

BUILDING FUTURES BEYOND TRAUMA

Partners in Change Report



Foreword

The Partners in Change project, funded by the Robertson Trust and delivered in collaboration with the University of Dundee, has provided invaluable insights into how we can move beyond trauma to create an environment that prioritises trust, wellbeing, and empowerment for both our staff and participants.

Over the past three years, we have listened carefully to voices across our organisation and the communities we serve. The findings highlight both the progress we have made and the challenges we must address to ensure our values are lived in practice every day.

Our response has been bold and intentional: from developing a unique conceptual framework to implementing changes at individual, community, and practice levels. These efforts have shaped four strategic service outcomes—Building Trust, Widening the Window of Tolerance, Establishing Autonomy, and Wellbeing—that will guide our impact reporting and future development.

Looking ahead, we are committed to sharing these learnings widely. This is more than a project; it is a cultural transformation, ensuring that Apex Scotland continues to lead with compassion, innovation, and integrity.



Lindsay Fyffe-Jardine,
CEO

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Holding up a mirror to ourselves

Apex Scotland exists to support people with experience of the justice system to overcome barriers, realise their potential, and positively engage with society. To build a future beyond their past.

We do this through guidance, advocacy, skills development, and person-centred support, we enable individuals to take control of their futures and contribute

meaningfully to their families, workplaces, and communities.

We envision a Scotland where every individual—regardless of their past—has the opportunity, support, and confidence to build a positive future.

Our values of 'Believe, Respect, Empower, Support' underpin our work.

BELIEVE

We believe in the potential for positive change in every individual. This belief drives our work and reminds us to see beyond labels, focusing on strengths and possibilities.

RESPECT

Respect is at the core of everything we do. We treat everyone with dignity, recognising their unique experiences, perspectives, and contributions.

EMPOWER

We empower individuals to take charge of their futures, providing the tools, resources, and confidence needed to achieve meaningful change.

SUPPORT

Support is the foundation of our approach. We provide practical assistance, guidance, and encouragement tailored to individual needs.

“The three-year Partners in Change project involved putting ourselves under the microscope and exploring our take on the sector’s use of terminology, commercial requirements and how services meet people’s needs. We wanted to understand what it means to be genuinely ‘trauma-informed’. This report takes a transparent look at the drivers for change, the barriers faced by the entire organisation and what we learnt as a result.”

Emma Wilson,
Director of Services and Programmes, Apex Scotland

What was the Partners in Change project?

The [Partners in Change](#) initiative was launched in 2021 by The Robertson Trust as part of their 10-year strategy focused on tackling poverty and trauma in Scotland. Some of its main aims and criteria included:

- Supporting work around changing how services and support for people experiencing poverty and/or trauma are designed and delivered.
- Preventing and mitigating the negative impacts of poverty and trauma on society.
- A commitment to shared learning.

As one of the six funded Partners in Change projects, Apex Scotland collaborated with the University of Dundee as our monitoring, evaluation and systemisation partner.

We also collaborated with the Resilience Learning Partnership as a lived experience organisation and Jan Montgomery, an independent accredited Psychotherapist. Together, these partners contributed diverse positions and viewpoints, enabling us to explore a better understanding of genuinely ‘trauma-informed’ practice.

“With ‘trauma informed’ now firmly at the forefront of the social sector - and increasing pressure to evidence our methods – this funded learning journey enabled us to move beyond intention and establish a genuine, accountable approach.”

Emma Wilson,
Director of Services and Programmes, Apex Scotland



'Trauma-informed': What's in a label?

As an organisation working with people who have experience of the justice system, we've always been aware of how trauma impacts lives.

- Sometimes, it is trauma, which demands a suitable response and referral
- And sometimes it's not, which also demands a relevant response
- It can be problematic, and maybe even harmful, to view everything through a 'trauma' lens.

While we welcome more awareness and discussion on this complex topic, there are potential downsides of using labels such as 'trauma informed' and 'trauma responsive', as a catch-all, including:

- Incorrectly labelling everything as trauma can be counter-productive.
- A lack of focus on the quality of practice behind these terms.
- Becoming overused and losing their true meaning.

We're not being dismissive or trying to downplay the impact of trauma on people's lives.

In fact, Apex Scotland has greatly benefitted from the leading work developed in this area – primarily through the [NHS Education National Trauma Training Programme](#) and the [Improvement Service Roadmap](#).

Before embarking on the Partners in Change project, our approach was centred around three core principles:

Collaboration

An individualised approach to support, working with people who use our services who are the experts in their own lives.

Trust

The importance of ethos, values and ethics in our practice.

Reflection

Acknowledging our work is often more complicated than simply 'doing the right thing'.

"Our staff are not trained therapists or counsellors. It's not their role to diagnose trauma or delve deeply into therapeutic exploration of past events."

Silvana Watson,
Head of Service Development and Compliance, Apex Scotland

"Correlation is not the same as causation - past events cannot predict future behaviours."

Jan Montgomery,
Independent Accredited
Psychotherapist

3 years of invaluable learning

Starting in 2022 we undertook an organisational whole-systems approach to ensure the project learnings and changes had a positive and lasting legacy for our staff and participants (those who access our services).

It very quickly emerged that for high quality services to function, there requires equal attention to those receiving the service and those delivering the service.

The University of Dundee systematically monitored all the activity listed below over the three-year duration, tracking primarily the learning, reactions and feedback of staff. Their report is [available here](#).



"Some scholars¹⁰ argue that trauma, particularly when embedded within policy or service delivery frameworks, risks being used as a tool for governance and categorisation by defining individuals based on their experiences of harm rather than their capacities for resistance or transformation."

University of Dundee/AS report



Over a three-year period from 2022 to 2025, the project team:

- Listened to staff and participants – year 1
- Gained diverse learning contributions from an independent psychotherapist and a lived experience organisation – year 2
- Moved towards shifting perspectives and measuring impact – year 3

Year 1 - Listening to staff and participants

The activities included:

- The University of Dundee led employee surveys and focus groups to gain baseline data gathering. This included understanding of trauma, workload, role clarity, wellbeing and safety, job satisfaction, and sense of belonging and connection from their experience as an Apex Scotland employee.
- Identifying barriers and facilitators for becoming a trauma-informed organisation.
- Highlighting existing gaps in practice, staff capabilities, and organisational operation.
- Recognising promising practices and learned lessons emerging from project implementation with people delivering and accessing Apex Scotland's services.

Year 2 - Diverse learning and development contributions from an independent psychotherapist and a lived experience organisation

The Resilience Learning Partnership, contributed from the perspective of a lived experience organisation.

Discussions and contributions centred around:

- Trauma is "everyone's business".
- Switching the narrative from, "what's wrong with you?" to "what happened to you?".
- Power dynamics and power sharing.

We covered a primarily Scottish Context:

- Trauma Informed Practice Level 1: good self-care and professional support and supervision, defining trauma.
- Trauma Skilled Practice Level 2: wider impact of trauma, role of lived experience in services and policy design, procedural implementation.
- The five key principles of trauma informed practice: choice, collaboration, empowerment, trust, safety.

Monthly staff development sessions took place with Jan Montgomery, Independent Psychotherapy and Coaching, with expertise in psychological trauma.

The sessions covered:

- There is a lot of wider understanding to be gained before we start to talk about 'trauma'.
- Learning about ourselves, our brain, our nervous system and how that informs our life and work.
- Self-awareness, self-reflection and self-regulation for practitioners is key.
- Understanding that the 'you', you bring to your practice as a service delivery practitioner, matters.
- All behaviour is communication.
- Changing the lens by understanding how the body physiologically keeps the score on trauma.

In addition to understanding what causes trauma, how it changes the brain and trauma blocking behaviour, we covered:

- **You are important:** understanding your own energy, self-care, boundaries, access to debrief and meaningful support and supervision, a resilient workplace, being present.
- **Laying the Foundations:** identifying needs, attachment theory, emotional regulation, healthy nervous system, personal shame, thinking styles and traps, self-compassion, finding joy.
- **Brain basics and ACEs:** Mc Lean's Triune brain model, Bruce Perry's Neuro Sequential model, the Modulation model (Hyper and Hypo Arousal), Adverse Childhood experiences.
- **Self regulation and regulating others:** shifting our focus – all people make mistakes, all people want to have worth, all people want to belong, grounding techniques, self-talk.



Year 3 - Shifting perspectives and measuring impact

Building on the intensive learning of years one and two, it became apparent that our experiences as a provider of services, and the experiences others were sharing with us, go beyond trauma.

The complexity of the knowledge we acquired actually led us towards simplifying our approach to ensure we humanise our services and the accessibility of our charity.

What we uncovered is an organisational belief system about the primary components where we feel change is required to occur at a personal level, for an individual to progress and thrive in a sustainable way, irrespective of an experience of 'trauma'.

With this new perspective at the forefront:

- Staff and participants undertook monthly co-production workshops exploring the needs of people who use our services, and our responses.
- We targeted the concept of how we achieve people to 'see' and experience the positive.

"Noticing the positive has to become experiencing the positive – that is what changes the brain"

Hanson, Rick (2013). *Hardwiring Happiness*. Ebury Publishing.

"The brain is velcro for negative experiences and teflon for positive experiences... our brains have a negativity bias... we can learn to balance this out, to see and experience the positive."

Hanson, Rick (2013). *Hardwiring Happiness*. Ebury Publishing.

We found that, an individual can experience successes, but if these are not underpinned by growth in these four key areas of personal development, highlighted below, then long-term stability of change is weakened:



Establish Autonomy

Increased choices, confidence and independence



Wellbeing

Able to care for themselves and others



Trust

Increased trust in self and others



Window of Tolerance

Experience and process emotions in a balanced way

Tying everything together

Embedding all the learning into the wider organisation in a considered and structured way was a critical process.

It needed to align with our entire organisational belief system. Our job as

a charity is to hold the belief that any of us could gain a criminal conviction, and having trauma in our lives is not a prerequisite for that. Nor is it always suitable to be the lens by which we view and design our service response.

Purpose

Vision

Apex Scotland envisions a Scotland where every individual—regardless of their past—has the opportunity, support, and confidence to build a positive future.

Mission

Apex Scotland exists to support people with experience of the justice system to overcome barriers, realise their potential, and positively engage with society. To build a future beyond their past.

Values

BELIEVE RESPECT EMPOWER SUPPORT

Pillars - What drives our work



Empowering people



Ensuring wellbeing



Employment support



Bridging gaps



Equipping people



Continual learning

Participant journey - How we deliver our work

Pre Stage 1
Access

Stage 1
Engagement

Stage 2
Barrier
Removal

Stage 3
Vocational
Activity

Stage 4
Skills for
work

Stage 5
Routes to
work

Desired outcomes



Establishing
Autonomy



Widening the
Window of
Tolerance



Building
Trust



Improving
Wellbeing

Beyond Trauma

As an operating Scottish service provider, we are required and compelled to stand up and show how we are 'trauma informed'. It has become a measure for credibility and a requirement to win service contracts.

Our project findings require that we re-write the narrative around that and our positionality in this area of public policy.

As a result of our work on this project, Apex Scotland now embraces a 'Beyond Trauma' approach.



The term 'beyond trauma' is not new. It is widely used in therapeutic approaches, academic and non-academic literature and clinical practice. These sources offer variants of perspective on the term, while the core messaging focuses around:

- The relevance of interdisciplinary and global perspectives to trauma, and the need to look beyond a Eurocentric approach. This includes an exploration of the issues beyond the individual's psychological dynamics of trauma, covering social, political, cultural and ethical dimensions, from an international and global perspective.
- It is mostly associated with an attempt to look at the future, and therapeutic approaches of 'overcoming'. This recognises the 'post-traumatic' condition of individuals rather than trauma pathology, which may focus on a deficit-based approach.
- Supporting evidence for a more holistic approach, addressing the ideological dimension of trauma and the associated risks of policy driven agendas that give too much emphasis on a narrow perspective on trauma.

Beyond trauma gives scope to enable a more holistic and integral perspective, to link an individual's emotional dimensions to social drivers and barriers faced by them.



"As Herman⁷ argues, trauma cannot be separated from its social context, a point which is often raised by critiques which stress the ideological and policy-driven risks of framing trauma in overly narrow terms⁸."

University of Dundee/AS report

"Past experience can have an impact on present-day functioning (although the nature of this connection is rarely direct or inevitable). Increasingly, this relationship between past and present is understood through a lens of trauma...The concept of trauma has become a major driver of Scottish public policy, with Scottish Government guidance stating that all social care and related practice should be understood and responded to through a trauma lens...There is a risk that a predominant focus on trauma may construct the kind of psychological conditions it professes to respond to... A primary focus on trauma in service delivery can limit alternative ways of thinking and practising."

Smith, Mark; Montoux, Sebastian (2023). Trauma Informed Approaches. The University of Dundee.



Being comfortable with the uncomfortable

With over three decades of experience supporting people, we were keen to learn how our approach to trauma aligns with credible practice and meaningful regulation, beyond box-ticking.

Putting your staff, processes and procedures under the microscope will have its challenging moments.

We looked through the lens at the following areas:

Self-awareness

How are team members showing up each day, and how might their work and learned behaviour be affecting their personal lives, and vice versa?

Drop the act

Organisational values require to be lived and breathed. If we get cynical or immune to our participants' experience, how does this impact our practice?

Complete transparency

Creating an environment for open and honest communication at all levels of the organisation and implementing feedback quickly.

Emotional intelligence

Are staff thinking about what they're qualified to help with and what they're not? Do they ensure they navigate people to the most appropriate support when needed, recognising the boundaries of their own expertise?

Sensitive leadership

The intent, understanding and compassion of leadership is instrumental in managing change tactfully and feeding what we learnt into the organisation's strategic framework launched in December 2024.

There were several other significant outcomes driven by the three-year Partners in Change project, including:

- **Building capacity and integrating expertise** to strengthen the connection between our vision around trauma and its practical application.
- **Investing in Continuous Professional Development** so practitioners are always up-to-speed when helping participants.
- **Deepening cultural change** below the surface so our visual identity reflects how Apex Scotland operates internally.
- **Prioritising co-production** to ensure our practitioners and participants have the opportunity to shape the future of practice.

How to manage the change reaction

Committing to an extended period of training, insight and organisational change will never be plain sailing.

This project aimed to create a sense of national ownership and belonging, enabling our staff across Scotland to see their collective wisdom and experience reflected in their tools and practices.



If you're about to go through something similar in your organisation, it's only natural for there to be resistance to change, which can manifest in several ways:

Compassion fatigue

How can practitioners ensure they're bringing the best version of themselves to work each day and give 100% to their participants?

Defensiveness

Periods of change can often be misinterpreted by staff and evoke strong reactions - "I've heard it all before" and "I'm too busy with my current caseload to do training."

Lack of self-regulation

Helping others on a daily basis can lead to stress, anxiety and burnout if practitioners aren't able to regulate their approach, nervous system and emotions.

Dependency

Participants might share details of traumatic experiences with their practitioner, and they feel compelled to help despite it not being their area of expertise, or because other services fail to respond. This can become a cycle and we find practice staff in human glitch mode, taking excessive responsibility for people in need.

Feedback loops

Having open feedback loops throughout the three years was highly beneficial for our team and led to prompt action.

The results and ongoing benefits have shown up as increasing assertiveness, enhanced decision-making and improved knowledge sharing across the organisation, of course, underpinned by trust across our workforce.

Being comfortable with the uncomfortable

“Ultimately, moving “beyond trauma” is not about denying trauma or its impacts but about widening the lens.”

University of Dundee/AS report

The insights gained throughout this project have been a powerful catalyst for change, fundamentally reshaping:

- Our leadership approach
- Operational protocols
- Service delivery models.

Learning derived from initial research and ongoing partnership work has driven new principles across the organisation regarding our approach to trauma.

One of the main reasons for producing this report is to look after the wellbeing of our staff, share our insights and start a discussion to help other organisations.

Here are five valuable lessons that could help you.

1. Staff wellbeing, self-reflection and self-awareness

When your team is committed and passionate about their work, you need to be aware of the hidden downsides.

If people are stressed, burnt out and unable to switch off, what version of themselves is showing up for work each day?

“Supporting those who support others is a key part of building sustainable, compassionate systems of care.”

University of Dundee/AS report

What version of them is going home at night and how does this impact the whole person, not just the employee?

Is there a possibility this leads to risky decision making to help people at any cost? How do the lines of role clarity become blurred?

Does your organisation have a culture where people feel safe to speak up and receive support to help them reflect on negative patterns?

Does your team confidently talk about job satisfaction and that they can see the positive impact they have on others?

2. Avoid an isolated approach

One of the main reasons we applied for funding from The Robertson Trust for this work was that it provided us with the opportunity to examine trauma through an organisation-wide lens.

It's not credible or practical to train some staff and departments and not others. The application of what you've learnt will inevitably cross department boundaries, so needs to be carefully considered. Your approach needs a whole-systems internal strategy.

3. You can't train 'trauma-informed' approaches in a one-off programme

As we touched on earlier, one of the dangers of 'trauma-informed' training is that it can be oversimplified and reduced to a box-ticking exercise within organisations.

Given that we've just been through a three-year project examining this, it's fair to say much shorter programmes could end up doing more harm than good.



4. Defining quality practice and evaluation

There's a lack of consistently applied quality standards that focus on the experience of people accessing services and how they thrive.

In our experience, true quality of practice lies in the 'every day' personal transitions people experience that shapes sustainable futures.

Successful in the sector is not about public perception of an organisation, their track record of winning contracts or headline milestones that lack depth.



5. Don't stray from your core purpose

The sector has developed a baseline requirement to report on and evidence how they respond to the trauma of the people who use their services.

However, while trying to meet requirements, and gain funding for services to run, there's been little pause for reflection. This project has made it clear we can't always respond to an individual's trauma.

We're required to hold awareness that it might have occurred, but that doesn't mean we're qualified to directly respond.

Making this a contracting requirement for an unqualified sector is dangerous, because it puts people at risk who have experienced trauma, and require a professional, qualified response. Some questions to consider:

- What does quality practice look like in your organisation?
- How do you evaluate the lasting impact of your work?
- Are you prioritising qualifications over emotional intelligence when hiring?

These points led to a great deal of soul-searching at Apex Scotland, enabling us to move forward with greater confidence.

The next steps for Apex Scotland

At the time of writing in September 2025, the Partners in Change project is in year four, creating legacy for this work. We are keen to share our learning with the sector around our journey to a 'beyond trauma' approach.

The University of Dundee continues to monitor and evaluate our approach to services which focuses on the four key personal development outcomes for participants and how this supports sustainable change. This is being monitored internally following the

production of a practitioner resource tool in the form of a physical deck of cards. We look forward to generating learning and increased understanding from participants and practitioners as to the impact this has on practice, as an aid towards sustainable futures.

The project provides us with a foundation to collect richer data that demonstrates life-changing outcomes, often dismissed in the sector as 'soft' yet essential milestones on the road to lasting change.

I first used the service to find a job with Kaitlin. As things developed, my needs changed and I required more support with my mental health, which I received from Natalya and Dylan. In both cases, I was met with nothing but kindness, understanding, and genuine support. They took the time to listen and respond to what I needed at different points, which made a real difference. If I'm to be perfectly honest, I don't think I'd be here if it wasn't for the care, patience, and support these three gave me.

Apex Scotland Participant

This data will create greater transparency between participants and practitioners.

Empowering staff to report back on outcomes in a more consistent and quality-driven way will improve outcomes for previously overlooked people when reporting on our impact to funders.

From the end of the three-year project in March 2025 to the time of writing this report, many steps have been taken as a result of our learnings from the Dundee University Report.

Some of these steps are:

- We introduced a new, fit for purpose Employee Engagement Programme.
- We carried out a job evaluation and benchmarking exercise to ensure our pay is fair and on par with the sector.
- We introduced new co-produced values for the organisation, Believe, Respect, Empower and Support and are continuing to take steps to embed them in both our internal and external work.
- We restructured our Leadership team and the support structure for frontline staff.

We look forward to sharing more details of our complete four-year journey in the Spring 2027.

5 final thoughts

We'll leave these insights with you to consider, shaped by our work with Partners in Change and the spotlight it placed on Apex Scotland.

1. Presuming trauma is a label in itself.
2. Boundaries lie at the heart of true 'beyond trauma' practice.
3. No one wants to feel isolated, stigmatised or hated within their community.
4. Actions that are 'bad' are not necessarily intentional choices – our brain calculates the best way to respond or survive.
5. Our brains can be rewired.

"I have never been shown kindness in my life until now."

Apex Scotland Participant

Acknowledgements and contact details

We would like to thank the following organisations and people for their help, support and guidance through this three-year project:

- The Robertson Trust for working alongside us, collaborating as a partner in change, facilitating creative, shared learning spaces and shared vision, to drive better outcomes for services that support people across our communities.
- Thrive, our Partners in Change, learning and evaluation partner for introducing us to a non pre-determined exploration of how change occurs.
- The Resilience Learning Partnership for their passionate input, care and attention to our staff group to upskill and educate around the current Scottish approach to trauma.
- Jan Montgomery for the meaningful journey she took us on, where for one full day monthly, we permitted services not to run. This enabled us to immerse ourselves as a collective, in true self-reflection of our approach to practice, the us, we bring to work every day and to take a deep consideration of what sits behind and around, the people who use our services.
- Our valued partner in the University of Dundee, who have walked beside us, flexing and adapting to ensure the genuine findings from the project always came to the surface.

"If used meaningfully by organisations such as Apex Scotland, the concept [beyond trauma] can serve as a powerful framework: one that integrates personal healing with social justice, honours complexity, and moves away from viewing people through a purely pathological lens"

University of Dundee/AS report



JAN
MONTGOMERY
— Psychotherapy & Coaching —

The
Robertson
Trust

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