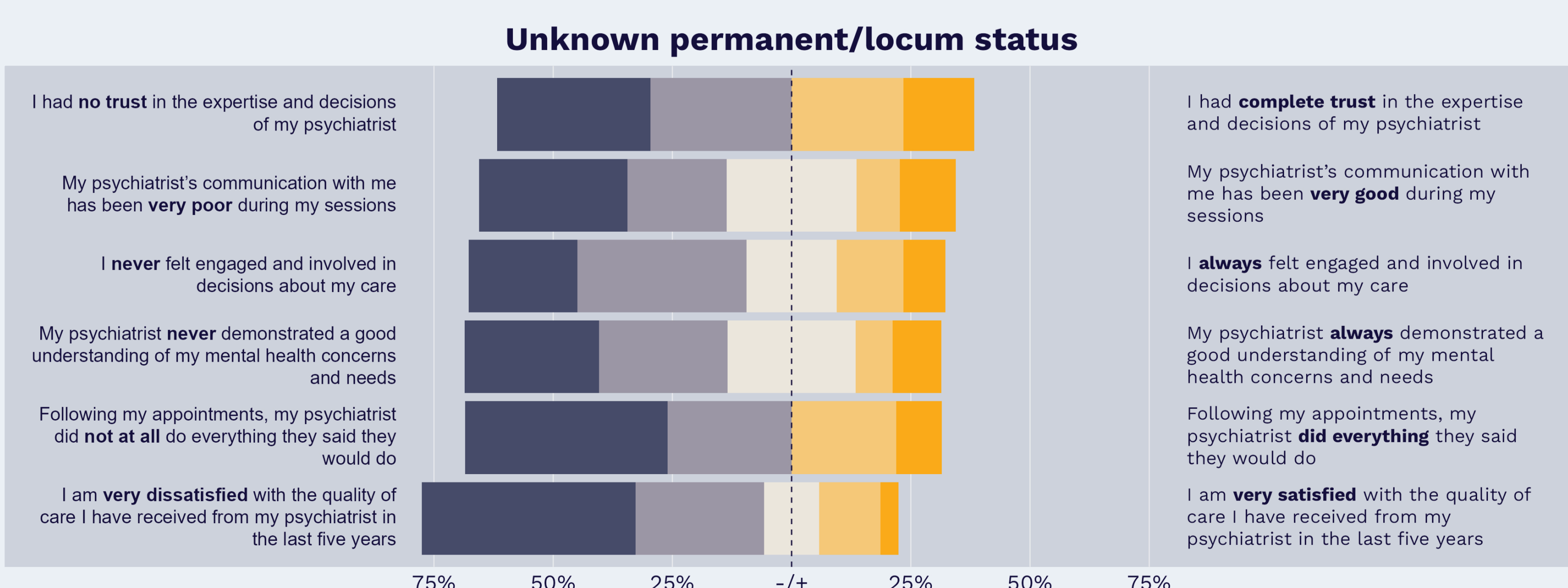
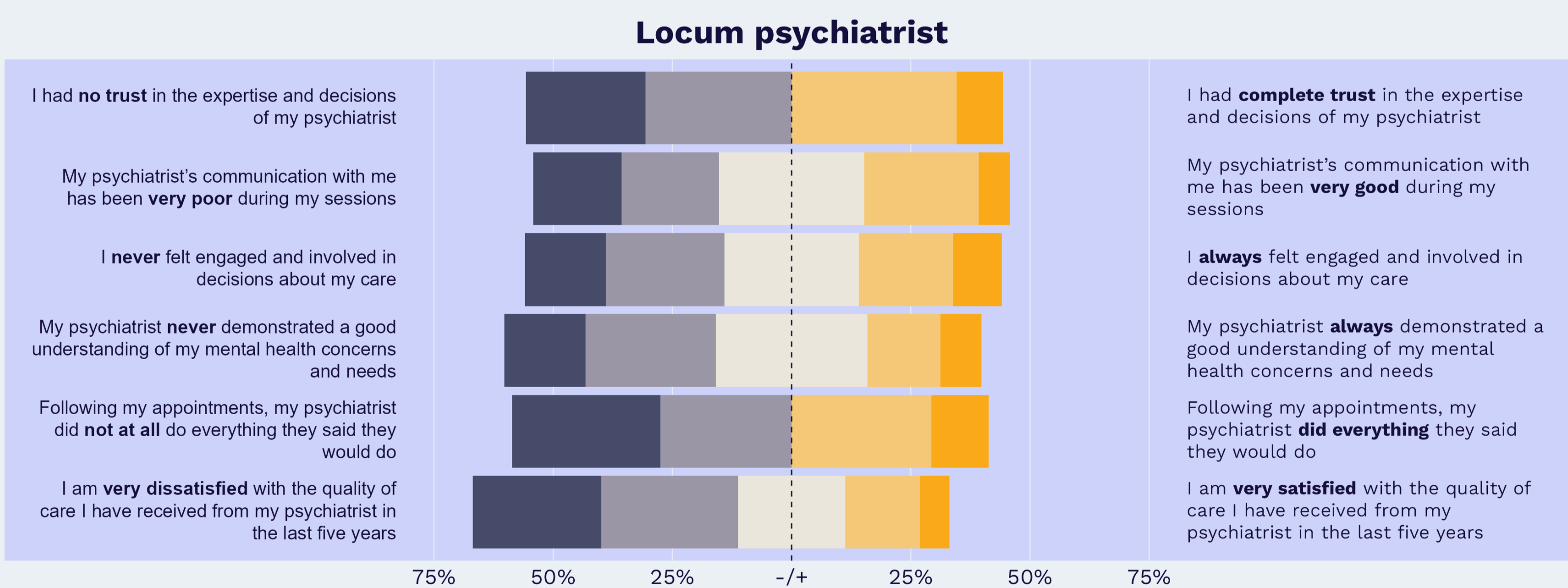
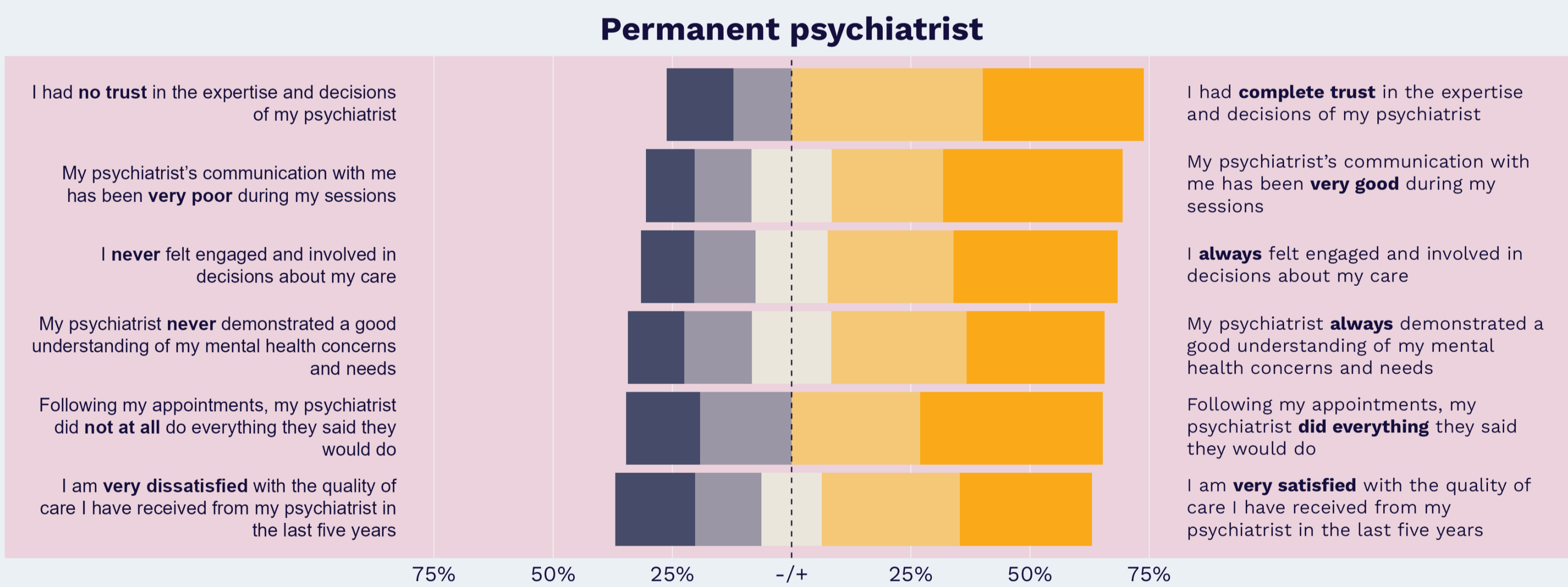
We recognise that our sample was self-selecting, which may make negative or strong viewpoints more likely. However, the trend of results and qualitative answers show genuine and individual experiences from respondents with a mixture of positive and negative perspectives.

What We Wanted to Achieve

- A better understanding of the quality and continuity of care under psychiatrists experienced by adults in Scotland
- An understanding of any issues particular to certain geographical or health board areas or any rural, remote or urban issues
- An understanding of any good practice taking place
- An understanding of any issues particular to locum or permanent psychiatrist care
- To provide information to our members, the wider public, the NHS and Scottish Government on findings

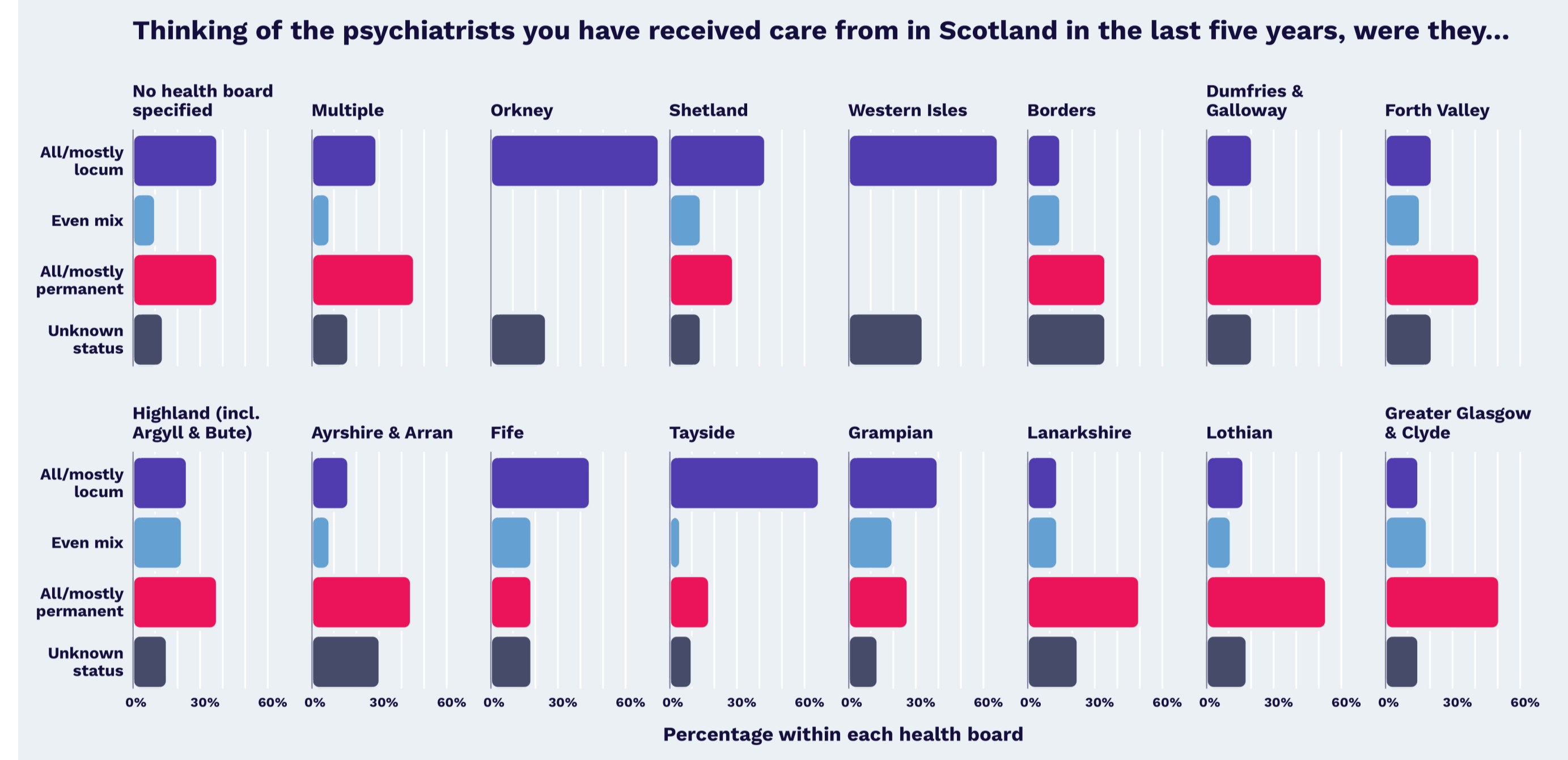
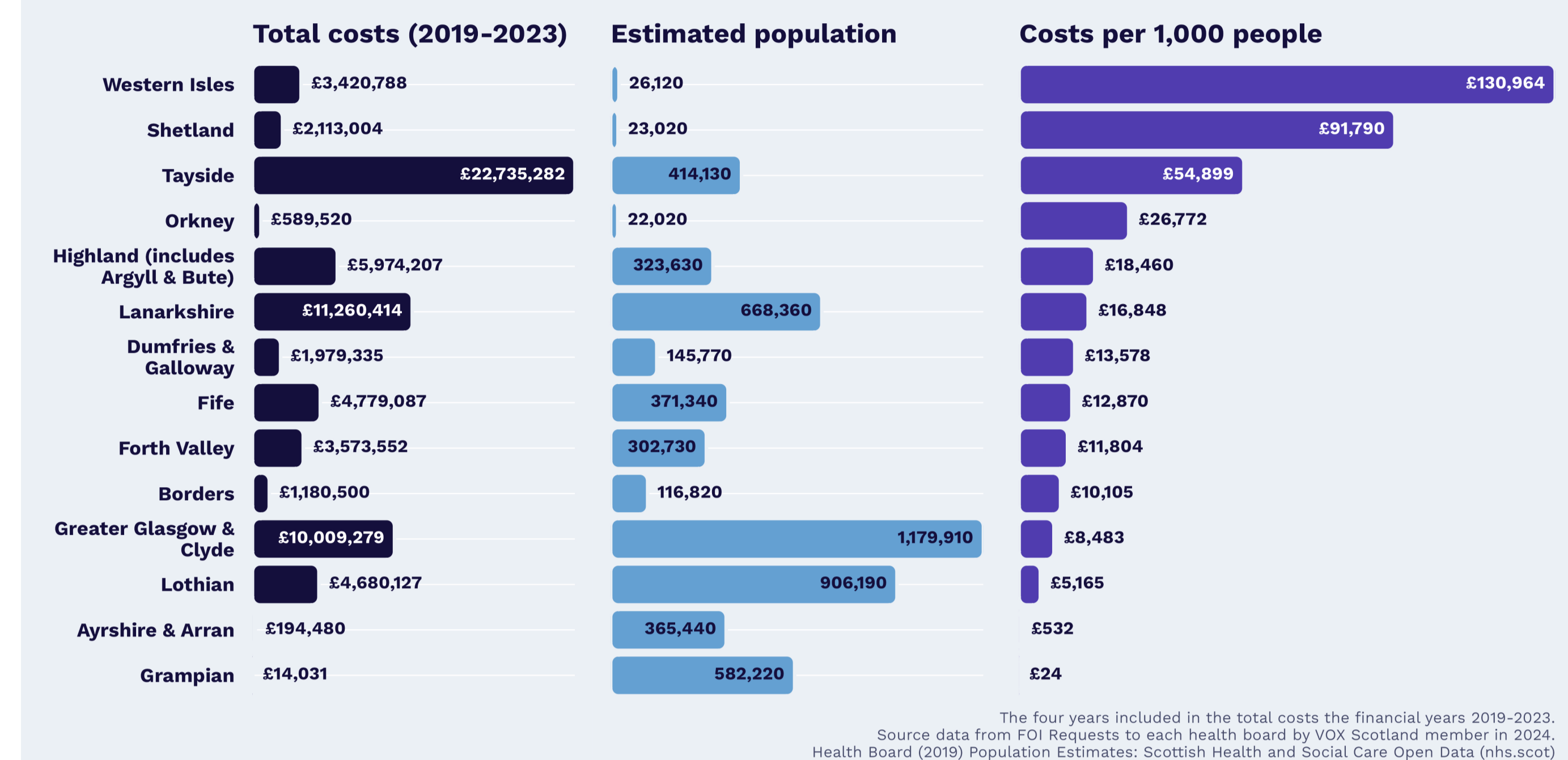
Tell us about the care you have received

Each question had a different set of negative to positive answers, represented by the grey to gold scale. Some questions had a neutral middle answer, represented over the the mid point of the scale.



Job titles and communication – transparency

This research also highlighted procedural and transparency concerns around communicating a psychiatrist's title, role and status with patients, as nearly a fifth of respondents said they did not know whether their care had been under locum or permanent psychiatrists.



How we worked together to campaign for change

In the lead up to, and since publication of our report, we worked in partnership with the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland to share our common concerns and insights, potential solutions and to campaign to make changes that will improve the quality and continuity of care for individuals.

This helped develop a stronger and more productive relationship between the two organisations, which is beneficial for creating wider change for our members. We presented our findings to the Scottish Government's psychiatry recruitment and retention working group on 15th January 2025, and can see evidence of our influence in the recommendations of their report.

We also worked together with the VOX members who were instrumental in starting and developing the work to publicise the campaign. We had coverage on BBC Radio Scotland and in the Guardian, as well as local press.

"What an absolutely brilliant report! It's such a good read. So good to see that VOX has taken up an issue that was instigated by a member and has given the issue some fangs!" (VOX Scotland member)

"Our members consistently tell us that trust and continuity are vital for effective care. A revolving door of psychiatrists undermines this. We must move beyond transactional approaches of simply providing an appointment to recognising the need to foster lasting therapeutic relationships." John Beaton, Manager, Spirit Advocacy

"All too often, the person that you see described as a locum consultant doesn't, in fact, have the same qualifications as substantive [permanent] consultant. So, they may be put in post without having completed the rigorous higher training. That doesn't necessarily make them a bad doctor, but it means they don't have the hallmarks that public and employers have come to rely on as providing assurance that such a doctor has the necessary skills and experience." Dr Morris, Chair RCPsychIS



Mental health: 'No care left in the system: patients on use of locum psychiatrists in Scotland'

"Ask yourself will things change if people with lived experience aren't listened to." Peter Todd, Spirit Advocacy and VOX Scotland member

On the 26th February 2025 we met with the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, Maree Todd MSP, to present our findings and recommendations.



In April 2025 a motion was lodged by Gillian Mackay MSP, welcoming our report and a report published by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. This again highlighted our partnership and collective action for a common cause.

Our research told us that we need to ensure relevant training, support and implementation takes place for psychiatrists to meet all elements of the core mental health standards, with emphasis on ensuring individuals can be involved and engaged in decisions about their care, awareness and promotion of advocacy rights and services, and a fit for purpose, impartial and authoritative complaints and feedback system as standard.

Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland Locum Psychiatry Survey – Report & Recommendations

Submitted by: Gillian Mackay, Central Scotland, Scottish Green Party.
Date lodged: Tuesday, 22 April 2025
Motion reference: SGM-17229

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of two reports relating to locum psychiatry, the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland Locum Psychiatry Survey - Report & Recommendations from the perspective of psychiatrists and Your Views: Psychiatrists in Scotland, by VOX Scotland, from the perspective of lived experience; believes that Scotland's psychiatrist workforce is not growing sufficiently to keep pace with the well-documented rising scale of demand for services, nor, it considers, is it growing in line with almost all other medical professions notes that, according to the report Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland Locum Psychiatry Survey - Report & Recommendations, locum psychiatrists have been appointed to fill the gaps in workforce and that an average of one in four consultant psychiatry positions are estimated to be vacant or filled by a locum across Scotland; considers that, across the two reports, it is clear that the widespread appointment of locum psychiatrists is associated with issues relating to quality assurance, patient safety, satisfaction and continuity of care, transparency, morale and stress of permanent colleagues, and cost, and highlights what is seen as the importance of the recommendations across the two reports, which emphasise the need to improve continuity and quality of patient care by reducing the reliance on locums in Scottish psychiatry, increase the number of permanent psychiatrists by focussing on retention and addressing job plans and working conditions, implementing a standardised system of transparent psychiatrist job titles/roles, which reflects the training and qualification levels achieved, increase funding and support to implement the core mental health standards across Scotland's mental health sector, and ensure that the gradual cessation of non-qualified locums is delivered.

Supported by: Clare Adamson, Jackie Baillie, Jeremy Balfour, Miles Briggs, Ariane Burgess, Finlay Carson, Foysool Choudhury, Sharon Dowey, Annabelle Ewing, Dr Pam Gosal MBE, Rhoda Grant, Dr Sandesh Gulhane (Registered Interest), Rachael Hamilton, Daniel Johnson, Bill Kidd, Monica Lennon, John Mason, Carol Mochan, Audrey Nicoll, Willie Rennie, Emma Roddick, Douglas Ross, Liz Smith, Colin Smyth, Paul Swenney, Michelle Thomson, Mercedes Villalba, Sue Webber, Martin Whitfield, Elena Whitlam, Brian Whittle

Read the full report
www.voxscotland.org.uk

