

Rowan Alba Case Study: Integrating Psychology into Homelessness Services

Rowan Alba is a third sector organisation that provides housing with support through a combination of settled and temporary accommodation services across Edinburgh. They introduced an embedded NHS psychologist to their services to provide flexible, relationship-based mental health support to staff and residents.

This case study highlights the benefits of greater collaboration and integration between statutory and third sector services for service providers and commissioners. It shows how to incorporate psychological expertise into a third sector service which in return can enhance person-centred care, improve access to mental health support for people with complex needs, and foster more coordinated, trauma-informed approaches to care delivery.

Summary of outcomes

Embedding a psychologist within a third sector housing organisation addressed critical gaps in mental health support for individuals with complex needs who struggled to access NHS services. The role significantly enhanced person-centred care, reduced access barriers, and improved outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

Working with staff: Staff gained confidence and skills through psychologist-led training and reflective practice. This increased staff compassion satisfaction by 11%, decreased their secondary trauma level by 22%, and reduced burnout levels by 14% (*see Figure 1*).

Working with people: Individuals received tailored psychological support, including therapy and coping strategies, in a safe and familiar environment. This increased engagement with services and reduced emergency department visits (*see Figure 1*).

Bridge and continuity of care: The psychologist improved coordination between third sector and NHS services, ensuring smoother transitions and better advocacy.

Getting people ready for support: Trust was built gradually through consistent presence, helping individuals engage with formal mental health services when ready.

Barriers and enablers: Despite challenges like limited capacity and communication constraints, a relational, flexible, and trauma-informed approach enabled meaningful impact.

Overview

Rowan Alba, an organisation supporting people experiencing homelessness and complex needs, recognised the need for psychological support after seeing the impact of such support provided by the Edinburgh Access Practice.

Many individuals using their accommodation had undiagnosed mental health conditions, histories of trauma, and high levels of distress, yet struggled to engage with NHS mental health services. The existing system had significant access barriers such as long waiting lists, rigid appointment structures, and misunderstandings about their needs.

Rowan Alba introduced an in-house NHS psychology role, a joint three-year project between NHS Lothian, Edinburgh City Council and Rowan Alba with funding from mental health charity St-Martin-in-the-Fields. This allowed for more flexible, relationship-based mental health support. The aim was not only to provide direct interventions but also to build staff capacity in trauma-informed care and create stronger links with NHS services.

Embedding psychology within Rowan Alba has led to practical service improvements, targeted staff training, and consistent reflective practice. The psychologists supported both direct clinical work and liaison with external services, improving access and reducing stigma. Early evidence from the service showed a positive trend in reduction in emergency department visits for residents and increased engagement with other health services, indicating potential cost savings and improved outcomes.

This case study highlights the importance of embedding psychology into third sector services to improve engagement and outcomes. The support that Rowan Alba has been able to provide with psychology support has made the service more person-centred. It has reduced barriers to access to NHS services ensuring that individuals receive the support they need in a way that works for them.

Improving Outcomes

Working with staff

A key part of the psychologist role involves working alongside staff at Rowan Alba to build their confidence and competence in supporting individuals with complex needs. This includes:

- **Training Needs Assessment:** Identifying gaps in staff knowledge, with a focus on psychological first aid, trauma, mental health, and neurodivergence,
- **Reflective Practice:** Facilitating regular discussions where staff can process challenging situations, develop psychological thinking, and refine their approaches, and
- **Reviewing Care Plans:** Ensuring that care plans reflect individuals' psychological needs and are adjusted to be more person-centred and trauma-informed.

Benefits

Working with the staff, the psychologist has helped create a trauma and psychologically informed environment within the service. The additional expertise and input from the psychologist supported staff to creatively come up with a large number of ideas ranging from small easily implementable changes to much larger and more systematic changes.

Having the psychologist role embedded within the service helped staff feel more supported and empowered to adopt new ways of working. There were also significant benefits for staff wellbeing, with one service seeing a 14% decrease in self-reported burnout.

Working with people

The individuals engaging with Rowan Alba's services often have multiple overlapping challenges including complex needs, missed or undiagnosed conditions, and difficulties engaging with traditional services. In response, the psychologists can provide:

- Talking therapy – creating a safe space for individuals to explore their experiences and emotions,
- Safety and stabilisation work – supporting people to manage distress, regulate emotions, and develop coping strategies, and
- Specialist interventions, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for anxiety and depression.

Benefits

Providing psychological therapies in this environment was noted by the psychologist as being highly beneficial. The culture can be more person centred, due to less focus on the volume of interventions provided. Similarly, there is more flexibility around timescales so people can engage with support at a pace that suits them.

Being located within a person's home and being able to hear about how they are from the support staff also allows for more targeted and responsive support.

Being a bridge and supporting continuity of care

The psychologist role has been instrumental in bridging the gap between third sector services and NHS mental health teams. By working closely with clinicians, hospital wards, and community mental health teams, the psychologist helps ensure people don't fall through the gaps. For example:

- Informing third sector staff if a person has been admitted to hospital, what support they are receiving, and when the person might get discharged to help prepare a care plan for their return
- Challenging assumptions within statutory services – ensuring that if someone refuses an appointment, they are not labelled as "non-compliant" but instead supported in a way that works for them
- Advocating for service users to ensure they receive assessments and referrals appropriate to their needs, and
- Additional clinical services, such as the Sleep Clinic and respiratory clinics, were brought into the accommodation due to professionals feeling more comfortable and supported with another clinician there.

Benefits

The input of the psychologist has enhanced communication and liaison with other health professionals, including GPs, Practice Mental Health Nurses, the Sleep Clinic, Speech and Language Therapy (SALT), substance use services, The Access Practice, the Ritson Clinic detoxification ward, and Psychiatry.

By sharing updates on hospital admissions, discharge plans, and mental health changes, the psychologist helps support workers tailor their approach and care plans. This collaboration also gives clinicians a fuller picture of individuals' lives— highlighting progress that might otherwise go unnoticed and identifying early warning signs.

Getting people ready for support

Many people living in Rowan Alba's accommodation are not yet ready to engage with traditional NHS mental health services. A key challenge is that many have been previously let down by those meant to care for them in their personal and family lives, leading to mistrust and disengagement. This results in individuals frequently not attending appointments or refusing support.

The presence of a psychologist within Rowan Alba helps to enable engagement – being a familiar, visible figure allows for trust to be built gradually through informal, day-to-day interactions. Working within the service, the psychologist supports individuals to reduce distress and develop skills they need to engage successfully when they are ready, with more formal support.

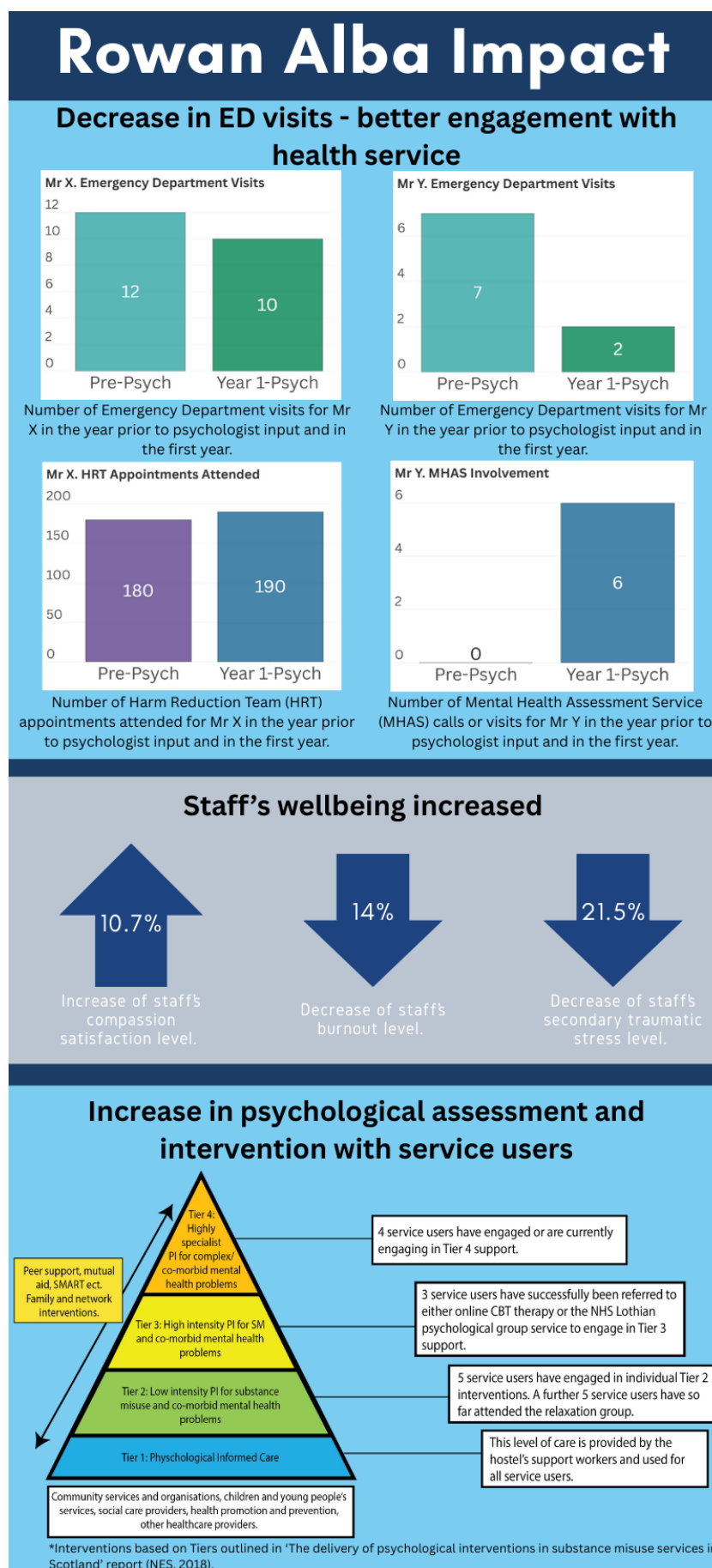
An example given was a person with neurodivergent support needs in temporary accommodation who has been referred to the NHS mental health psychology service. In the standard system, they may be given a letter to phone to make a clinic appointment, expected to attend on their own, disengage due to anxiety and be discharged from the service due to non-attendance.

With psychological support in Rowan Alba:

- The person is assessed in a familiar environment, with support from staff they trust.
- The psychologist builds rapport, explaining the process in a way they understand.
- The person's needs can then be communicated to the wider NHS services involved in their care enabling the person to receive care that is best suited to their needs.

This approach prevents unnecessary exclusions and ensures people get the support they need.

Figure 1. Impact during the first year of psychologist input on Emergency Department visits, engagement with services and staff wellbeing.



Barriers and enablers

While the role has had a significant impact, several barriers have made implementation challenging. Enablers to support implementation have also been identified.

Barriers:

- Time constraints – the demand for psychological support far exceeds the available capacity of one psychologist.
- NHS and third sector communication – NHS confidentiality policies make it challenging to share information with third sector organisations. This was overcome in part by a data sharing agreement, however, the psychologists are limited in what they can share with Rowan Alba colleagues, affecting continuity of care.
- Lack of flexibility in mental health services – strict appointment times mean that many individuals can fall through the gaps. If someone does not attend a mental health appointment, it is often recorded as “non-compliant” rather than identified as a barrier that needs addressing.

Enablers:

- Relational approach – relationships are prioritised over outcomes, allowing time for trust to grow, which is essential for working with people who have been repeatedly let down.
- Supportive environment – Rowan Alba’s psychologically-informed approach creates space for reflective practice and relational working. Allowing the psychologist to adapt their approach to the needs of each individual.
- Better engagement with health services - Residents show increased engagement with NHS services and a reduction in emergency department visits, suggesting improved health outcomes and potential cost savings.
- Continuity and Co-ordination of Care - The psychologist acts as a bridge between third sector and statutory services, improving communication, reducing stigma, and ensuring smoother transitions in care.
- Staff openness – Staff are receptive to learning and willing to engage with new ways of thinking about behaviour and support.

Conclusion

Embedding an NHS psychologist within Rowan Alba’s services demonstrates the transformative potential of collaborative, trauma-informed approaches to care for individuals with complex needs. By bridging gaps between statutory and third sector services, this project has enhanced person-centred support, improved access to mental health care, and empowered staff through training and

reflective practice. The model not only addresses longstanding barriers to engagement but also fosters trust and continuity care for people. As early outcomes suggest improved health service engagement and reduced emergency department use, this case study provides a new example of how embedding a psychological role in third sector settings can lead to more responsive and effective care.