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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 Agata Ciesla from Link Living Edinburgh Young Persons Service. This service aims to help young people overcome the challenges and barriers they may face whilst helping them to achieve their own individual goals and shape their lives for a more positive future.

My name is Agata Ciesla, and I'm the Service Delivery Manager in Link Living Edinburgh Young Persons Service.

And can you describe for me the work that your organisation does?

So Link Living is a charity; well-being and health charity, that supports people in Scotland and over Scotland and my service covers the whole of Edinburgh. It works with people between 16 and 25, young adults, supporting them with various things. We've just been awarded a new contract so it's not just visiting housing support that we do at the moment, we do a few other things, but yeah visiting housing support is kind of our bread and butter.

So this is supporting either homeless young people or people who are threatened with homelessness or people who have recently been homeless who need help to get or keep a home, who need help with working on their independent living skills to help them manage the tenancy, to help them come up with some plan for the future and hopefully engage with some kind of employability, education, some kind of big plans. The other part of the new funding that we have is a YES project which is Youth Emergency Support Service working with 16- and 17-year-olds who don't have social work or through care and after care support, who are in an emergency situation. It's kind of more preventative, kind of early intervention support, trying to help people not progress within the kind of homelessness world. So ideally trying to get them back home if that's safe to do so, so the work could be around working, kind of mediating with their family. This is also about them figuring out what the housing options, realistic housing options really are and to try and put this off as much as possible because that can be quite a difficult world, especially when you're super young. The other part of the funding we have now is group work and that is providing group work sessions for small groups, up to I think eight people, again for 16- to 25-year-olds to learn independent living skills. Different areas from looking at housing options, what's available, but also practical tasks like cooking, looking at correspondence, benefits,

applying for things, but also education, also employability, applying for jobs, living in a community, dealing with neighbours, different kind of tasks like this. And the last part of our support is our supported living. So actually very close to here we have a project called Leith Base based on Bonnington Road, that supports 10 homeless young adults, and it's temporary support, temporary flats with support, and people can live there before they can move into their own tenancies provided by the council or housing associations. So we have more flats, but this particular project is just here.

That's loads, that's more than I actually, than I knew that the organisation does. And can you talk a little bit about your role within the organisation?

So I have been in Link Living for nearly 20 years. I started as a support worker many years ago and I loved it. It's the same service, I never moved, I felt like my life changed. Suddenly somebody switched the lights on, and I realised that there is a job in this world that I am good at and that fulfils the kind of biggest need in me, that is to help people and be needed and be resourceful and looking for solutions. I love that. It's like, I don't know, it just makes me feel alive. So I've done that for many years and then I was a senior for a bit, and then four years ago I became a manager of the same service.

The service that I manage is not massive, it's only about 20 people, and my role is to make sure that the funding is there, that we do what we're meant to be doing, that people that we work with get a quality of support, that their needs are answered, that it's tailored to their needs, but also that my workers, my support workers are happy at work. I find that probably one of the most important part of my job is to make sure that I employ people who want to do the job, who have the passion for working with young people. They don't just want a job, they want to work in this particular service, and that they can do it, that they are accepted by young people, that they can support them, help them in a way that young people want to be helped, which is tricky because young people are a group that's different from adults.

Anybody who ever worked with people at this age will know that. They require a slightly different approach, a lot of patience, and a lot of love, I guess. So yeah, providing that space for my support workers to be able to provide support in that way, I feel like it's my biggest role, really. But yeah, I also do a lot of boring things, like writing reports and making sure that our funding is there. We were just recently awarded the funding that I mentioned earlier, so this is fantastic, fantastic news about Edinburgh Council giving us the kind of assurance that we're going to be able to provide the support we're providing for the next 10 years.

That's such wonderful news, congratulations again, it's fantastic.

Thank you, that's fantastic because we are really, really happy to be doing this. Obviously, there's other organisations that could do the job well also, so we weren't sure that we would get it, absolutely not. So yeah, it's great to know that we can provide it longer.

Can I ask you about your experience and how things have changed since the 2020 COVID pandemic and now the rising cost of living. What changes have you noticed and how has that impacted the work of your organisation and of your own work as well?

Oh God, massively. Well, to start with, loads of us now work a lot alone, much more alone. Homeworking, you know, we had to get used to this, it brings its own challenges, but also benefits, right? It's something we all got used to somehow. Some people came back to offices a bit more now, some people are really stuck in their ways now in the kind of homeworking. For me as a manager, that allowed me sometimes to have the space to kind of work on reports, projects in the kind of safety of my own home, which yeah, I think time is not that important, so you can start really early, finish really late. It's actually quite beneficial sometimes when you kind of maybe benefit from that, right? Problems, obviously, is that we're alone, we're sitting alone with ourselves. I try to encourage my staff not to be at home much. Their jobs during the pandemic were completely different to before and now.

Our jobs are to be with people in their homes, so we should be 90% of our time with people in their homes, in community. Suddenly when the pandemic started, we had to support people remotely, either by calls or teams calls or just phone calls. We were going for walks, meeting people for a much shorter amount of time, which was really challenging, because as we know, the only way to support people is to build relationships with them. You can't build relationships on teams. It's really hard. So that's how it changed back then, and then we were adapting all the time to all the changes that were happening, and I guess how it is at the moment, I feel like we're still a little bit shaken. We went through trauma, all of us, right? It's something that in a very different way because some people have families and they had to work from home, and that was really challenging. Some people were alone during this time, and they really struggled with being alone. We were all affected.

Young people we work with, my God, I don't know if you know, but during the pandemic, the homeless people were not moved at all. So the situations that normally would take maybe a year, somebody would be somewhere in a hostel, and then were able to move into flats, suddenly everything was put on hold. So from maybe a year, a year and a half, two years wait, suddenly it was three, four years people waited. And okay, if somebody was in a safe place, that was all right. But if somebody was in an unsafe environment, waiting, eagerly waiting to move, that was really hard. So we had to change also what advice we give and try and support people to cope with this. So it's now, it's kind of going back a little bit to how it was before. But timescales have extended because it's not like suddenly, I don't know, thousands of houses are built, and we can give them to people. So people were not moving. So yeah, the waiting times are still very long. So that's the pandemic. I guess there's probably many, many other ways that it's affected us.

But that's kind of like the biggest thing, I think, in our work. The cost of living, my God, where do you start? Again, we're all affected. Because it's not just in people we work with, but all my workers, you know, working in health and social care, as much as it's rewarding and beautiful, it's not paid enough. So I support my staff very often when they tell me that they're struggling, their families are struggling. We can support young people we work with grants. I think my staff need these grants also very often when they're moving, when they are in hardship. So that's been super hard. Our work changed so much. We're talking about grants, we're talking about food banks, we're talking about help with paying gas and electricity all the time at our meetings.

Organisations that were around very often aren't around anymore. Grants change all the time. And there's just not enough. Another tricky situation is that some people got really used to these grants, and they don't even want to try to budget their money and look at ways to kind of be better prepared for independent living. They kind of just go, oh, I'm just going to go to the food bank. And as much as you know that's great that it's there, you're kind of wondering, you know, it's not going to be there forever. You know, I don't want people to learn that that is how you live independently, that you depend on all the charities. It's not right. Like, you know, Scotland, it's not, you'd expect that it would not be needed. But it is, people do rely on it. And people live in extreme poverty. So when we work with, and we work with many young people who are very different from each other. So some people will be single young people, some people will have families, lots of them single, one parent families. We'll have people who work, we'll have people who are on benefits, we'll have people who are refugees, people who have mental health issues, long-term health, physical health conditions, such a variety. So their needs are affected by this.

And then if buying food, paying for gas and electricity takes them to the limit, there's no money to live, to do things that make you happy, to invest in your own interests and hobbies and or just have fun. Yeah. Which obviously young people, as all of us, but young people really need to do. So, so it's hard. It's been super hard. Yeah.

What would you say are the main challenges in your work right now? I know you've talked about some of the impacts of where society is at the moment, but what would you say the main challenges are?

So I think poverty is the main thing. Yeah. And like I say, it's not just with service users, people we are helping, but workers. Because if we don't pay workers good wages to support people, if they are struggling going back home to buy their own shopping, at some point they will burn out and they will say, I can't do this. I need to go and get a different job. And for young people we work with, you know, it's like the last two weeks, two of my staff applied for a crisis grant, which in the past was one of those things that, you know, you are struggling today, how long are you going to struggle for? A couple of weeks, a week? Council would kind of assess the situation and give people a little bit of money. Guess how much money people got?

How much?

One person, £7.06 another £6.10 or thereabouts. And we were thinking, what is this assessment? £6. You know, it's like, OK, maybe people don't go and buy artisan bread for £6 a loaf, but what can they buy for £6 really?

Yeah, £6 doesn't get you much, you know.

Gas, electricity, this will be eaten in a day because majority of them will have pre-payment meters, you know. Yeah so, it's really tricky. In the world that promotes, because when you look at this, you see the models that, well, they're definitely not my own, but, you know, on TV, you can see, I don't know, the rich with all the different clothes and makeups and haircuts and eating sushi. OK, maybe that's not what everybody can afford, but they can't even afford, I don't know, beans on toast and a

warm home. And, you know, again, we live in Scotland, we're in middle of April and it's cold outside.

Yeah, it's freezing and raining.

And, you know, again, you may put another layer, a blanket, but you want to have the heating on. You don't want yourself, your children to be sitting in cold. And what if your heating also is not gas, it's electricity. Some of our young people have said that they really struggle with this, that, you know, it's all the different pressures, it's all-around money. I think money is definitely the biggest challenge, the biggest problem. Yeah, I would say, I don't think there is another one that's bigger.

What do you think would help, like your role, your organisation, society, what would help? I know that's quite a big question.

Oh God, it's massive, yeah. I guess if the problem is money, is having more of it coming, right? Both for workers and for people we work with, but that would need to be a massive social change, isn't it? It's like Scandinavian countries, you know, how they look at benefits and how they look at people who are not working, it's very different, isn't it? But it's a massive, would-be massive job for people really, really high up in the world to make these decisions, isn't it? Or in this country. To treat people who are not working in a different way. They are not, I don't know, in this country, they're given money, but it's like scraps, isn't it? It's like people are told, okay, so you want a sofa, have the cheapest, the most uncomfortable sofa, that's what you're going to get. And I think when people, I remember being told by one of the grant givers, not you guys, somebody completely different, somebody told me, well, you're telling me that they need this, but I think they want it. So it's need versus want, Aha. And I was like, what do you mean? So because you're not working, because you're on benefits, because you're in hardship, that means you can't want. You can just need.

That's surely a thing that we're all allowed to want. And especially when I think, yeah, things like help is given, money is given for, in our situation, helping people establish homes. You want them to be happy with these choices. You want them to look at the sofa that they've picked and think, wow, this is my sofa. That's my first sofa ever, and I love it. And I picked it. And it may be second-hand, because that's what I decided, or it may be completely new and leather, because that's what I wanted. And yes, I understand there should be realistic boundaries of this. Obviously, you can't just have whatever you want because it's just not possible. But within reason, it's nice when you're given a choice. So yeah, I would want people to have more choice. I would like more resources, more money being available.

I would like big changes on top to kind of allow people a bit more control over their lives. I would like more support for them getting jobs. We all say like, oh yeah, we want people to get jobs. But then they get jobs, go to unis, and their rent payments stop suddenly. And they're expected, 17-year-olds are expected to pay their rent from one day to the other because they went to uni. And you're thinking, okay, fair enough. But really? Yeah, I would want more support for young people to study, to establish themselves in a role as a worker. I think that would be really helpful. Because I think the big change, we want people to change and look after themselves, but we don't want to facilitate that. We just want them to change. And some people do. We have some young people, oh my God, we have some amazing young people in our service.

And some of them are so resourceful and able to use what they've got. Others need more help. And that's why we're there. So expecting that all young people should just be ready, ready, steady, go. They aren't. Yeah.

What is rewarding about the work that you do?

Seeing a young person use support who never thought that they would be able to use support, build a relationship with us, when they said that they don't trust anybody. Seeing them smile, seeing them move to their own places and be proud of those places. Seeing a young person get accepted to college, finish a course, get a job, sustain it, all of these things. This job is so rewarding. Young people are very up and down. You have to always be ready for a change. Somebody that you've had a long relationship with and you're thinking you know everything about them, one day they disappear. And you have to be prepared for this. So that's hard.

But seeing them cope, seeing them change their life and having this little feeling that, oh, I took a little bit, like there's a little bit of me there. It's so, so amazing. I sometimes meet people I've worked with 20 years ago, 15 years ago, and seeing them recognize me on the street and come and say, hey, remember I was not doing great with this, but now I am. Look, I remember you told me I should be an engineer and I was fighting with you. I thought it wasn't the right thing. But I decided to do it a couple of years later. And now I have a job. I have, I've seen people with their kids who I knew when they were like just born. And they are like, you know what, when I first had my daughter, I didn't really have much self-belief. And then I met you and it just made me feel so different. And I felt so accepted. And now I do this. And I don't know, it's just so, it's rewarding. Everything about it is rewarding. But it's also rewarding when, and I love when that happens, when we work with somebody, and it doesn't work well. They disengage, disappear. And then they come back. Because they felt like we've created a space that they can come back to. You know, it's like, I can fail you, I can shout at you, I can swear at you, and you still open your hands, and you take me back.

So that safe space.

That safe space. It's like we can say, your time with us, your support, this particular time is ending. But our care never ends. Once you start caring, you're always caring. It doesn't stop because somebody's been, I don't know, not saying the right thing. It doesn't work like this. So yeah, that's beautiful. And that's super rewarding.

That is really beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. So we've come to the end of our conversation. But I have one more question for you. Can you tell me what Edinburgh means to you?

Wow. I'm not from here.

Like myself.

I was born in Poland. And at some point in my life, I started craving Scotland. I started thinking about Scotland. And Edinburgh and Scotland were the two things that were on my mind throughout my studies. I studied cultural anthropology. And when writing

about different things about ethnic problems or whatever I was writing about, there was always like this angle that I would take that I would talk about Scotland. And I don't know how it started, but it was growing in me. And then when I finished uni, I had this desire to come here. And it was calling me, although I've never been here. I've never been to Scotland before I came 20 years ago. And I think I fell in love with Edinburgh and Scotland immediately. And I think this is a place I love. Edinburgh. But I love people here as well.

I love how international it is. How varied. All the religions, all the colours, all the subcultures, everything is around. Edinburgh's home. Edinburgh's a space where I discovered passions, like I dance now, and that's where I discovered it. And the community, dance community in Edinburgh is beautiful. I love how Edinburgh looks as well, like I live not too far from Arthur's Seat. So having a nature reserve like that in the middle of the city. I cycle and the streets being so varied, like up and down, it just keeps you interested all the time. Yeah, Edinburgh is a fantastic place. It's somewhere where I felt welcomed. Again, not being from this country and Britain kind of deciding to part from you I knew Scotland wasn't choosing that. I knew Edinburgh wasn't choosing that. But being from another country, I never really meet people who speak badly to foreigners. And I'm sure they are there. I'm sure they are there. But that's never happened to me. People are lovely and welcoming. And I feel like that's a special, special thing. I don't take it for granted. I'm very, very grateful to Edinburgh and Scotland for taking me in.

Well Edinburgh is grateful for you no doubt. So if someone wanted to learn more the work that you do or funders wanted to fund the work that you do, where they learn more?

So we have a website, Linkliving.co.uk and I would be more than happy to speak to people and people are more than welcome to get in touch with me directly. We are based in St Margarets House, we have a little office there so if anyone wants to come to see us and speak to us, I am more than happy to organise this. Link Living is not just my service there is a mental health service that works with people of any ages with long term mental health needs. There is group work practice and participation team that has many different courses for people in Edinburgh and there are courses that we provide to other organisations to help them be a bit more trauma informed. So yeah, we do a lot of different things. So if you are interested, be in touch.

Aga thank you for your time, for your energy and for your heart in this work and for your honesty. I really, really appreciate it.

Thank you, Ems, I'm very grateful.

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