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Welcome back 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 Mark Phillips from Access to Industry, a charity that works with individuals to support them into education and employment.

So can we start by you introducing yourself and let me know what organisation that you work for?

Certainly, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today Ems. My name is Mark Phillips. I'm a service manager with a local third sector organisation, Access to Industry.

Thanks so much Mark. Can you tell me a bit about the work that your organisation does?

Okay, where do I start? Come next year it'll be a quarter of a century of Access to Industry. The organisation started small in the west of Edinburgh as a kind of cottage industry working with the local college to provide access opportunities to some of the people in that part of Edinburgh to do some creative work. And since then it's grown into a much larger and hopefully punchy concern of around about 40 or so staff members working across several local authorities including Edinburgh and East and Midlothian. The main premise of the work is to help people into opportunities; be that work, training, education, but some of the work we do is involved in simply just looking after people so they can possibly wake up one day ready for the kind of opportunities I just mentioned. That's really about it in a nutshell.

That's great, thanks. So what is your role and if you could share a bit about what your role entails?

Okay, well I joined Access to Industry in 2008 having worked very closely with them since 2003 as an addiction worker feeding the people that I was supporting into Access to Industry's opportunities. For a large part of my early career there I was one of the case workers supporting people coming out of prison, rehab, hostels etc. into jobs, into classes and just generally addressing the barriers that perhaps needed help with to get them to that point.

But since the last decade or so I've been one of the managers in the team and really it's about making sure that the teams are looked after themselves, know what to do, know how to work with the people we support, know what we need to do to keep the

doors open, know what we need to do to change with the times and to attract the right kind of people comfortably into the project and to make sure that they're looked after on the way out. So all the other more mundane things, helping with recruiting and some of the administrative things that go on behind the scenes although there are people far better than me at doing that, but I'll contribute where I can. So really, it's about making sure that the projects that we run are doing what we tell the funders that we plan to do with them.

That's great and what projects do you run that you would be responsible for, you and your team?

Well the one that's been the most consistent and the one that's probably most people identify Access to Industry with is the Encompass project which was formerly known as the transition project until about six or seven years ago. That's been the mainstay since Access to Industry moved into the city and its client group is mainly people in recovery. Nice to be using the word 'recovery' because we just talked about 'addiction' when we started so it's nice that the zeitgeist has actually kind of followed us in that respect; where we're talking about people using the labour market, using education and all these kind of things as a means to help them get better rather than it being a means and an end in itself. But also people coming out of prison and in my time with Access to Industry we've developed a lot of positive work in Edinburgh prison and then at Polmont Young Offenders Institute and elsewhere at times too. But we also work with people who are homeless.

Our location in the Cowgate, in the centre of town, is in proximity to lots of hostels and everything is helpful too as is the fact that, just in general, our centrality because it's not all that far for anyone. We don't have any kind of kind of tribal link with any of the the outlying parts of the city where a lot of the people that we support come from. But we also have an interest in looking after and supporting the Access Progress Project which is a project that has developed from the priority of supporting parents. So on paper perhaps less vulnerable but you know certainly on paper just as needy. People that are trying to return from the period of looking after the kids to thinking about returning back to work or doing so for the first time. Interestingly and hearteningly quite a lot of the people that we support from that project are people that are from other parts of the world, and it's been a real learning experience to look after and learn from people from other cultures too. And also similarly one of the emerging priorities locally and nationally is to increase people's awareness of data and digital learning and digital skills and everything so we've actually been a part of that.

I've got some excellent staff that know far more than I do about that type of work that are working with the local college and other people to bring new people in to learn new things and in doing so we learn about these things too. So if you'd been speaking to me five, ten years ago it would have been a much more of a one-dimensional answer to that question, but you know there's all sorts of client groups emerging now that all have equal merit and the nice thing is when they all work and study together because that's the way it should be in a community.

Absolutely. That's loads of stuff, fantastic. So in your experience or/and in the experience of your team how have things changed since the 2020 Covid pandemic and with the current rising cost of living? What impact have you seen on like the people that you support and, on your organisation, as well?

My goodness!

I know, it's a really big question.

It's either a really stumbling monosyllabic answer like I'm about to give you or it's a 45-minute lecture on the subject but you're wanting something in between. So I'd say it's a little difficult now because I think things have kind of recalibrated a bit since. I'll admit when we were talking before we switched the tape on here, we were talking about how interesting it is that people don't speak to each other on the phone anymore. Some people tend to thrive with video conferencing and some people are sick of it too, so I suppose there's some people have found it's a godsend as far as family life and you know pet life and things like that. So just like anything there's been almost too many aspects to put into one punchy wee answer. I think in this kind of situation you have to take the positives. You know I could moan about the things that bother me about it and other things like that, but I think it's just given us more options to play with. Saving time, saving money.

Yes, the downside is that perhaps the kind of human touch is being lost more and more professionally with people, certainly personally. If I'm in a video conferencing situation I'll, because of the way I am, lose interest far quicker in this kind of that format and that's a challenge. As far as other aspects of post-pandemic obviously there's been real changes in the labour market and with us being an employability organisation that's significant too. It looks different. The pandemic period has also coincided with Brexit too and the challenges and you know some say opportunities that that brings as well so you might sometimes find that there's a mixture of things going on between the two when it comes to work and everything like that.

Perhaps we can talk about the pandemic all we like and the post-pandemic reality, but in amongst that is obviously the difficulty people have in making ends meet and the amount of poverty there is now. That's probably more significant than the pandemic perhaps or perhaps the pandemic's contributed to that but I'd say that's probably been the most telling thing that that we encounter and are challenged by is how difficult it is for our students and our clients to get by but also our staff.

So do you think that they would be the main challenges in your work?

I would say they are. Obviously if we're working with people who are disadvantaged because of addiction and because of a criminal justice involvement; having offended, whether they've been in prison or whether they were able to avoid that obviously those are those are problems. Because these aren't things that are what you would call 'protected characteristics', you know, there's no nothing in the Equalities Act about the things that happened to you in your childhood that got you a criminal record in your youth and then worse as you grow older. There's nothing. There's no protected characteristic for having a drug problem that may have come alongside that period of offending. So because of that it's always in the eye of the beholder. So if we're talking

about opportunities and things, you there's a real genuine stigma and it's backed up often by genuine barriers that people will face because of people's judgment and regardless of what's on their CV a criminal record has never helped anybody get a job apart from in some quirky unique situations where maybe it's a necessity. So I'd say having thought about the questions you'd ask that's certainly been one of the things that challenges us the most. Because people come with low expectations because they you know they fear that they've got. They're two nil behind before they start because of things that they've encountered whereas in reality people should actually often be congratulated for still being alive never mind further punished for anything that they've had to do in the course of trying to survive.

Absolutely that's a really important point and I'm actually very glad and grateful that you brought that up. I think that's really important. I also want to acknowledge for anyone listening to this that we are having this chat next to a building site which is louder today than it's ever been!

What is rewarding about the work that you do?

Well I'd say I've kind of set the scene with the gloomy know challenges but at the end of the day despite all of those Edinburgh is a prosperous city and you know a city of opportunity. I mentioned Brexit too, but it means that things like that also mean that perhaps employers are looking in places they never used to in the past. So I'd say that the real rewarding thing is when you get somebody coming in with a bit of fear in their eyes, but you can see an appetite, a bit of fear and a bit of fire at the same time. Certainly my time as a case worker I would have an instinct of who actually means it and who's there to keep other people happy, be they social workers or family members or partners or whatever like that. But you would see that kind of mixture like trepidation of eagerness in people and if you wake up in a year, two years, five years later and that person's now a peer and they're working in an organisation, in the field or they're working in any kind of setting then that's, I mean it sounds corny, but that's it. And everybody says if you had a pound for every time anybody said "oh your work must be so challenging but rewarding" but people say that for that kind of cliché for a reason and so that's the nice thing because that means that when you're done with this line of work there will be people there that can be your legacy and your organisation's legacy. And I dare say be far better at doing the same kind of work than you are yourself because they've overcome obstacles and gratifyingly there's so many people that we know, and we can name that are in that boat now that are working for other organizations.

I bump into people all the time literally and I have to admit at my age sometimes it takes a few minutes to recognize them, but I always do. The name always comes back. And it may be from a short six month period they had in one of our classes 15 years ago but they remember it and often they'll say that was the kind of catalyst for what they did next so that's a really nice thing to do because you didn't realize this was happening behind the scenes but somebody just got up off their off their knees and bounced back now that's cool.

But the most important thing is to make sure that the standards are still high, and the opportunity is still good so you can create your next bunch of people, your superstars so to speak rather than dining out on stories from people from x years ago. So I think

for all the staff, if all the staff were sitting here, they would say the same kind of thing they may have some different things that that inspire them, or you know make them feel glad they're doing what they're doing. But the main thing is especially if maybe the people you've worked with, certainly in my time when I was supporting people, that the people I remember the fondest were the people where we actually did have some troublesome moments. People who have been on the edge of something. They end up back in jail and you couldn't be more frustrated, you couldn't be angrier dare say they always feel the same, but you know when they do get it and do bounce back, and you've helped them do that. That means far more than if it was just some fairy tale story where everything landed right first time. That's good too but you know it's less meaningful for everybody.

I think yeah that's very special, and I don't think corny at all and really important. What would help you in your role or what would help in your organisation? So would it be funding? I think funding comes up a lot for everybody. Is there anything that would be helpful?

Well I mean I'm no expert on funding and there are other people that could talk better about that but obviously the funding is important. We're very fortunate where most of the project, well you make your own luck, but the standards that my colleagues, my own managers that pursue the funding and take a great responsibility for that. They're very experienced and skilled at that so touch wood. But you know I think we're in a decent place with that and I think we're all aware that it's not important to just chase more funding just for kicks just because you can. So I mean we're you know quite selective with what will actually work versus still having an eye on things that will actually be interesting and different, so I don't think I need to say much too much about the funding. I could be speaking to you next February or March when we've had a run of bad luck with that, and the same discussion could be a cry for help. So it's not to say there's no complacency here but I think the thing main thing would be, that does help, is having really good quality partners, to educate people in education and opportunity providers who are genuine about supporting the people that we're trying to help.

And it's also it's obvious for me to say here just to keep everybody sweet but you know having funders are more kind of niche based like the Edinburgh Trust to fill in the gaps for things. Because our larger funders you know central government, local government give us some money and we're expected rightly to run everything with it but things come up particularly for our students where we might think "well we can't justify x hundred pound or even a four-figure sum for things like that" so actually having more funds like that rather than putting all the onus on Edinburgh Trust would be good. We talked before this discussion about another fund that's no longer here locally and in Scotland and you know if you were asking what's needed it needs to come back. Things like that need to come back because they were useful, and they were there around for 25-30 years. I used one in the mid-90s when I was long-term unemployed in Edinburgh to do a computer course and things like that, so you know rather than these things disappearing. It was £200 I think, £150-200 pound when I used it.

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So these kinds of things are really handy and also as I was saying about 10 minutes ago having some sort of equity in the labour market and a grown-up attitude towards risk and things like that when it comes to people going for opportunities and people being treated humanely. Even if they're not going to get the opportunities, people to be treated fairly when it comes to their brave decisions, to start work for the first time since they've been in prison or to start work for the first time in their life because they've had to use drugs since school. So that's the thing that they would mean most. A lot of people kind of flatter to deceive because they want you to have lots of people come to us, employers wanting something really quick and we're in their face that they have a problem that needs solved. You know as far as staffing is concerned and because we're not a large-scale organisation we perhaps aren't able to respond immediately with what they need and then before you know it you know the phone's gone quiet, and the emails aren't being answered. So it would be nice to have more people, more schemes, more opportunities where there is some sort of uh wage incentives on the behalf of employers to take people on now. These things have come and gone over in my time with Access to Industry and sometimes they've been earmarked for age groups and things like that, particularly young people, which is cool, but it would be nice if there was more money being spent to actually encourage everybody to work together to make openings affordable and available for people that need them the most. Because that kind of affirmative action is only going to help us all if the people we support are paying tax rather than know sustaining themselves entirely on benefits.

My next question was about your hopes for the future for your work and for the people you support. I think you you've actually kind of answered that. Was there anything else that you'd like to add in there?

I think you're right. I'd hate to waffle because I'm probably waffled enough but no it's a waffle just for the sake of it but yeah, I think I've summarised that. More of the same. The kind of things I've just suggested aren't necessarily unaffordable or difficult to put together and I think most people, if they were sitting in my seat right now would be nodding their heads too, it's just it would be nice to have the powers to be that be doing that. But I understand that the country, the city, and everybody who are skint at the moment but there's an economic argument for this as well as a social argument and everybody knows that that you if you invest money in this type of work then it does pay itself back very quickly yeah.

So we've come to our last question. What does Edinburgh mean to you?

Well pondering on this one it's funny isn't it because I'm an immigrant from across the water albeit that the water is fife it's the Forth, so Edinburgh means a lot of different things doesn't it. Since I moved to Edinburgh about 20 years ago it's meant different things even since then I think Edinburgh is going through a funny phase at the moment. It's interesting isn't it because it's a small medieval city but it does feel that perhaps gasping for breath at the moment because of its popularity and I'm part one of the reasons for that! I'm one of the problem! I'm one of the people to blame for this because there's a beauty and attraction to the city but it's also really going to be interesting to see what Edinburgh looks like having been here in 20 years if we're lucky to be around in 20 years to just see what the city is going to look like. Because obvious examples being like the housing crisis here which unless you're one of the more fortunate people it's crippling for a working/middle class family maybe like the one I've

got, and a lot of people like us. But it must be utterly demoralizing for people that are having to get by in unstable circumstances and even having what we would have called in the old days a decent income. You know it means that you're a redundancy or a relationship breakup away from having to be a grown adult trying to find a room in a shared flat or living in Fife or Lanarkshire or something like that and spending 20% of your earnings commuting and things like that too. It's funny, I'd love it to have given you a really a kind of emotional, beautiful answer to that, but the reality and I have to say it because a lot of people feel it, is that it's a particularly difficult city to live in if things aren't going too well for you. Especially like most people in this business, you know we're not particularly political or anything like that, I think it's there's more to it than that, it's just that it's difficult when there's so much prosperity rubbing you in the face in a city like Edinburgh. And you know it is usually quite at odds with your own situation. Because we're trying to help people obviously, but we can understand why people might not want to trade in their benefits and especially their housing benefits for you know what could be a relatively modest income at work yeah but it's accompanied by a huge rent bill that makes the work seem you know like it wasn't a good idea in the first place.

That's a really important point that you've made and what I love about this question is that everyone's answer is so different, it's so different. And I think as someone like myself who, I mean I'm not from Edinburgh I'm from Ireland and moved over from Dublin 22 years ago, I can see a little bit of myself in every single answer, in every single person that's answered this question. But I think it is a very important point to make that you know we have a housing crisis in Edinburgh and that rents are going through the roof so it's an important point. Thank you so much for your time and your honesty and your great conversation. If someone wanted to learn more about the work that you do how could they do that?

Well they could simply go on Access to Industry website (accessindustry.co.uk) We also have a Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts or they can contact Access to Industry. Our phone number is on our website too. My name is Mark Phillips and I'm always happy to speak to people or indeed invite them in if they'd like to have a look around and especially if they've got something they can offer us or they think that we can offer them. We do all sorts so it's all there on the website and if there's anything that's missing then just give us a call or email the info which you'll find on our own page too and I'd be really happy to speak to anybody that's interested enough to sit through 20-30 minutes of my rambling! If you've done that then you at least need to probably get in touch with me so I can apologise!

Not at all Mark it's been an absolute pleasure and thanks again for your time.

Pleasure, thank you.

This interview was carried out and produced by me, Ems Harrington, Senior Partnership Development Officer 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