

**Welcome to Partner Conversations; a series of interviews from the Edinburgh Trust where we learn more about the work of our partners across the city and the challenges faced by the people they support. My name is Ems Harrington and I'm the Edinburgh Trust Senior Partnership Development Officer. Today I'm speaking with Dorothea Peszkowska from Feniks, a charity supporting integration and aiming to improve the wellbeing of the Central Eastern European Community in Edinburgh. Just a note that there is mention of the quota system in this interview. The quota system was a temporary arrangement from November 2022 to April this year when The Edinburgh Trust had to limit the number of daily applications, we could accept in order to manage our grant budget.**

**So, can you start by telling me what your name is and what organisation you work for?**

Hello, yes of course and thanks so much Ems for inviting me over here and hi to everyone listening. My name is Dorota Peszkowska and I work for a charity called Feniks. We are based in Edinburgh, and we work with Central Eastern Europeans. Now our full name is very long but I think I should say it out loud just in case its helpful. So we are Feniks Counselling, Personal Development and Support Services and we are spelled the Polish way so with an f at the beginning and ks at the end but the name simply means Phoenix; like the one rising from the ashes. And Feniks was set up in 2007 to help Central and Eastern Europeans in Edinburgh and Scotland in order to tackle the barriers they may face in accessing health support, in particular mental health support. And it's a grassroots organisation that helps people essentially combat social isolation and the services Feniks offers at the moment are quite varied and we are mostly working with the Polish community but not exclusively.

We have a group of counsellors who are able to offer culturally sensitive therapy free of charge in Polish and in English. We have various community groups, such as Active 50+ for Polish people over 50 who settled in Edinburgh and want to spend time together. We have a toddler group, we have groups that support people with addictions so the Smart Recovery Programme. And last year we also opened up a position for the Ukrainian community developer for obvious reasons who supports the Ukrainian refugees with sort of navigating the system in the city. And then there are various ad hoc initiatives such as Ambassadors programme which was recently nominated for the Scottish Charity Awards who raise awareness about mental health problems among Polish men in Scotland who suicide twice the rate of Scottish men. And then there is my own service at Feniks. So I'm a community link worker and in short, I help people access services they need in the city. And the idea for link working comes from the principle of social prescribing, which is essentially, it can be summarised as, looking for non-medical solutions for mental health problems.

**That's wonderful. Thank you so much. So, what area do you work in? Is it city wide or specific areas within the city?**

So, at the moment, its city wide and it still doesn't feel like enough so very often I have questions from you know Musselburgh which technically is not in Edinburgh anymore. We are trying to be as flexible as possible which is great, and which is possible because we are a charity, so the rules are a little bit less stringent. But mainly I work only in Edinburgh because part of my work is knowing what's happening and it would be very difficult to be a specialist, you know, in every little town and region.

**And how many people does the organisation support?**

The organisation wide would be difficult for me to tell, and it also depends on what project you mean really because with some campaigns it would definitely be tens of thousands but [when] it comes to my little project I work one to one with 66 people from the beginning of the project. So, in a bit over a

year, I provided advice probably to around 200 people, but it didn't turn into long term support. So very different numbers.

**And in your experience, how have things changed for the people you support since the 2020 covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis?**

So, 2020 was a very difficult year, well for us all, no doubt about that. But particularly for the community that we work with because it's also important to remember the context of Brexit in it all. And for many people, you sort of start losing track about what happened when and which date was significant. But essentially the end of December 2020 was the cut-off date to be able to come and settle here. So many difficult decisions were being made for people who wanted, for example, their family to come here and be able to live with them long term. And then the end of June 2021 was the cut-off date for applications to secure your immigration status and then the 1st of July 2021 was effectively the date when hostile environment rules started applying to European citizens in the UK as well so if they had the correct type of immigration status all was fine but if they, for any reason, didn't apply or if they qualified for the less generous pre settled status then they started experiencing problems.

So yeh, the pandemic was hard for all supporting organisations, I'm sure I don't need to describe details. But for our clients in particular when a relatively big number of people work in very precarious employment or the so-called key sectors, the very practical issues started kicking in of, you know, not working enough shifts to provide for the families, not being able to find childcare even if there was some work. And we really saw an increase in enquiries then and in particular the waiting list for the therapy services just was getting longer and longer every day. And then in the summer we started having enquiries from people who stopped being able qualified for certain kinds of support at the time when they needed it more than ever. So, this sort of carried on until now and this current crisis and it's a little bit difficult.

For me personally, I am not a fan of the cost of living crisis as a phrase or a concept or a focus. And I understand why it's important. Definitely things have deteriorated for a greater number of people and it's important that we are talking about it but when I am thinking about the groups of people I am supporting, my service opened in October 2021 and already then, people I was helping, couldn't make ends meet. So they would need to choose which bills to pay, whether to pay bills or afford food. It was just impossible to survive on what Universal Credit was offering to them even together with the number of hours they were allowed to work so when I think of how it's now versus when it was then it's like comparing two shades of pitch black. It's probably grimmer now, it was already not that good then because also it's been over ten years of austerity, and this also had an impact that we saw during the pandemic with mainly public services crumbling under the weight.

**And how has that affected capacity? Your own capacity and the capacity within your organisation? Have you been able to meet extra demand?**

Well, the demand has always been higher than what we are able to provide so, no. We also haven't been able to provide the extra, to meet the extra demand. We are doing all we can really. We are lucky that my service started. So before, I was doing the immigration advice relating to that new settlement scheme and seeing the profile of the people who are needing help with that, it was obvious that the rest of the month or more, that people need this help to connect to the support that is there in the city. But they maybe don't understand or are not aware of or it requires a lot of work to actually use. And it was a year of intense growth for Feniks actually. We now have a policy researcher and a community engagement officer and the Ukrainian project coordinator as well but we always see more people wanting and needing the service than we are able to provide.

## **And what are the main challenges for you in your work?**

So, it's an interesting question and there are different ways to look at it. So first of all I would like to talk about the profile of the clients I am helping because there are three important aspects I can think about which is mental health, crisis and then the additional level of exclusion because of being minority ethnic. And I think it's important to see sort of all three of them as as important as any other because they do compound and they do create particularly difficult situations. So I don't want to generalise or simplify but certainly with the mental health when we imagine people with depression or anxiety or with PTSD obviously a lot of people are high functioning and this part of how they are dealing with their experience. But quite often what we see are people who struggle to make complex decisions, to understand various choices that they need to make, to sort of follow through. I always joke that you need to be very healthy in order to be able to navigate the system and you're obviously not at this particular point. And then people who happen to use my service usually do it as a result of a direct crisis in their life.

So, I mentioned at the beginning, mental health is not really a topic in Poland at all. People will say things like "I don't have mental health" as in if it weren't something that affects all of us. So they treat things like not coping with everyday life as something normal you just have to power through it. And then it usually takes this additional event that makes them actually take a moment and think about and take this very important and scary step of asking for help. So, I usually meet people who either had a very serious diagnosis or [are] bereaved or lost their jobs or are in a financial need for any other reason. And then, when you have this crisis in your life you are under pressure, there is no time to think so this is, sort of, another layer that adds to not being able to navigate the complex system very well.

And then the last aspect obviously is the communication barrier and I very consciously use the word communication barrier not just language barrier because I think it's quite easy sometimes for people to just say or think this is all due to the language. Whereas, well, first of all I have already explained that mental health itself creates a barrier to understanding and communicating with whoever is trying to support you and then there are aspects like culture and having different expectations and not knowing the systems, expecting something else. For example, the health system in Poland is very different from what it is here, and people go and just describe their symptoms and they expect one thing and then they are offered something completely different, and they are just lost. They don't know if they have been misunderstood or if they were treated differently and these sorts of thoughts just occur. And there is obviously language which is also very important and there are people who speak fine English and they are capable of going by in everyday life but when it comes to medical jargon or understanding complex information about how the benefits system works for example, if it's the first time in your life that you need to even think about it, it's not the best time to be doing it in a language that's not your own. And again, comparing it in your head to a system that is different, so some things just don't translate.

And then there are obviously, just for instances, when you need this extra language support; you didn't have opportunity to learn English here and I would like to address this as well because this is a question that sometimes people get asked or people get blamed for this. I mean I would like to ask how many adults do we know that, in their adulthood, mastered another language? It takes a lot of energy, time, and commitment and when you're working full time, taking care of family you often just don't have this luxury of sitting down and you know, really studying. So, these are the barriers from the point of the user and of the people I am working with. But then there's the system that's underfunded as we know, and inflexible and that I see particularly is difficult. Is that it struggles in

seeing people as a whole, to have this so-called intersectional approach, to just really assess what the person needs at the moment and why. So you go somewhere [and] you are expected to have one problem, one answer that you implement, and everything will be fine after that and it just, as we all know, doesn't work that well. And if you are a person with complex needs, you quite often just feel looked down and lost. And for example if someone, apart from having experienced domestic abuse and needing help with that, is also disabled in any way and to top it off is minority ethnic the system very often doesn't know how to approach it and how to even communicate with the service user.

**So, the main challenges in your work would really be from the challenges that the people you are supporting are facing, would that be the case?**

Yes, yes so there's no getting away from the fact that people I'm helping are very often in very complex situations and it must be acknowledged. I think even the best system will struggle to process it all at once and appropriately. But there also just seems to be a shortage on the part of the system as well to be even able to comprehend complex things let alone apply it in practice. And I know it sounds fairly vague, but I have been thinking about it and I don't want to provide too many examples because then you are talking about various partner organisations who I'm sure are doing their very best but are under very similar pressures.

**What is rewarding about the work that you do?**

It is very important to find rewards in your everyday work. I think, for me personally, the most important aspect is building relations with people who come through my door and without it, it would be a very difficult job indeed because there are various outcomes. But the first moment of building a connection, and because I do have the liberty to really to talk with a person, it's really about getting to know them and why they are where they are, what they need at the moment [and] what strengths they have. Actually because if they have been dealing with this difficult situation for a while then obviously they have applied some successful strategies. And I am very often the first person to, sort of, give them the space where they don't need to just focus on one thing and just ask one question and be out of the door. So, this is very rewarding seeing the relief this brings. But also, I am the first person who tells them that they did things right and managed to do this and that and this is really, it may not seem like much, but it already means that they are in a better position than they would have been otherwise. So relationship building is a great one and another rewarding aspect is definitely seeing an improvement in people's lives, and it varies very much from person to person so this is also rewarding for me that this changeability. I never know what the next story is going to be and who I'm going to meet. But yes, sometimes these are very basic things like providing someone with dental and eye care and getting them glasses and sometimes it's more complex and difficult advice that I don't provide myself. I just link to other services relating to their legal situation or housing situation.

But to give you an example, my favourite story at the moment is this lady I have been supporting for a few months, I will call her Marlina which is not her real name. She's just turned 60 years old and her story is really quite tragic as is often the case. So, she came here a few years ago to live with her adult daughter and they were both working, they had a good circle of friends, but the daughter was very much the main carer and provider in the family. She is younger, she spoke the language, she was looking after her mum and then a few years ago she got sick and was completely paralysed. So now she needs support 24/7 and it's up to the mother to deal with this. So after the whole emotional impact of seeing this happening to her child you are also suddenly in this situation where you are the main provider when you need to navigate the system that we've just explained can be quite unfriendly sometimes. And you feel very lost. And the span of the time we were working together we managed to, I would say, improve the relationship with social work a little bit because there is also a lot of

mistrust about, these people coming and assessing your life situation so it was important to explain what the job is, why they are doing it the way they are doing so sort of improving the relationship and by the way, the social worker do great work as well. Then helping with all the legal stuff. It seems that is difficult for anyone to arrange the power of attorney but then you also have the language barrier and some lawyers who say that they cannot assess the capacity because of the language barrier just becomes a much longer and stressful project... process, that's the word I was looking for!

And then you know she needed a lot of emotional support and in a lot of ways she was relying on me for this which always puts me in a bit of a difficult position because obviously I am there for this person, but I am also not their friend, I am not a counsellor and its very important to always remind yourself and themselves of these differences. But I was able to arrange counselling sessions for her in Polish actually with VOCAL and then I even encouraged her to access some complementary therapies which is my favourite aspect of this. Because she was so reluctant to spend some time on herself, to get away from her obligations and she was also suspicious of the therapies themselves. She was like "I don't need a head massage, what is going to change my life?". I was like "it won't cost you anything, it's not that far away, just go and see, check if you like it, you can always not come back, tell them you are resigning." And then she called me afterwards and she was like "I feel so amazing, this changed my life" and I was like yes, this is exactly what I want to hear, and this is exactly what I want to see changing in people's lives. So, these are the rewarding aspects.

**Thats powerful, thank you for sharing that with me. So, to move into a slightly different conversation and to give some context for anyone listening or reading. So, we partnered with you in, last year, after the launch of our new model. So, you didn't have any experience of the Edinburgh Trust before that model but to give some context, we relaunched our grants programme with a redeveloped referral model that the focus was really to shift power away from us and back into the communities in which we deliver support. We wanted to prioritise the preservation of dignity of our grant applicants and to build collaborative and trusting relationships with local organisations. What are your thoughts on this model and how has it worked and also how do you see your work fitting with that model of working?**

So first of all, we have a clean slate in this regard, I don't have a point of comparison. But to give some context or to reply to your question I'm a link worker so as a rule I don't do casework, I don't make applications for people just because if I did, I wouldn't be able to help as many people. The idea is to send them where the support is. I can make exceptions if the process is very simple and straightforward, and this is why I was able to apply for many people to the Edinburgh Trust fund and use your service. So I think that's an answer in itself that we deemed the process straightforward enough that it wouldn't be too much of a burden for me as a link worker to use.

And I really like the process itself, it really seems person centred. You still need to do some checks, verify the situation of the person but it's a very different starting point to like, let's talk about your needs, let's see how you can cover them with your current income etc. rather than just saying "these are the requirements, let's see if you fit into this little table here". So, I would say it's quite user-friendly process and I also really like the question [on the application form] about long-term goals. It sometimes, it's a bit awkward because you're talking to someone who hasn't got money to pay their rent and they've already borrowed from all their friends and are already in debt and looking at you like "what long term goals? Not starving I guess" but it does open the conversation when, after this crisis, where would you like to go and it gives people hope like even thinking about what may be there beyond. So yes, in short, I really like it. So, I actually started making applications only in December [2022] so already after the quota system was introduced. Obviously, it's not the most convenient but

then when you have that many people needing help, how else you are going to decide? It always becomes less open in a sense because it needs to. So, the process has been quite easy, and I love how quickly the decisions are made as well. This really makes a lot of difference and I think adds to the disbelief of the clients, like "What? So quickly? how is it possible?" Especially since I have to tell them that it's a grant and not 100% sure that you will get it.

**That's so great to hear, thank you. So, moving back to just thinking about your role again, what would help you in the work that you do?**

Definitely more funding and I don't just mean selfishly for me but for the entire system. It would really help if the public service and charities in Edinburgh as well just had more funding and longer-term funding so there is some sort of certainty. Because also right now, a big part of my job is just checking if this service still works or did they close since the last time I used them? Did they have staff changes because no one is able to work long term in such an unstable environment when no one is able to offer you long term employment etc. So, seeing more funds definitely would help.

Another thing that would help is more understanding, as I mentioned before really, of the intersectionality. And in particular as we are working with minority ethnic groups, raising cultural awareness and organisations capacity and ability to use translators. And this is very important as well and I would like to talk about it a bit. Because it's not just about having access to some translator services, it's also about your employees knowing how to work with a translator; not rushing through the conversation just because they need to wait for the process to take place. But double checking with the service user as they should in any other situation. Because quite often these meetings are just rushed or if there are any incongruencies just no time is given to stop and understand that maybe this is a symptom that maybe this person has more complex needs as opposed to, translator probably didn't translate something. So these two would be quite important.

**And what are your hopes for the future, for your work and for the people that you support?**

My hopes for the future, I definitely hope, and I see sort of first signs that it's maybe possible, for the more intersectional approach becoming mainstream so again being person centered and being able to help a person with more than one difficulty at a time. And I guess for a lot of people, for example, who studied sociology or had some sort of interest in it, it feels like there has been talk about it for quite a while and it's natural. Because first you need to sort of identify a need, then you have to educate people about it and raise awareness and then you can start seeing change. And I think we are at the stage where a lot of mainstream organisations are really rethinking the way they work. And I think that's great. So this is my huge hope for the future. And in a more general terms just living in a greener and healthier society.

**And lastly, what does Edinburgh mean to you?**

So, when I think about it, the thought that comes to my mind immediately is a memory from when I first came here for a longer term. It wasn't my first time in Edinburgh in general but I came for an internship so I didn't know for how long really or if I would be staying. But I just emerged from Waverley Station towards Princes Street and looked down Leith Walk and all of a sudden, I felt at home. I don't know how to explain it, but it turned out to be true and since then it's been 8 years and I've lived here and started a family here so obviously it became true. But this is what is what I think about when I think about Edinburgh...home.

**Thank you so much for spending time with me today. Where can people learn more about your work?**

So definitely you can visit us at Feniks website so its [www.feniks.org.uk](http://www.feniks.org.uk) so I would invite you there and just explore what we offer, and I would invite you to make referrals to our services. And I would also just like to give a little reminder that we are not a crisis centre. You can access things like Breathing Space or Edinburgh Crisis Centre which both offer translations on their lines aswell. Thank you very much Ems for having me.

**Thank you, it was an absolute pleasure.**

**This interview was carried out and produced by Ems Harrington, Senior Partnership Development Officer at the Edinburgh Trust. Sound production by Miles, Programme Assistant at the Edinburgh Trust.**

**The Edinburgh Trust is part of national poverty charity, Turn2us, and we have over a decade of experience in giving direct financial support to people experiencing poverty in Edinburgh. You can learn more about our work by going to [www.turn2us.org.uk](http://www.turn2us.org.uk)**