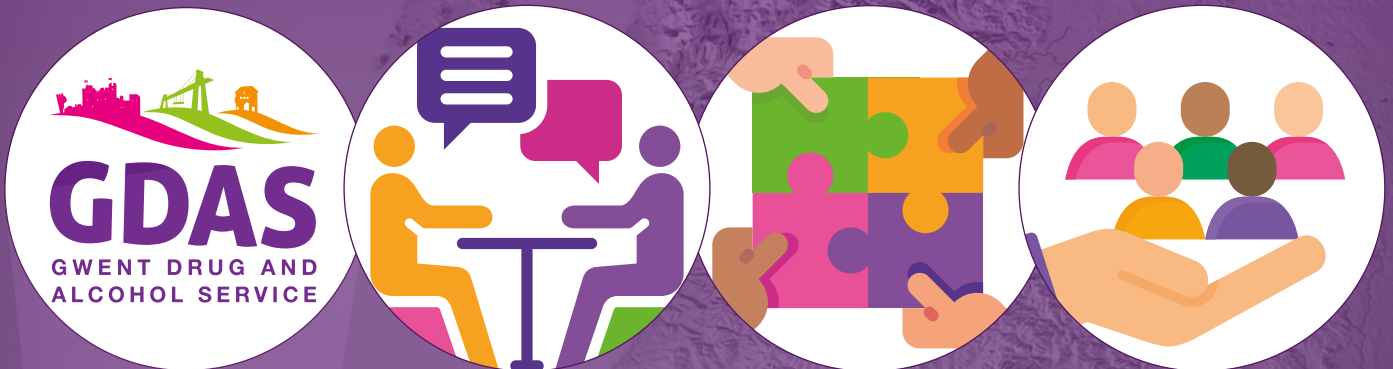


Gwent Drug and Alcohol Service (GDAS): A Spotlight on their journey towards becoming a Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (TrACE)-Informed Organisation



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Author:

Huw Williams

ACE@wales.nhs.uk



Hyb ACE Cymru
ACE Hub Wales

ACE Hub Wales
Policy and International Health,
WHO Collaborating Centre on Investment
for Health & Well-being,
Public Health Wales,
2 Capital Quarter,
Tyndall Street,
Cardiff, CF10 4BZ

www.acehubwales.com

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Background

This report spotlights Gwent Drug and Alcohol Service (GDAS) and their commitment to implementing ACE Hub Wales **Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experience (TrACE)-Informed Organisational Toolkit**. It builds on a series of spotlight reports published by ACE Hub Wales that focus on initiatives at the community level across Wales which align to the principles of a trauma-informed approach and contribute towards Wales's mission to become a trauma-informed nation.

The TrACE Toolkit was co-developed with organisations across multiple sectors to provide guidance, resources and support to embed trauma and ACE-informed practice at the organisational level. It is a reflective process that enables organisations to consider where trauma and ACE-informed practice already exists and form an action plan to implement changes to help them further strengthen their trauma and ACE-informed approach.

In 2021, GDAS became one of six organisations to pilot the TrACE Toolkit; this built on their integral involvement in the co-development of a bespoke workforce training package for the substance use sector around Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Since then, the TrACE Toolkit has further developed from the learning from the pilot organisations and is now referenced in the **Trauma-Informed Wales Framework (2022)** as a key tool in supporting organisations to embed trauma and ACE-informed practice. The aim of the TrACE Toolkit is to encourage organisations to reflect on their current culture, practice and process and identify activity to implement more trauma-informed and trauma responsive approaches, resulting in increased ownership for transformational change within their setting (ACE Hub Wales and Traumatic Stress Wales, 2022).

This report will first provide an outline of GDAS, the services they provide and their unique consortia approach to providing substance use support across Gwent. It will then briefly detail the context of the need for a trauma-informed approach to substance use services, how the Trauma-informed Wales Framework supports this, and finally how the TrACE Toolkit has assisted GDAS to make positive changes to their organisation in their commitment to becoming a trauma and ACE-informed organisation.

Gwent Drug and Alcohol Service (GDAS)

GDAS provide support to individuals and families affected by substance use across all five local authorities within Gwent: Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen. GDAS is a consortium-run service involving three organisations: Kaleidoscope, Barod and G4S. Each organisation provides a different element of support, outlined below:



As the contract lead for GDAS, **Kaleidoscope** oversee the governance of GDAS's commitment to implementing the TrACE Toolkit. Kaleidoscope offer a range of services aimed to help people

with substance use, with much of their work focusing on harm reduction and recovery services for individuals at various stages of their journey.

Kaleidoscope advocate for the rights of people who use substances and work to end stigma and judgement surrounding their substance use (Kaleidoscope, 2025). In doing so, they provide person centred care which delivers personalised support to meet individual needs and emphasises collaboration and choice to empower individuals to make informed decisions about their treatment options and recovery goals.

Kaleidoscope recognise that substance use often intersects with wider mental health, housing, employment, and social issues, and as a result offer support that addresses other factors affecting the individual's wellbeing outside their substance use. They recognise that their service users may have experienced adverse experiences and promote a trauma-informed approach to support long-term recovery.



Barod provide support and guidance to anyone who is affected by drug or alcohol use, either their own or someone else's. They recognise that their staff and service users may be individuals who

have experienced or are experiencing trauma and ACEs. Barod raise awareness about the ways everyone can help to reduce the harm caused by substance use and acknowledge that trauma/ACEs are only one aspect of their identity which does not define them.

Barod's workforce is equipped with the skills and knowledge to reduce the impact of trauma and re-traumatisation by providing psychosocial interventions. They offer support to all individuals affected by substance use, including young person's services (for under 18's) and friends and family support. Their staff employ compassionate, inclusive approaches to ensure that relationships are safe and nurturing, allowing individuals to heal, build resilience, and focus on their strengths (Barod, 2025). Barod's culture emphasises choice, collaboration, and empowerment to prevent, mitigate, and address ACEs and their impact on future generations.



G4S lead the Criminal Justice aspect of GDAS, providing individuals with a range of interventions designed to help them move away from crime and into treatment aimed at reducing their substance dependency, ultimately reducing related criminal activities.

Alongside Barod and Kaleidoscope, G4S recognise the impact of past trauma on an individual's life and how these traumas may play a significant role in their offending behaviour, dependency on alcohol and/or substances, and their thought processes. They advocate for an approach which is human-centric, compassionate, and nurturing, enabling them to deliver support for people caught in a cycle of offending related to their alcohol and/or substance use (G4S, 2025).

Working as a consortium, the organisations that make up GDAS work collaboratively, utilising a whole system approach to supporting those impacted by substance use. This allows GDAS to support service users with limited waiting times, and easy transitions between services. The services offered by the GDAS consortium cover a wide range of support including:

- Harm reduction
- Brief advice
- Structured care planning
- Manualised psychosocial interventions
- Clinical treatment programmes
- Recovery support and signposting
- Criminal Justice drug and alcohol treatment programmes
- Referral to Family Support

GDAS foster an environment of empowerment, encouraging service users to be ambitious about their recovery (GDAS, 2025). They recognise that trauma can have a significant impact on individuals' lives and that healing is a journey. Their commitment to embedding trauma-informed practice through the TrACE Toolkit drives GDAS to provide a safe, non-judgmental, and inclusive space for all individuals. Their approach is rooted in authenticity, care, and an understanding of the complex ways in which trauma can affect people's lives (GDAS, 2025). Their support is complemented by a range of services and a strong foundation of service user involvement through peer mentors which help to support individuals and families to sustain change. By bringing a range of service providers together, this consortium provides a unique example of how organisations can support those affected by substance use in a way which considers ACEs and trauma. In their Statement of Commitment to taking a TrACE approach, organisations within GDAS outline their aims:

“We aim to be compassionate and responsive in our approach, and to identify gaps in practice and ensure continuous review and learning. Our goal is to ensure we are offering trauma informed support to those who both work for us and who use our services” (GDAS, TrACE Statement of Commitment)

The Need for a Trauma-informed Substance Use Sector

Research indicates that 75% of both women and men attending drug and alcohol services have experienced trauma (WHO, 2002 cited in Townsend & Brown, 2024), therefore, having a trauma and ACE-informed substance use sector is essential in addressing the complex relationship between trauma and substance use. This is supported by research which outlines that exposure to toxic childhood environments, racism, and discrimination are key social stressors that contribute to vulnerability to substance use (Amaro et al., 2021). One systematic review focussing on the relationship between ACEs and substance use overwhelmingly demonstrated an elevated risk of substance use among young adults exposed to ACEs (Sebalo et al., 2023). This finding has been consistently replicated with other studies outlining a higher prevalence of ACEs amongst people who use substances, and further research finding that individuals often turn to substance use as a coping strategy to manage feelings of low self-worth, depression, shame, and inadequacy resulting from childhood adversity (Leza et al., 2021; Teixeira et al., 2017). This has also been evidenced within a Welsh context in the Welsh Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study which further highlights the correlation between an exposure to ACEs and using substances in adulthood (Public Health Wales NHS Trust, 2015).

In addition to this, research has consistently shown a correlation between people living in poverty and a high level of exposure to ACEs and trauma (see for example Walsh et al., 2019; Crouch et al., 2020) and further literature has demonstrated a strong relationship between substance use and low socio-economic status (Townsend & Brown, 2024; Hélio, 2020).

As a result, the need for a trauma-informed substance use sector is particularly important in Gwent, where high levels of deprivation, highlighted in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), exacerbate challenges individuals face when accessing support such as substance use services. Close to half of the areas in Blaenau Gwent are in the most deprived quintile of WIMD, the highest for any local authority in Wales (Institute of Health Equity, 2023). The Gwent Well-Being Assessment (2022) further highlights significant inequalities, including health disparities, which often correlate with higher rates of substance use and trauma; this illustrates the enhanced need for trauma-informed services in the Gwent region.

The need for a trauma-informed substance use sector is also supported by the A Heart of Help report (2024), which explores the experiences of people with lived experience of substance use and sanctuary seeking in Wales. This work was commissioned by Traumatic Stress Wales and supported by ACE Hub Wales to inform the further development of the Trauma-informed Wales Framework and to ensure that this lived experience was heard and to consider how the implementation of the Framework can better include their needs.

A Heart of Help draws a connection between traumatic experiences and substance use and the findings highlight the negative impact of uncompassionate support and stigmatisation which serve as significant barriers to seeking help and building trust. Conversely, service users outlined the importance of a human-centric and relationship-focused approach which were seen as central elements for building trust. Additionally, power and control over their own recovery process were identified as crucial elements for service users' recovery. The report was co-produced by Platform who were commissioned to undertake the research, GDAS and the Welsh Refugee Council. GDAS were specifically recognised for their positive work surrounding trauma-informed care and their staff and peer support were highlighted as providing a compassionate and empathetic approach which service users valued, as it allowed for a supportive environment that fosters positive change (Townsend & Brown, 2024). By engaging with this study, GDAS have also ensured that their experience of supporting people, their voices and the positive impacts and challenges of working in a trauma-informed way are included in the 'all of society' work.

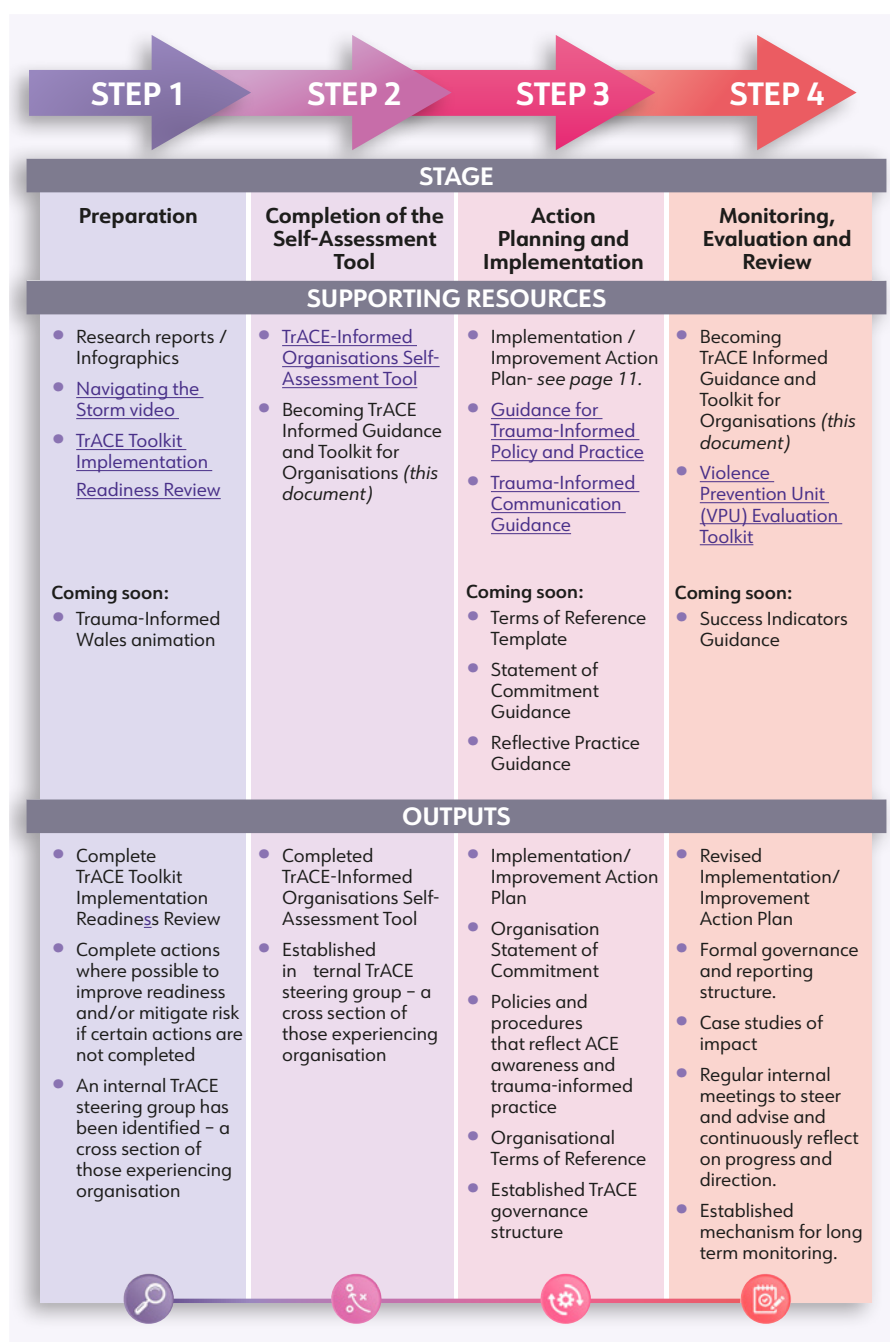
One of the key purposes of A Heart of Help was to make recommendations for Traumatic Stress Wales and ACE Hub Wales, for how to widen and deepen the implementation of the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework. By considering the findings from a literature search, and the relational values identified through the research process, the report proposes nine 'Framework Recommendations', which will help address some of the system conditions that will get in the way of further successful implementation.

Ultimately, the A Heart of Help report recommends that implementing trauma-informed practice within the substance use sector using the Trauma-informed Wales Framework will help organisations to support individuals who may have experienced trauma on their recovery journey. This aligns with the broader recognition that trauma-informed care not only helps individuals recover from substance use but also improves mental health, social relationships, and overall life outcomes (see Tebes et al., 2019; Grummit et al., 2022). The involvement of GDAS in this study is an example of their commitment as an organisation to learning and improving their trauma-informed approach for workforce and service users and sharing that learning with others.

Trauma-informed Wales Framework and TrACE Toolkit

The publication of the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework (ACE Hub Wales and Traumatic Stress Wales, 2022) provides an all-society approach to support a coherent, consistent approach to developing and implementing trauma-informed practice across Wales.

Figure 1: The TrACE Toolkit is a four-step process:



To support the implementation of the Framework, the Trauma and ACE (TrACE)-Informed Organisation Toolkit provides practical guidance to support people, organisations, sectors and systems to become trauma-informed.

The TrACE Toolkit operationalises a trauma-informed and ACE-aware approach that supports organisations in identifying where they have existing, embedded ways of working that are already trauma-informed, and where improvements and changes can be made (ACE Hub Wales, 2023).

Within these steps, organisations are encouraged to consider six domains to embed a TrACE-informed approach:

- 1. Governance, Leadership and Organisational Culture** - this domain relates to the overall support for and investment in implementing and sustaining a trauma-informed approach.
- 2. Policies and Procedures** - this domain relates to how organisational policies and procedures demonstrate commitment to, and enable internal systems to, reflect the foundational values and principles of trauma-informed practice.
- 3. Workforce Training and Support** - this domain relates to ensuring knowledge and skills within the workforce, enabling trauma-informed principles to be embedded in an ongoing supportive, learning cycle that recognises the importance of the wellbeing and safety of the workforce as set out in the four practice levels.
- 4. Physical Environment** - this domain relates to what the physical and social environments provide to promote safety and the provision of appropriate resources to achieve this. This is about more than one room being used as a calm space, it considers every space that is used from walking in the front door to the toilets and considers things like promotional materials displayed and accessibility requirements.
- 5. Service Design and Delivery** - this domain relates to ensuring trauma-informed principles are incorporated in all aspects of service delivery and that there is commitment to sustain this approach in things like funding strategies.
- 6. Monitoring and Evaluation** - this domain relates to an ongoing monitoring and evaluation process to support the embedding of TrACE approaches, using reflective practice as the underlying principle. Adequately demonstrating impact will be key to ensuring sustainability. Understanding and creating success indicators to record outcomes and encourage momentum of this approach is important. This should be part of the process as it is important to set a baseline at the outset to understand how far the organisation has come on this journey and the impact that this is having in the organisation. Considering how to involve those who experience the organisation in this process is also important, inclusive of those who deliver the service as well as those who receive the service. Remember that good quality case studies can be as effective as data when demonstrating impact.

Implementing a Trauma and ACE-Informed Approach: GDAS

GDAS's journey to become a Trauma and ACE-informed organisation started in 2021 when they agreed to pilot the TrACE Toolkit. This followed their involvement with the co-development of a bespoke training package for the substance use sector on Adverse Childhood Experiences and following their involvement with the training package, GDAS's initial focus of the TrACE Toolkit process was the Workforce Training and Support Domain. This Domain relates to ensuring knowledge and skills within the workforce, enabling trauma-informed principles to be embedded in an ongoing supportive learning cycle that recognises the importance of the wellbeing and safety of the workforce.

In implementing the TrACE Toolkit as a consortium, GDAS provides a unique example of how this can be done across multiple agencies that work in partnership. The initial focus was on training members of the consortium using the self-assessment process of the Toolkit to examine the other domain areas. To manage the implementation of TrACE Toolkit across the consortium, members from each organisation attend a monthly trauma-informed steering group. Here, they review the Self-Assessment Domains against their current practice to identify areas to prioritise, resulting in their 'Trauma-Informed Practice Action Plan'. Over the last four years, this approach has enabled the development of a sustainable model to embed trauma-informed practice into its culture, consortium wide, evidenced through substantial changes and the new direction of the organisation.

"The thing I feel most proud of as an organisation is that I have seen other people approach this very much as sort of a tick box thing to get done, and I feel like we [GDAS] are really understanding that the extent and breadth of what this is all about. It is about creating a culture and environment of working." (GDAS Learning and Practice Manager)

By focusing on all six domains of the Toolkit, GDAS have transformed their service, this has been recognised positively by the Commissioner of their service:

"They've been exceptional, and they've just run with it; looking at all domains from their policy to their training, their bases, and their practice. They've done amazing."
(Commissioner for Substance Misuse)

The next section will outline how GDAS's work over the past four years has contributed towards the objectives of the TrACE Toolkit Domains, with a specific focus on Workforce Training and Support; Physical Environments; Service Design and Delivery; and Monitoring and Evaluation.

Workforce Training and Support

A crucial aspect of embedding a TrACE approach within the organisational culture has been through workforce training and support. All staff attend the ACEs and Substance Use Training Package at induction, and receive relevant ongoing training and support linked to trauma and ACEs. GDAS have a consortium wide training strategy which ensures appropriate training and workforce development for staff to understand ACEs, trauma, their potential impact, the complexity around healing and recovery, and the principles of trauma-informed practice.

When GDAS started their TrACE journey in 2021, they began by reviewing their guidance for staff supporting service users, this helped to support communication between staff and service users in a way that considers and supports them with their trauma.

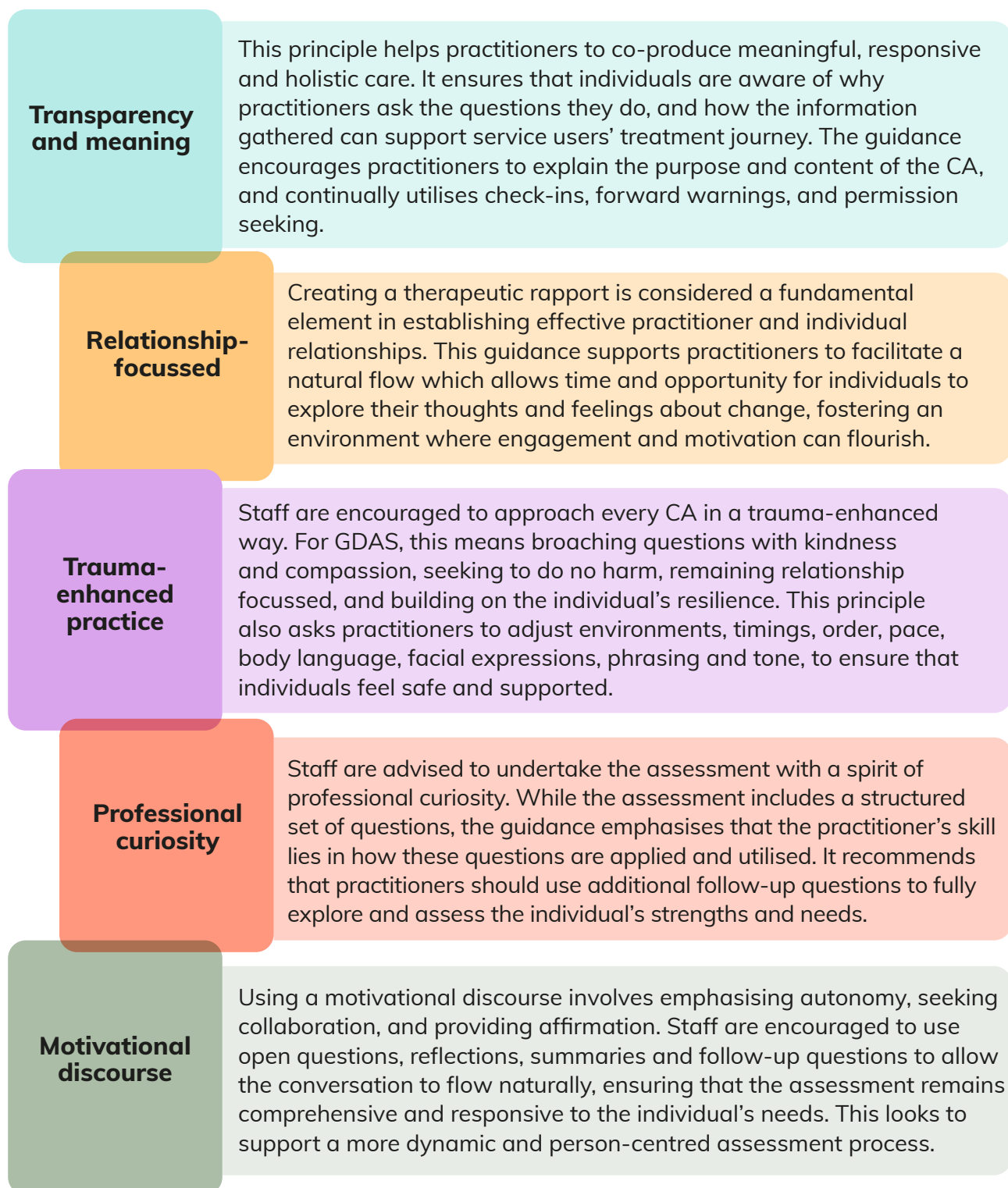
One output of the review was the creation of a trauma-informed practice handbook (GDAS, 2025) which outlines GDAS’s perspective on delivering trauma-informed practice and provides practical guidance to supporting people experiencing trauma (see Figure 2); this has supported staff to align themselves with GDAS’s trauma-informed values and deliver strategies to service users who may have experienced trauma.

Figure 2: Practical guidance to supporting people experiencing trauma.



Along with this handbook, GDAS have reviewed their internal guidance to support assessment processes that sits alongside training, this helps staff who are supporting service users to put this into practice and gain experience of working in a trauma-informed way. Their guidance for a Comprehensive Assessment (CA) is designed to support staff in understanding how GDAS wish to support services users. This is broadly captured within five core principles (Figure 3):

Figure 3: Five Core Principles



The trauma-informed practice handbook and the CA guidance provide positive examples of how staff are supported to deliver a trauma-informed practice which strongly aligns with the Trauma-informed Wales Framework. These resources encourage staff to use relational practice to engage with service users, centring the key elements of collaboration, choice and developing trust through therapeutic rapport. GDAS's guidance allows staff to align with their core beliefs of treating service users with dignity and respect, with a commitment to providing safe, non-judgemental and inclusive support for those in need of help with their substance use.

It is also clear that organisations in GDAS recognise the impact of vicarious trauma¹ on their staff. GDAS support their staff through regular supervision, professional counselling, and additional resources such as their 'Burnout Booklet,' an internal document which helps to support staff to take care of their wellbeing and mitigates the impact of vicarious trauma. The culture of safety that supports staff wellbeing is reflected in their staff survey (conducted in 2023), which indicates that 77% respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they are provided with adequate regular supervision that considers their wellbeing (GDAS Trauma-Informed Practice Baseline Questionnaire, 2023).

In addition to focussing on staff training and support, GDAS also run a Peer Academy programme which equips individuals with lived experience of substance use to become Peer Supporters. The Peer Academy is a twelve-week training programme designed to empower people with lived experience to provide support to others on their recovery journey through volunteering and/or employment. The Peer Academy Training includes a module on ACEs which gives peers an overview of how ACEs can impact on substance use in adulthood; this not only helps peers to support service users with their substance use, but feedback from peers has also shown that this training has helped them better understand their own substance use and negated feelings of shame and self-blame.

While the Peer Academy is designed for members to provide support to service users through guidance, moral support, and practical assistance, peer feedback has shown that the Peer Academy has helped to support peers with their own recovery and acted as a continuation of the support GDAS offer.

"The Peer Academy is the best thing I've ever done. I feel much more confident and ready to do other things" (Peer Academy Graduate)

"I've learnt so much. I've told everyone I know about Peer Academy and how it can change their lives for the better" (Peer Academy Graduate)

¹ Vicarious Trauma: Experiencing trauma symptoms from being repeatedly exposed to other people's trauma and their stories of traumatic events (ACE Hub Wales and Traumatic Stress Wales, 2022)

“I never thought I’d have the confidence to do anything, ever again. Now I’m ready to do new stuff, like volunteering” (Peer Academy Graduate)

“The best thing was making friends. When I gave up the drugs I lost a lot of friends, now I have new ones” (Peer Academy Graduate)

Future plans for training and support

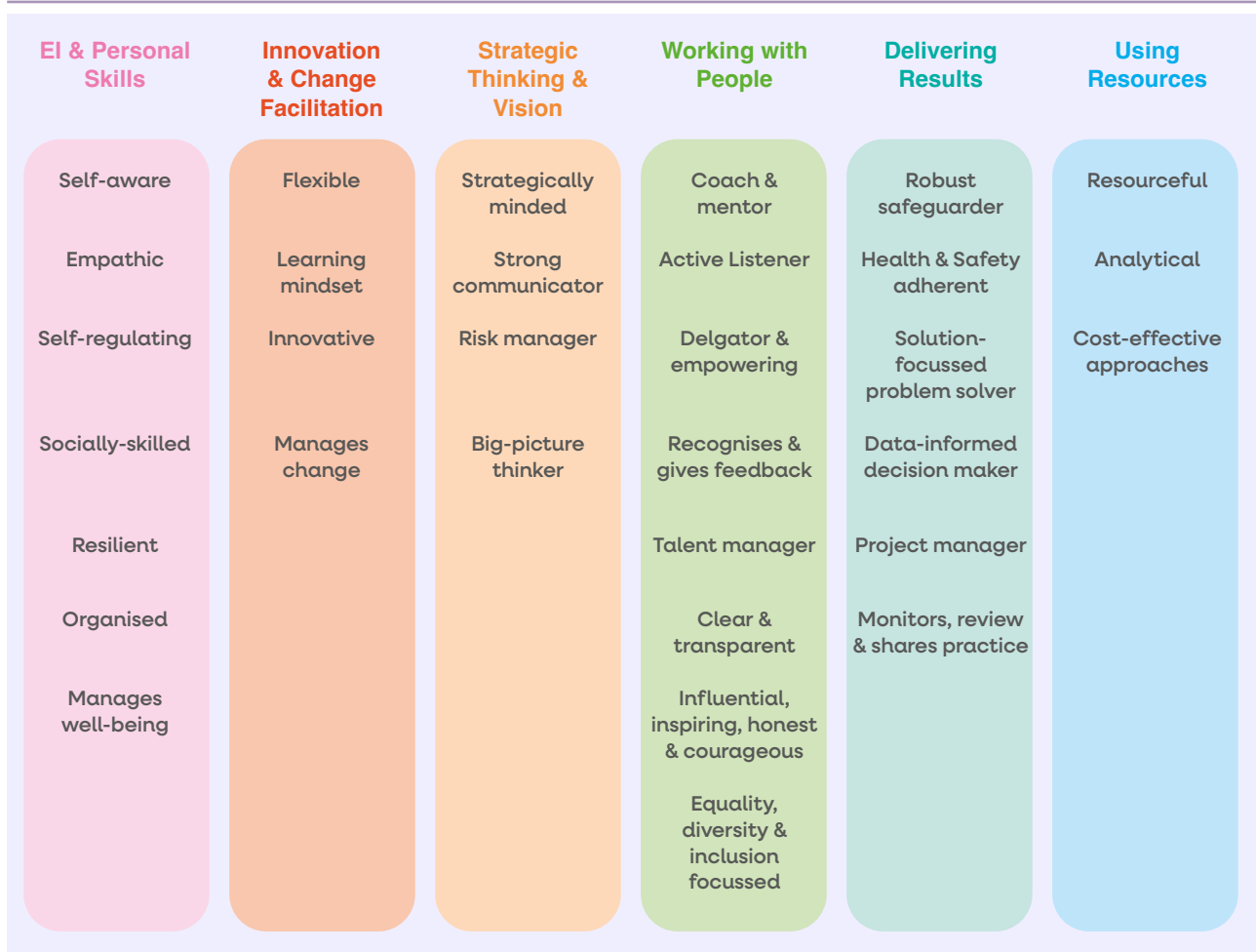
To strengthen their training and support further, GDAS have plans to create a new consortium wide staff induction in 2025 which will integrate the new **ACE Hub Wales Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Trauma-Informed Practice in Wales E-learning Course**, along with other guidance, to all staff joining the organisation. This will provide new staff with an understanding of ACEs and an introduction to how to support people in a trauma-informed way. The new staff induction aims to set the standard of what it means to be a trauma-informed organisation and raise awareness about the TrACE approach that GDAS are committed to sustaining. This will supplement further plans to support staff wellbeing by developing a vicarious trauma e-learning resource and introduce additional wellbeing plans to provide tailored support for staff.

In addition to the new staff induction guidance, a collaborative steering group made up of practitioners and management team members are currently developing a training package which will focus on the practical ways staff can support those who have experienced trauma. This training will be for staff working at the Trauma-Skilled Practice Level (outlined in the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework) (ACE Hub Wales and Traumatic Stress Wales, 2022) which aims to increase staff members’ confidence to deliver a variety of exercises with service users, such as breathing exercises, thought mapping and journaling to help support those who have experienced trauma and to mitigate the impact of re-traumatisation. This package will also help to further embed a trauma-informed culture within the workforce, supporting staff to be more comfortable in utilising emotional regulation strategies for their own wellbeing and encouraging staff to advocate for a trauma-aware way of working. Staff’s awareness of their own emotional regulation is an integral part of responsive working:

“One of our aims is to embed more commonplace integration of mind/body techniques and practices that are increasingly being recognised in research for their value. So many of these practices cost nothing and are extremely accessible yet there seems to be a general scepticism and reluctance that prevents many people from giving things a try.” (GDAS Learning and Practice Manager)

GDAS are also looking to embed a Capability Framework which considers staff practice to see how they can strive to improve trauma-informed support to service users. Periodically, staff will record a practice which is reviewed with their managers to consider their practice against certain behaviours (see Figure 4: Competency Framework below). This process will embed reflective practice in GDAS’s workforce, where practitioners are able to consider how they provided support in the session and allow a space for managers to provide feedback to staff to help them provide an environment for continuous learning for staff and ensure that non-judgmental support, rooted in kindness, empathy and collaboration is consistently provided by GDAS staff.

Figure 4: Competency Framework:



The development of this framework illustrates GDAS’s approach to draw from and develop their practitioners experience in delivering a trauma-informed practice. While training remains an integral part of implementing a trauma-informed approach, what GDAS have found beneficial is the experience and confidence of practitioners in supporting people who have experienced trauma.

‘... a good, experienced worker will read the room, they will read the person in front of them and gauge how best to work with that individual.’ (GDAS Learning and Practice Manager)

Service Design and Delivery

Working as a consortium

Working across three specialist organisations (Barod, Kaleidoscope and G4S), GDAS provide services that require their workforce to be able to work at all four practice levels of the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework:

- Trauma-Aware
- Trauma-Skilled
- Trauma-Enhanced
- Specialist Interventions

SUPPORTING SAFELY

You may have found yourself feeling anxious or concerned about the increased focus on trauma informed practice. You might have concerns about re-traumatisation, as this is something people can experience and this is something we must do our best to avoid.

The role of Trauma-Enhanced workers means we focus on helping a person cope with the current and ongoing impact of trauma - staying in the here and now experiences.

In contrast, Trauma-specialist workers, such as our Trauma Counsellor, are trained to help via interventions that might involve revisiting past trauma event(s) directly.

Staying in the here and now helps prevent unnecessary distressing conversation, protecting against re-traumatisation.

The most important part of Trauma Informed support is the relationship between the worker and the individual. Creating a foundation of safety, trust, inclusion, care and compassion is the priority of trauma responsive working.



Examples of support offered at trauma enhanced and skilled levels include: 1:1 counselling (both non-structured and structured sessions); peer support; self-help materials including harm reduction, and aftercare for those who have met their substance goals.

GDAS have roles which align with the Framework's practice levels; employing practitioners who deliver trauma-aware and trauma-skilled support to service users, in addition to trauma-enhanced and trauma-specialist workers who deliver more specialist interventions to support people with trauma. One example is the trauma-specialist role of the Trauma Counsellor in GDAS who delivers psychiatric interventions to service users who have experienced trauma and require support at this level. The positive impact of the Trauma Counsellor role in GDAS is illustrated by service user's feedback:

"The alcohol support and, more recently, the trauma sessions have had a huge impact. There's a wonderful lady leading these sessions with kind words and a friendly attitude, making me feel truly cared for and supported throughout the process."

Another person who used the Trauma Counsellor service noted:

“I started working with a GDAS counsellor for a few sessions, this was helpful to me as we attempted to reframe any negative thoughts I was experiencing, and we looked at different mantras that I could use to remind myself that ‘I was safe’/‘I was okay.’”

To ensure a shared understanding across the consortium, members from each organisation utilise a monthly trauma-informed steering group. This allows GDAS to prioritise certain areas of the Toolkit and embed a trauma-informed approach consistently across the consortium organisations. By working collaboratively and ensuring a consistent trauma-informed approach across the consortium, GDAS’s work aligns with the ‘Service Design and Delivery’ domain of the TrACE Toolkit, which encourages organisations to consider a whole system approach to supporting people who may have experienced trauma.

When considering this domain within the TrACE Toolkit, GDAS’s Head of Service shares an important reflection with regard to their organisation’s approach to trauma and ACEs, this outlines a shift from a clinical approach to trauma to a more universal and holistic approach:

“It has influenced a transition away from a clinical approach towards a more holistic approach to treating trauma in the substance use population. GDAS now recognises that trauma is too widespread to count. So rather than adding up the ACEs of each individual service user, the assumption is that most of our service users have been affected in some way by Adverse Childhood Experiences. This approach acknowledges the importance of focussing on service user strengths, identifying resilience and Positive Childhood Experiences and avoiding traumatising.”
(Head of Service at GDAS).

GDAS have found that working as a consortium also has its challenges. Various staff from the consortium organisations have moved to different organisations and roles which has been a barrier for the Steering Group. Having consistent staff who have a shared understanding of trauma and ACEs is a major asset to any organisation looking to implement the TrACE Toolkit. While staff turnover has slowed GDAS’s progress in embedding a whole-system approach across the consortium, they look to overcome this by continuing their work with other agencies and further instilling a trauma-informed culture across the organisation.

This challenge is not unique to GDAS, it is relevant to any organisation working to embed the TrACE Toolkit. This provides a valuable opportunity for shared learning and collaboration. By openly acknowledging obstacles, GDAS and other organisations can work together to share best practices and support each other in navigating the complexities of embedding a trauma-informed practice. This is encouraged through the TrACE National Community of Practice which continues to provide a space of cross sector collaboration and learning for organisations embarking on their TrACE journey.

Working with multiple agencies

When an individual is referred to the GDAS consortium about their substance use, a person-centred approach is taken to understand their needs and assess the best pathway for them from the range of support and treatment options available. Working with other agencies, GDAS members conduct multiagency allocation meetings to discuss inter-agency referrals and transition between services, with providers including the Aneurin Bevan Specialist Drug & Alcohol Service (ABSDAS); Gwent N-Gage (a young person's drug & alcohol service); and the NHS Alcohol Care Team. GDAS work closely with ABSDAS, who are also implementing the TrACE Toolkit, and provide support to service users with complex needs such as pregnant women and those with complex physical and mental health needs. Moreover, GDAS employ staff who work for both ABSDAS and GDAS which enables these organisations to share learning and support each other on their TrACE journey.

In working closely with partner organisations, GDAS demonstrate a commitment to a holistic, trauma-informed approach, ensuring a coordinated response across services. This collaborative working fosters a shared understanding of trauma-informed practice and ACE awareness, further aligning themselves with the 'Service Design and Delivery' domain of the TrACE Toolkit. Utilising a close working relationship with organisations such as ABSDAS enables GDAS to provide a wide range of interventions and allows for a more seamless service delivery model for individuals with complex needs.

Physical Environments

A review of GDAS's physical environments (a collection of 10 branches within Gwent that staff and service users' access) was conducted by staff and service users which identified a range of improvement recommendations. An action plan was put in place to address some of the recommendations and some immediate changes were made to their physical environments; for example, added furnishings and the design of their bases were made to be more welcoming and ensuring they foster a safe and calming atmosphere. The action plan also outlines longer-term plans to renovate office bases, subject to funding, to ensure the risk of re-traumatisation is mitigated as much as possible.

While GDAS's commitment as a consortium to improving the physical environment remains strong, one of the areas where they have encountered some challenge has been reconciling the desire to provide inviting and welcoming spaces with ensuring the health and safety of everyone within them. This has meant that the inclusion of items such as soft furnishings, plants, books, clocks and pictures have required risk assessment or exclusion from their branches in order to be compliant with the Health and Safety Executive regulations due to risk of harm. An example is the requirement for their reception area to have a Perspex screen with a curtailed communication opening, this has resulted in the need to reconsider plans for how to make the lay out of the reception area more open and inviting.

The need to ensure that the physical environment is safe for staff and service users is an important part of making it trauma-informed. The need to consider and balance all aspects is a shared concern with other organisations such as policing and Criminal Justice agencies. Criminal Justice in Wales has committed to a trauma-informed approach; the trailblazers are all four Welsh police forces, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service. There is an opportunity to jointly develop further learning on approaches that are HSE regulations compliant, but that can improve the physical environment of spaces through communities of practice as they implement the TrACE Toolkit.

Monitoring and Evaluation

GDAS's monitoring and evaluation is service user led. Supporting approximately 1200 people across Gwent (GDAS website, 2019), every 90 days, GDAS collect information on service user's emotional, physical and overall health which is held and used by the consortium to monitor service users' progress and to inform future planning. This information is used by the consortium in their ACE Awareness Steering Group which reviews their service delivery against the six TrACE domains; a group GDAS also actively involve service users in.

An example of how GDAS have involved service users in the TrACE self-assessment can be found in the process used to review and evaluate how trauma-informed their key organisational and service level policies are. GDAS peers, together with Kaleidoscope's Co Production Team gave feedback on the language, layout, accessibility and ease of use of their policies. Using a trauma-informed lens, these policies were re-written by peers and documents such as the organisational Complaints & Suggestions leaflet (GDAS, 2025) were re-designed to improve people's confidence to give a suggestion or make a complaint. By including the knowledge and experience of peers within their monitoring and evaluation process, GDAS's Complaints & Suggestions leaflet invites service users to give honest feedback which help to improve the service.

Another example of how GDAS involve peers in their monitoring and evaluation is through the Peer Academy. Once graduated, peer supporters take on roles such as offering one-on-one support, running activities, and collecting feedback from service users to support their monitoring and evaluation. Peer-support and feedback is often carried out through the use of community-based spaces such as the Voice Hub, a community space located in Newport run by a team of Peer Supporters who run activities like focus groups, breakfast clubs, and lunchtime events to gather input from current service users. The feedback collected is then shared with GDAS and their Commissioners to help shape their services and policies. This feedback ensures GDAS are informed by the real experiences of substance use, both current and historical, and allows their services to align with the needs of the community.

GDAS have found their Peer Supporters' experiences to be invaluable to supporting service users and in providing a lived experience perspective to the way GDAS work:

“They bring things to the table which we may not even have thought of, because they've been there. You need feedback from those who've gone through trauma [to understand] what they would have liked to see in a service” (Gwent Commissioner for Substance Misuse)

By actively involving and listening to individuals with lived experience through peer support and feedback, GDAS are committed to utilising service users voices to shaping their service. This way of working is central to the successful implementation of the TrACE Toolkit as it ensures that the needs of service users are understood which helps to continually improve their service and support service users.

In addition to their service user involvement, GDAS also record and share case studies of people and families affected by drug and alcohol use on a six-monthly basis alongside their contract review with commissioners. They use these case studies to illustrate the powerful positive impact their work has on services users and can be provided to advertise the service and encourage uptake. Some of these case studies can be seen on GDAS's website (GDAS, 2025) which have been shared to show how people have used GDAS's services for support. By hearing other experiences, these case studies can be comforting for people affected by substance use and be used as a guide for the support GDAS offer.

GDAS's commitment to monitoring and evaluating their service is also seen through staff feedback. Staff surveys are taken every six weeks to assess wellbeing and identify needs. GDAS have also conducted a survey to baseline the TrACE Toolkit's domains from a staff perspective which was used to inform the Organisation's Trauma-Informed Practice Action Plan.

The positive impact of the implementation of the TrACE Toolkit in GDAS is evident from the Commissioner's view:

"I think having this toolkit has given service providers a focus on what areas they should be looking at. It's not just about the way you talk to service users, it's about ensuring your bases are trauma informed and welcoming, it's about going that extra mile to make sure that individuals will access services" (Commissioner for Substance Misuse)

The Commissioner also added that the commitment to TrACE-informed organisations needs to be long-term and the positive impact of the changes GDAS have made provides learning for other organisations and sectors beyond substance use:

"I don't think it's something that we can do overnight... I think the toolkit needs to go into housing, hostels and wider. It's not just substance use services that should be trauma informed" (Commissioner for Substance Misuse)

Next Steps

GDAS aim to continue embedding a trauma-informed practice more consistently across the consortium. Crucially, leadership and managers in GDAS understand that implementing a TrACE approach is an iterative and ongoing process:

“It’s a never-ending thing. It’s not a task and finish job for me, so I think that for me is the mindset. That’s the message we need to get across for people to understand. It’s embodying a way of practice, it’s not a list of things to get done. I’d like to say that we have that understanding in the organisation.” (GDAS Learning and Practice Manager)

As an organisation, their commitment to continuing to share learning and applying a trauma-informed lens in all areas of their work as evidenced in this Spotlight report, will continue to inspire others to support Wales’s ambition of being a trauma-informed nation.

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Hyb ACE Cymru
ACE Hub Wales

ACE Hub Wales
Floor 5,
2 Capital Quarter,
Tyndall Street,
Cardiff
CF10 4BZ

www.acehubwales.com

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