



Summary

- Being human - working through trusting and authentic relationships supports healing and growth for families and communities.
- Always start by looking in the mirror
- Systems change requires focus and perseverance - a shared enthusiasm and even a shared purpose is just the beginning

Aberlour Child Care Trust

| Overview

Aberlour Child Care Trust is a Scottish charity offering a broad range of support and services to children, young people, and families across many Local Authorities in Scotland.

As Assistant Director responsible for the South of Scotland I am responsible for supporting and developing our work in Scottish Borders Council, South Ayrshire, North Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway.

Aberlour has delivered a range of supports for children and young people affected by parental

substance misuse in Dumfries and Galloway for more than a decade.

Our approach is to:

- work through honest, open, and trusting relationships,
- focus on strengths and build on the interests and ambitions of families and communities,
- support families to learn new skills and build confidence
- support families to connect with and contribute to their local community

After securing three years of core funding in 2018 we made a commitment to avoid the temptation to



do what we have always done and our Service Manager in Dumfries began to explore how we could do more to help families and communities take a lead in the process of change. This began as a place based (North West Dumfries) and community led activity before we began thinking about system change through my awareness of '[A Whole New World](#)'. When '[Exploring the New World](#)' was published the HLS approach was a great encouragement and resonated strongly with our established values and beliefs.

Following 18 months of community consultation where our staff team were out regularly at community events and local groups asking questions about existing support, local need, and suggested improvements, we opened our Community Hub in North West Dumfries. Secured on a low-cost short-term lease with the support of Dumfries and Galloway Council, our shared ambition is to work towards community ownership. In response to feedback the hub has a community fridge and freezer, community washing machines (in partnership with Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership), a clothing bank, a community library and flexible meeting/family time rooms.

The development of this community space has helped secure funding to support a range of new projects. Families2gether provides transitional support for family members returning from prison (in partnership with Dumfries Prison and D&G Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (ADP) and Communities2gether has provided a Community Connector to develop the local hub and two caretakers to ensure it is organised and available across evenings and weekends. We are profoundly grateful to a wide range of local and national funders including CORRA, Holywood Trust and Scottish Government (Challenge Fund and Investing in Communities). However we recognised that long term sustainable support would require silo-busting systems change which could establish a shared purpose and put 'Families and Communities First' –

which is what we called our systems change project (funded by CORRA) to review the provision of whole family support.

Our Families and Communities First project will be delivered in partnership with Collaborate, D&G Alcohol and Drugs Partnership and D&G Children and Family Services. Our aim is to work with families, communities, and local partners to rethink whole family support (where families are affected by substance misuse) using a Human Learning Systems approach.

| Story of Change

We were at the beginning of our journey in the development of a community hub when we engaged with the D&G Transforming Children's Services initiative. It was at this event we first explored the possibility of applying to [CORRA](#) for funds to support a review of our whole family support approach from a system change perspective. The lead officers for children's services and the ADP quickly became enthusiastic partners and could see the potential for this work to inform the wider ambitions of Transforming Children's Services.

[Collaborate](#) agreed to work with us and were invaluable in facilitating initial discussions and supporting the development of a project plan which supported our successful application to the CORRA Whole Family Approach – System Change fund.

The initial information gathering/diagnostic phase of the project started in August 2020 following a delay because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, the response of Aberlour and our community partners during the public health crisis has provided a rich source of learning and reflection. Arguably the impact of the global pandemic disrupted the system, providing



permission and space for people and communities to respond creatively to community need.

What did you do to define the purpose of the system that you were trying to steward?

Families and Communities First will explore and test new **whole-system, place-based and community-led** forms of support which improve the lives of families affected by substance misuse. This will be delivered through two interconnected activity strands:

- Building Whole-System Change – we will deepen understanding of the whole-system of support for children and families affected by substance misuse across Dumfries and Galloway, including the strengths and weaknesses in the systems of support. Moving from Silo-working to Silo-busting by improving collaboration, and systems-thinking will identify and start to build the System Conditions needed (shared vision, values, principles and infrastructure) to create a new ‘whole-family’ approach with families, communities, stakeholders and local partners.
- Community-led Local Test of Change – we will engage families in a different type of conversation; one which moves away from a service-focus to look at holistic needs; involving them in designing a more effective network of local support – building on family\community strengths and improving community connections. This work, utilising our existing community Hub, will provide the learning and insights which drive our whole-system change activity, with people and communities becoming the new leaders of change.

What work did you do to ‘Understand the System’ (to make it visible to the actors within it, to build relationships and trust between those actors, to help those actors create a shared purpose)?

During the initial diagnostic phase (3 months) [Collaborate](#) are conducting a wide range of

interviews with key stakeholders (identified by local partners) and this will be complimented by a range of family and community engagement activity coordinated and delivered by local partners. The information and insights gathered will inform the next phase of the project which will focus on **establishing a shared vision** and the co-design of future whole family support.

Through meetings, workshops and 1:1 support, we will develop a ‘**Systems Conditions Framework**’ identifying the cultural (eg. relationships) and technical (eg. governance) enablers of change; a shared Learning Plan; and priorities for action to test new whole-family approaches. We are on target to begin this work at the end of October

Our next phase will then be about testing and learning – the partners will test new approaches under two strands of work:

1. Local Tests of Change – communities/families and local partners will test and adapt new forms of whole-family support utilising Aberlour’s North West Hub as a focal point. Aberlour’s staff based at the hub will work collaboratively with families, communities and whole system partners on change and the implementation of new ideas.
2. Building Whole-System Change – developing the systems conditions required to deliver system-change including new culture, skills and infrastructure, particularly in formal services. For example, working with the ADP or Social Work colleagues on Systems Leadership; Whole-System Workforce Development for place-based practices; community/family involvement to inform service design; and developing different approaches to commissioning/ funding for sustainable whole-family approaches.

Finally, we will review progress and consider future planning – we will reflect on our learning/progress and have a clear, ongoing plan for continuous



change and improvement to sustain the work – looking beyond the boundaries of substance misuse support.

Working with Collaborate we will create a **Public Learning Report** to provide guidance for wider audiences and consider next steps.

| Current approach

As mentioned above the values of a Human and Learning approach feel familiar and comfortable. However we are much less familiar with systems thinking and system change beyond a long held belief that the current system is not working for families and communities. The HLS approach has therefore helped us move from a position of raging against the machine to recognising that by working together we can achieve lasting change – a change which must begin with ourselves.

| Barriers and Tensions

Being human, working through trusting relationships and being committed to an ongoing process of learning and reflection often feels far from intuitive, although what we know from experience when practiced and established it is a life giving and transformative approach.

The organisational silos of the current system can prompt us to be defensive of our own position, experience, or service. We must challenge this tendency in ourselves and create the conditions which allow open and honest reflection and learning with partners – it is stating the obvious to note that this is not always easy. Cultures, values, and practices which have been established over decades will require time and patience to change, people will often be highly invested in what is, and naturally anxious about an uncertain future which may question the foundations of their current values and approach.

| Enablers and successes

Our initial vision of a place based; community led change, supported by an accessible community space has provided a strong foundation from which to begin the work of system change. It helped us to feel comfortable challenging many of our assumptions and be more open to change.

As parents and carers became increasingly involved in contributing to the community through volunteering, we could see the energy and enthusiasm and commitment which can be generated through connection and community organising – an energy and enthusiasm which is infectious. Following an HLS approach helps create the conditions necessary for all people and communities (and organisations) to thrive.

After a few years where it felt like we were out in the cold (alongside many families communities and third sector colleagues) we have been very encouraged by the support of Children's Services and the ADP in a shared commitment to system change.

In the early months of the Families and Communities First project we have seen excellent engagement through families and communities to senior leaders in the Health and Social Care Partnership, a very encouraging start although we are aware the road is likely to have many bumps.



Our hope is that children affected by parental substance misuse will live happy health and fulfilling lives as a result of a new whole system approach to family support and that the learning from this can inform practice and improve the lives of families and communities across Dumfries and Galloway.

| What taking an HLS approach requires

A shared set of values (HLS), a shared purpose and a shared commitment to change. Achieving this will require us to be human, listen carefully, respect each other, understand our place in the system and approach new challenges together.

“Go into a community. As soon as local leadership begins to emerge, get out of the community so that the leadership will take hold and people will not continue to turn to you for guidance. You work yourself out of a job rather than trying to maintain yourself in a position or your organisation”

Ella Baker

(Community Organiser and
Civil Rights Activist, 1961)

WHAT NEXT

We are excited by the early progress of Families and Communities First and looking forward to the next phase of our work.

The local relationships and partnerships developed during the first six months of our community hub proved to be a catalyst for what turned out to be an incredible community response during the COVID-19 crisis. Existing partnerships were strengthened, new partnerships were created, and our work embraced older and more vulnerable members of the community. We gained 20 new community volunteers who worked tirelessly throughout the lockdown – 25,000 hot meals or food parcels were delivered to households and in the process many new relationships were forged through garden visits and safe walks. We are working to ensure these relationships and the learning from this experience is integrated into our ongoing work, particularly in relation to our commitment to working across generations.