

Independent Advocacy in Action: Supporting New Scots in Perth

“What is ‘home’ to you?” I was asked, unexpectedly, alongside around ten participants from a New Scots collective advocacy group based in Perth. I wasn’t ready to answer - it was the very first question of the session, an ice-breaker prepared by one of the more active group members. The question evoked emotional responses, shared in six different languages: participants spoke of stability, safety, closeness to family; of comfort, familiar foods and sounds; and of the ability to participate fully in society. The question revealed what truly matters to group members, and helped set the tone for exploring shared values across different backgrounds and experiences, beyond the language barriers.

I was invited to observe the session by one of the collective advocacy workers at Independent Advocacy Perth and Kinross (IAPK). At the time of writing, the New Scots group is unique among independent advocacy organisations in Scotland, offering a safe and welcoming space for people seeking asylum who are temporarily accommodated in Perth’s hotels. The recognition that this part of the local community needed space to come together to amplify their voices first emerged through the insight



The word “welcome” hand-written by group members in multiple languages and scripts

of an IAPK staff member who had previously worked in one of the hotels. Building on that thought, IAPK secured short-term funding to launch the group in 2024. In addition, when support is needed beyond what can be achieved in a group setting, New Scots are also able to access individual independent advocacy through the organisation.

Since 1995, IAPK has been at the forefront of human rights work in Perth. They operate across a wide range of environments: in prisons, hospitals, schools, and community settings, modelling a holistic approach to independent advocacy provision. Their mission is to support people who are disempowered by systems due to their disability, illness, or life circumstances, from “cradle to grave.” This means that they support children, young people, adults, and older people alike, making the organisation a true cornerstone of the community.

This innovative and inclusive approach is the result of years spent building relationships and embracing continuous learning. It is grounded in values of compassion, honesty, courage and empowerment – principles that are not only promoted but practiced daily by the leadership and the staff, guiding how they work with Advocacy Partners and with one another. This internal culture of collaboration extends outward. There is a generosity evident in how knowledge is shared - not just within the team, but with other organisations. IAPK is active in both national and local networks, including in SIAA’s membership and Children’s Hearings Advocacy Providers, and is committed to sharing expertise and working in partnership to drive real change for people they support.

During my visit, the organisation’s office, situated on the banks of the River Tay, was buzzing with activity: phones ringing, advocates exchanging insights and advice, and people coming and going throughout the day. The office is also where the New Scots group usually meets. The group’s composition shifts from session to session, with attendance ranging from 5 up to 25 participants, and the numbers

of languages spoken varying just as widely. For example, for the May session, discussion questions and a short presentation about collective advocacy in Scotland were translated into Arabic, Vietnamese, Kurdish, Amharic, Dari and Pashto, utilising a translation app Tarjimly.

During the course of the session, new people arrived with questions, seeking answers and support that independent advocacy alone cannot always provide. And while it was, at times, difficult to hear stories of separation, anxiety, and the frustration of being willing to work but legally unable to do so, the opportunity to share these experiences with others, fostering the sense of solidarity, is precisely why the group exists.

This fluidity and variation in communication styles brings a unique energy to each meeting, but also requires patience, flexibility, and a creative approach to planning and delivering the sessions. Yet, these challenges have also created opportunities. Group members, supported by the collective advocacy worker, have stepped up to support one another: I witnessed some taking on informal translation roles, others explaining the group's purpose and aims to the newcomers, sharing information about volunteering opportunities and other local events over a meal shared at the end of every session.

Within just a year, the New Scots group has shed light on issues connected to life in temporary hotel accommodation, contributed to Perth's City of Sanctuary strategy, and built connections with other organisations supporting people in similar circumstances. Their collective voice is being heard, but to continue this vital work, IAPK had to secure an additional funding source. While the initial short-term grant enabled the group to take root, and additional funding from the National Lottery Community Fund will allow its continuation for the second year, the uncertainty of future funding threatens its long-term sustainability, which is already challenging in a transient community of asylum seekers.

IAPK's ways of working and their successes showcase what's possible when independent advocacy is led by values and grounded in the local context. Their approach leverages existing relationships while maintaining independence and integrity. Funding quality independent advocacy is not just about supporting a service; it's an investment in the realisation of human rights, in community cohesion, and in the belief that everyone deserves to be heard and empowered to participate fully in the community they live in.

This experience reminded me that "home" is not only a place; it can also be something collectively created, even temporarily and despite barriers, through the relationships we build and nurture.

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