

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 Shona McLean from Community One Stop Shop, a charity whose aim it is to alleviate the effects of poverty and to support people through times of crisis.

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

Hello, I am Shona McLean. I am the Advice Worker based at Community One Stop Shop in Broomhouse.

And can you describe the work that your organisation does?

So, we do a variety of things so obviously my area is advice work. So, I help people complete benefit claims, help them sort out when there's problems, all the way through to appeals, tribunals, representing them. In fact, I would say, that's quite a high proportion of my work is relating to that; mostly disability type benefits as well but also things like rent arrears, issues with their housing, council tax arrears, utility issues; a broad range of stuff that people come and need help with. We are also a food bank and that's prominently accessed by people in the West, Southwest of Edinburgh but we do get people from all over the city aswell because we are, I think, one of the only food banks that don't need a referral. So people can self-refer. We also have a community pantry. What we are looking for is for people to move on from using the foodbank to then start paying £4 a week towards accessing the local pantry, which allows them x amount of items of food and then unlimited fresh stuff. So, they get a variety of stuff and that includes fridge/freezer stuff, fresh fruit and veg and tinned stuff aswell. So, it gives them a decent shop for £4 and they can do that once a week. And we have seen an increase in the number of people who want to access that. Again we are limited to numbers because of funding but we have seen people progress through and reduce the instances where they are using the foodbank [because] they are accessing the pantry.

We are referrers for the fuel bank foundation so people can come to us to be referred for fuel vouchers. We have some funding from Radio Forth Cash for Kids so we can allocate £50 per child in the household where we see the family are struggling. And the majority of those referrals come through me from my clients or through the pantry coordinator if she's identifying a family that are struggling. What else do we do? I wrote it down to trigger my memory! We also have a pot of funding that actually the Council provided to us through the Scottish Welfare Fund for people who are struggling with energy costs but don't have a prepayment meter cause obviously fuel vouchers are only accessible for those who have prepayment meters. So we can now allocate £50 to an individual who pays by bill payment or direct debit and who's struggling.

We also now work with an organisation called the Big Hoose in Fife who get the Amazon returns. So, we get deliveries every week now that have come from Amazon. So that's clothes, footwear, towels, bedding, small electrical items. We've had to rent a storage space at Jenners Depository now just cause the amount of stuff that we are getting. And then again, we can refer our clients for that help for their families cause its stuff for kids and stuff for adults that we are getting. So it's worked really, really well cause that's only been in place since last October [2022]. And the other service we offer is an employability service. We have an employability worker. She actually works from home, but she'll do all the stuff to help people with their job search, doing CVs, help with application forms, with interview skills, accessing college, training; whatever it is that they need to help them get back and into work. And she actually does one day a week at the job centre aswell, up at Wester Hailes

assisting, obviously predominantly, Universal Credit clients with their 35 hours a week towards their job search claimant commitments. I think I've covered everything (laughs).

Thats so much! How big is your organisation? How many staff are there?

So we have the manager, whose recently been changed to now be called the CEO. We have a voluntary management committee which kind of is a broad spectrum of people. We have a development worker who is responsible for all of our social media and promoting the service. We have a part time fundraiser [and] she works with lots of different organisations, but she allocates one day a week of her time to us. We have the pantry coordinator, and we have two admin staff and then there's me and the employability worker and the volunteer coordinator. So that's the staff. We rely heavily on volunteers which we now have quite a lot of. So every day of the week, basically the volunteers run the foodbank and partly the pantry aswell. And last year one of the things that I did was develop a training course for volunteer advisors, so we now have some volunteers who come in every week to provide advice appointments. So that takes some capacity from me aswell. But yeh our volunteering hours are the thing that we rely on the most to keep the service going.

Invaluable, absolutely invaluable. So, I wanted to know, in your experience how do you think things have changed for people you support since the 2020 covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis? And how has that also impacted the work of your organisation and your own work aswell?

Well obviously, having to look at doing things differently. We switched to doing telephone appointments only and trying to find ways around how can people drop off forms and how do we get consent from them and so a lot of that obviously took up more time and reduced the amount of appointments we could offer. Particularly in the beginning. But I think once people got used to it, it made it a bit easier. In fact, when we switched back to having face to face appointments in the office, people were like (laughs) "Can I not just do it on the phone?" (laughs).

They'd gotten used to it then.

Yeh but there's obviously things that are much easier to do face to face and that's particularly the more in-depth stuff that's involved in a PIP [Personal Independence Payment] claim, or attendance allowance. So much easier to get the right information from somebody face to face, rather than over the phone. I would say that had an impact on the success rate of the PIP claims when you were trying to do them over then phone. I think it's more difficult to prompt people to remember things and it's easier to do that face to face like I said.

Initially in lockdown all the donations for the foodbank dried up cause we get donations from a wide range of supermarkets. We get deliveries from Fare Share but all of that stopped as soon as we went into the first lockdown. But then it made a total turnaround after the first month or so and it flipped to be the complete opposite and we were completely inundated with people obviously being at home and then thinking they want to do something to help. So that was only a short-lived thing that it was a problem. But the foodbank continued operating throughout again... having to wear masks and just trying to keep people as safe as possible and obviously people couldn't access the office space, we were taking things outside to them. But again, finding ways around, still being compliant but still being able to offer a service to people.

Thats when the employability service aswell went to home working and everything was over the phone and that's actually worked so well that that's why its continued in that way. Because we had to open out some of the office space to comply with distancing when we did start doing face to face

again it meant that the employability worker lost her office. So that's one of the things we are really pushed for is space particularly when we get a lot of deliveries in, you just can't move (laughs) it's like an obstacle course! See trying to get into the toilet, oh my god climbing over hoovers and boxes of pasta (laughs). So yeh space is a major issue for us but we have started working closely with the Broomhouse Hub which is called Space and we will use rooms over there to help when the volunteer advisors are in particularly so that we are still offering that same service. We are not too squished.

What else happened? Yeh there was obviously an increase in demand for all of the services aswell but yeh it took people a while to adjust and realise that we were still open, and they could access the service. Cost of living crisis, that's where we got the money from the Council Scottish Welfare Fund for the emergency fuel, the Cash for Kids that was in response to the cost of living and partially the Amazon stuff aswell. Weve also got funding to give pantry members 10 free visits and also people can pay it forward. So they can donate money that would then be put towards somebody else's visit to the pantry if they were struggling one week. And we had a kind of crisis pack that had vouchers for Tesco, a voucher to have a meal at Space and a fuel voucher so different things to try and help cause it's the fuel costs that are particularly crippling people, closely followed by the food costs. That's starting to trickle through more so now. But from the end of last year people are really, really struggling now and the thing with the Fuel Bank Foundation is they will only allow you to have three vouchers in a six-month period and people are using them up so quickly now because over the winter months its gone through the roof for them. So we are now having to say to people "I'm sorry, we can't help" which is really tough.

So the demand obviously increased and is its just continued to increase? Cause that's really interesting about not only the energy costs which I think we all kind of knew of but also the cost of food and you're really starting to see that.

Definitely. Even for us, buying stuff for the pantry is kind of how much things have increased. Just doing a shop one week for food for the pantry because people's donations and the £4 a week payment, that's the majority of the funding for the food for the pantry for that week. Obviously, there is additional donations aswell that we get in but it's getting that so there's enough for people to shop and enough decent stuff for them. Is starting to become really difficult and we are having to supplement it from our own budget and I'd say that's been happening for the last couple of months. We are really noticing that now.

Individuals, members of the public, can they give donations to the pantry? Items and financial as well? Are they both accepted?

Yeh, absolutely. We have an option on our social media pages explaining how people can donate and some people will go on and donate a small amount, like a fiver. But then we have other people, and that's again some of our clients, which on the face of its crazy when you think about it. But one example that just happened last week, I did an appeal for a woman who hadn't been awarded PIP after being reviewed and so we did the appeal, and it came back that she didn't need to go to tribunal, and they revised their decision and she was now going to get the enhanced rate of daily living and mobility. So she got a backdated payment as well as the higher payments going forward but she came in to donate £50. And it's like "No, it's for you, it's for you to live on" but no she was adamant she wanted to donate this. And again, that's happened numerous times in the past where people have gotten that lump sum payment and because they are grateful, they got that help to sort things out, and they want to give something back. But we do have local organisations; the schools will do their harvest festival stuff [and] that usually comes to us, but local organisations regularly donate financially and food items aswell. And individuals, we do get that aswell, but obviously the majority of

our donations do come from main supermarkets. I'll give you an indication of some of the places that we get from regularly. So, its Marks and Spencers (the one on Princes Street and at the Gyle), Morrisons, Sainsburys (both at Murrayfield and Longstone, they both donate weekly), Tesco at Corstorphine, both Lidl (the one at Dalry and the one at Corstorphine), The Co-op on Calder Road and obviously Amazon and Booker aswell.

Oh yeh, the catering people?

Yes. So we get a lot of stuff each week but sometimes it can vary because it depends on what they have. But generally, the quality is really high and so we get some good stuff. And we'll split it between the pantry and the food bank aswell so that people are getting access to the same items.

Thats wonderful Shona. That's something we have seen as well, when we have given grants to people and they immediately want to know how they can give some of that back. And for me, it's extremely telling that when people have very little and then receive even something small, a lot of people's instant response is to want to put that back into the work that you're doing. So, thanks for sharing that story, it's something we have seen as well. What are the main challenges in your work? I mean I am imagining space, funding, capacity, but is there anything, like when you think about your own role, what the main challenges are.

I suppose a lot of it is the frustrations around the whole benefit system and how people are being made to feel going through that whole assessment process; not being given the right information, being told different things by different people, they struggle to get through to places by telephone. The sort of enforcement that everything has to be done online for Universal Credit which is such a massive struggle for some people, particularly where there is a language barrier or a technical barrier for them. And the DWP are just not listening, or it's a hit or a miss; it depends on who you speak to. If you get somebody who is quite experienced then generally you can get some common sense but if you get someone who's a newer member of staff which invariably a lot of them are, a lot of them are temp staff anyway, then its, you know you are getting closed down and you're not getting any information. And people trying to do that by themselves is just impossible for them. So what I see a lot of the time is people have tried to do it themselves and then so but the time they get to me, they've already gone through part of the process, and we are having to start at the stage of an appeal which is a traumatic thing for people to go through.

Could you say a little bit more about what an appeal means, just in case there's anyone listening or reading that doesn't understand, like in relation to benefits what an appeal means?

Yeh. So if someone, I'll use PIP as an example cause that has been the majority of the cases that I've worked on, so the starting process is that someone comes in because they've either had a review form sent to them or they're making a new claim and then they go through the health assessment process em, an after that they'll get a decision from the DWP to say whether or not they are entitled to anything. And a lot of the time obviously the answer is a no the first-time round. And then they'll come back, and we will help them with what's called a mandatory reconsideration which has to go in first before it can get to an appeal stage and basically that means it just goes to somebody else, another decision maker within the DWP to look at. And its fairly rare for that decision to be overturned at that point. And then it moves on to an appeal which is heard by the tribunal service, and it's an independent panel. So nobody from the DWP is partaking in that decision making process but obviously it means that individual having to sit in front of, or on the telephone with, or over video with three people they've not met before.

A lot of the time, they're in pain or they have mental health issues which means their anxiety is through the roof and it's a really difficult process to go through because it can feel like they are being interrogated and not believed about what they're saying. And so it takes a lot of time and support to get people through that process and time is a massive issue because the delays in the system mean that you've got people waiting for a year and a half to get through to the appeal stage. And so they're getting this big, massive lump sum at the end of it all but what they really needed was the money throughout that year and a half to help them rather than make them really struggle and make them more unwell.

That's such important work because I can't imagine how isolating and confusing and frightening it would be to try to do that process by yourself you know.

People don't. They just don't. They just stop. They might try and get them to look at the decision again but once it gets to the appeal stage, unless someone has support from somewhere, it's unlikely that they'll go through it. It's soul destroying, they don't want to continue. It's too much for them to cope with.

So, what would help you in your role?

That's a difficult one. I suppose if we had access to more space, we could utilise the volunteer advisors more regularly [and] we would be able to offer more appointments cause the one thing that frustrates people is when we say [that] our next appointment is until a month down the line. But you know our service is limited to what we can provide. I'm the only full-time advisor there and again, I can only do so much before it starts to become overwhelming for me. So we have to have a cut-off point to allow me to then catch up otherwise it has a detrimental effect on the individuals I've already met with. So having space to allow us to use advice volunteers more regularly would ease some of that.

I suppose the biggest thing would be if the benefit system was fixed (laughs) but I don't see that happening any time soon! I can only hope that the teething problems will be ironed out within the Scottish system and or things will start to migrate over and hopefully then we'll start to see a wee bit more of a difference, I would like to think. But with the cost of living crisis I can't see there being a let up for people needing help and advice and all the services in Edinburgh, well everywhere not just Edinburgh, all the services are just inundated. So you try and refer someone on for more specialist energy advice for example Changeworks are swamped so you're going to have to wait 8 weeks to get an appointment to speak to somebody. That makes people more anxious cause they think what's going to happen in that period of time and just being limited by what we can do to help sometimes. So I suppose, again, wider Government getting involved and actually trying to do something at a higher level to stop people being put in this situation would be the main thing I think.

Thanks so much for that because I know it's not easy as well when we talk about what's challenging and what would help but what isn't available right now so thank you. What's rewarding about the work that you do?

When you get that outcome for someone that's a positive thing that they were looking for. And you've been with them throughout the journey and trying to reassure them throughout that time and in between trying to do as much as you can to help in other ways just to get them through it. And then at the end the relief and how grateful people are and it's like, again talking about giving stuff back [they] buy you flowers, they buy you chocolates and it's like "No, it's your money, don't do that, it's what I'm here to do, it's my job (laughs)". But you can't stop people from doing that so it's just, people are so grateful, the cards and the little gifts and what people say and how much of a difference that that has

made to them, that's the thing that makes a difference and that's the rewarding side of it. Yeh, knowing that you've managed to help someone be in a better place.

Thats beautiful. You kind of touched on this a little bit already but in case you have any other thoughts, what are your hopes for the future; for your work and for the people you support?

I think, well we've got some more plans in terms of where we go with the pantry and hopefully trying to expand that service, looking at where we go with the volunteers because we've built up a large bank of volunteers now so looking at people doing different things to help within the organisation. But also looking at developing our social media presence because we've not really had anybody specifically working on that properly so getting more information out to people using that route than we have done before; so things about benefits and employability as well because that's where we have been lacking a bit. I'm trying to think what else. Just continuing to work with other organisations aswell is one of the things, trying to make more links so that we know where we can signpost people to for the most beneficial service for them.

Thats great, that's wonderful. And finally, cause we've come to the end of our wee chat, was does Edinburgh mean to you?

(Laughs) Well its where I was born, brought up, so for me its home, and it will always be home. Its where my mum and dad are from, where my grandparents are from so although I've lived elsewhere for periods of time, it's always the place I've come back to. It's to think about the different stages of my life and being with friends and friends always wanting to visit, wanting to go out in Edinburgh and that whole thing about going clubbing, going to gigs, progression throughout the years to never going out again (laughs)

(Laughs) Yeh I think I'm pretty much in that stage too.

So, its home to me.

That is really lovely. Before we say goodbye, where can people learn more about your work and your organisation?

So, you can go to our website, Community One Stop Shop and you can also pop in and see us in Broomhouse, always happy for people popping in to say hello. If you need any help or assistance or to find out a bit more or are interested in volunteering then you can phone us, email us, or as I said, pop in and find out a bit more.

Shona it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Thank you.

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