

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 Leo Parades from Harbour Homes, a Housing Association provided housing and help to people in need throughout Leith and North Edinburgh.

So, can you let me know what your name is and the organisation you work for?

I am Leo Paredes and I work for Harbour Homes. We just had a recent [name] change from Port of Leith Housing Association.

And Leo what kind of work does your organisation do?

We provide social housing and in our team we have an advice service team where we provide money advice, welfare rights advice and also tenancy sustainment. That is what I do.

So, can you tell me a little bit more then about your role is, your day-to-day work?

So, my day-to-day work would be to picking up referrals from housing officers or maintenance officers when they see that the tenants are struggling and then we assess the situation and either apply for grants if this helps or refer them for the support they need. We also help with utilities, council tax or anything that they need to just be assured that they are keeping up with the house needs.

In your experience, how have things changed for the people you support so, since the 2020 covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis. How has that impacted people and also your work?

So since the pandemic, we had a massive increase in anxiety and depression, isolation, self-neglect. And actually, some of the grants that you help us with was just to help the tenants to do clear ups after they have been isolated while they were getting support from other organisations; just to get them a hand to be able to maintain the house and basically just to put themselves back on their feet. So, since the pandemic it's not just because of the cost of living but some people have reacted [by] either going totally out and trying to engage again with the community [or] other people are still in the pandemic world. They are full of anxiety and they struggling to live day to day. Not just because of the cost of living but because of the mentality that "the world is an enemy and something wrong is happening, so I just keep myself to myself." So isolation [is] still happening there.

And what kind of support does your team offer if someone is experiencing that isolation?

So, we come to their house, we talk to them. For example, this situation of isolation, we will refer them for support and if they need anything else for their house, we will assess it. If [they need] flooring or a washing machine, or a bed for example, just something to be able to look after themselves we will refer them for a grant. But at the same time, we keep close monitoring of their support. So we would guarantee that they receive the help that they need just to get out and about. Sometimes they need support, sometimes they need different services, sometimes they need both. Sometimes this is linked with addiction, so we refer them to support agencies for this. So this is basically what we do.

From all the interviews I have done so far, mainly what people have spoken about is the financial impact of the pandemic and of the cost-of-living crisis. You're the first person that has mentioned the emotional and mental impact.

It's a lot of people who, the fear of getting the virus, is just still there in their minds and we are not seeing them much at the moment but we still seeing the consequences of people that have anxiety about engaging with people. So the anxiety is still there. So we need to show them that they have enough support and now it's safer and its better if you engage with the community. Because if you are [not] looking after yourself and something happened to you you don't have someone to rely on. Probably doctors are seeing a lot of this. So basically isolation is one of the biggest impacts of the pandemic. I don't know, I think about the cost of living prevents you or incapacitates you of engaging with other people. For example, if you are a single mother of two young kids and the kids are going to a fair or a trip or whatever, and you cannot provide for the packed lunch it is really difficult. So would you keep the child at home that day? They don't go to after school club and things like this so engaging in the society is hard.

What are the main challenges in your work?

The main challenges of my work are the amount of people or referrals that we get. We only have two hands, and we only have same number of hours in the day. We can only do one thing at a time. And the challenges we got aswell is just when people have lost track of how to engage. Some people are very good at engaging but other people, and actually the people that that [are worse at] engaging are the people that need more of the support. So it's just knowing where to establish the middle point and say "Ok, we are going to refer you for support, but I need you to engage" because actually the support is limited. We don't have many agencies that support at the moment. We [are] still referring to YPeople (YPeople have changed their name to Right There) and I don't know if they apply aswell for the Edinburgh Trust?

They do yeh.

So, Right There (YPeople) have been really good and they are the main one that we refer [to]. The other agency that we refer a lot is Social Work for, how would you say, assessments of people's needs and financial support or anything. I think I have lost track of the question, can you remind me?

Yeh we were talking about what the main challenges in your work are.

So, the amount of people that need help and that puts us a lot under pressure. So if the housing officer refers someone, we give them a phone call, we send them a letter, we email them, we text them, we give them a few tries. We give three tries and if they don't come back, unfortunately we need to look at the next person who is ready to engage. And sometimes that's hard. But at the moment my normal caseload would be about eight and I work only two and half days but now I am over 17 so suddenly we had a lot of people who need help. Fortunately we have two in our team so we will be sharing and passing things over but at the moment, suddenly we had a big influx. It's also because we have a new development of flats, so we have new people that are coming from temporary accommodation, and we need to be sure that they have everything to succeed in the tenancy. So basically, a lot of pressure at the moment.

And I guess following on from that, is what would help you in your role?

What would help me in my role?

Or generally in your team, what would help?

Well at the moment, to have more variety of grants I would say cause sometimes it's easy for us just to ask for the finishing touches. For me always the way I do [it is] for example the new tenant coming

from temporary accommodation, we will refer to the Scottish Welfare Fund to try and get the basics, the flooring and the furniture and the white goods. But the Council is running out of money so now they are not providing flooring for people who doesn't have kids and things like that. So at the moment the situation is tough. We would apply for the Edinburgh Trust just for the things that the Council wouldn't provide and the good thing that [with] the Edinburgh Trust we always have someone on the other end of the line, and it was really fast in the decisions. We have to wait 28 days for the Council, for the Community Care Grant. We, at the same time, are trying to be a bit more clever and start getting everything in place to get the help in the right moment when it is needed. So we are trying to get, how you say, ahead of the process just filling out applications and getting the tenants to send all the information that they need and to get, for example, the removal companies in place before. So it is just having more hands, more computers and more people organised but at the moment I think we do what we can with what we have.

More people, more time, more money.

Exactly.

So because you mentioned our grants and your organisation has been applying to the Edinburgh Trust for many years, possibly even...

Seven I would say.

So, this is a question about our model change, so not actually the day-to-day process but in April 2022 we relaunched our grants model as you know now. So we moved away from a very kind of traditional grant giving into a model that we wanted to shift focus and power away from us and back into the communities in which we deliver support. It was important for us that dignity would be at the heart of that. So I was interested to know, because we've been working together for such a long time, what are your thoughts on this way of working? And how do you see your work fitting in with a model of dignity and respect?

Well it's been an honour of you trusting us so much. And that's great. But at the same time you give us so much power, so we have responsibility then to ensure that you didn't need to ask for bank statements in certain cases. There were urgent cases in which we needed to know so we would ask for bank statements and to have that knowledge that the money is going to the right person at the right time. So that was really good [and] empowered us aswell and empowered the people we support, we help, we assist. So it's been amazing, I think basically it makes things much easier and aswell it's been easier and efficient and very diligent. So it's been really good.

For example, last year, I had to assist as refugee from Sudan who used to be working for a company in an extended contract every 6 months and this company decided a month [after] he moved in, the company decided not to make him permanent. So he just moved in [and] we applied for the Community Care Grant and he wasn't entitled. He had two beds, he had a washing machine that was starting to fail [and] they were a couple with a baby, a one-year-old baby. And they didn't have a dining table, they didn't have a sofa, they only have two beds and a cooker, fridge freezer but the washing machine was starting to fail. So I applied for an Edinburgh Trust [grant] and you gave a good entitlement and then they have sofa, dining table, I think a new bed for the baby because I think at the moment, they just had a cot. So that was what the grant was needed for, and this person was delighted and over the moon. After that visit, well we had a few visits, he was very capable, so we referred [him] to Community Works and they managed to engage him with a local upholsterer. And now this local upholsterer is not just training him, he is passing work to him and helping him to

become self-employed. And he is over the moon, so he is learning his English and doing really well and it's a lovely story.

Thank you so much for sharing that. That makes me so happy. I love to hear that.

It went to the right person in the right time cause when all the doors were shut. The Edinburgh Trust provided comfort and a washing machine that works. Because having a very young kid is really tough. Things are going really well for him [and] they are expecting a second baby.

Oh wonderful.

It is good. I was telling him to take it easy, one step at a time.

And you know, I guess in our work and especially in my role when I was doing casework you kind of became used to people's requests for the essentials and that becomes part of your job, your day-to-day job. But actually, having a washing machine is so important and having a fridge is so important and having a cooker is so important. This is really, really important things that people should have.

Yeh, the three essentials apart from also a bed. And flooring.

Leo, what's rewarding about the work that you do?

Oh when you see people thrive and improving their lives and becoming more independent. I always advise that the people that can volunteer, get back to work, leave the welfare rights system behind. It's there for a period of time but if you can get over and find your niche, find the things that you like to do or what you can find rewarding [is how] you can contribute to this society. Cause that will open so many more doors. The system is there for a reason [but] it can also incapacitate you, you can get institutionalised. I think when I see people getting back to work and living happily that's brilliant.

And I guess this is kind of a close question but what are your hopes for the future; for the people you support and for your own work?

Oh, after the pandemic and the tram works and everything, I would love to see Leith thriving again. There are no new works happening in Leith Links so to improve the park, to improve the communication of the city and to improve the community. So, I really hope that Leith is changing, its changing a lot and hopefully the lower classes can keep up with the change and also be benefited by the whole change. So hopefully the tram coming down and hopefully I can see more shops opening in Leith and that bringing more tourism and [then] the economy grows. I would love to see the community thriving again cause since the pandemic and also the tram works it was like a bomb shell, it was really, really struggling so hopefully, that's my hope for the future. Definitely.

And for your own work? Thriving in your own work too?

Yeh if I only have to help the people who really, really, really, really need it that would be good. At the moment there is a lot of people who need it. I would like to see less people needing our help.

So our last question, what does Edinburgh mean to you?

Oh Edinburgh is home and community. I moved here from Spain to UK 15 years ago and then I discovered Edinburgh 11 years ago. We moved because my sister-in-law was here, she was going to

have a baby and then my wife and I decided to move here to start a family. And Edinburgh is such a lovely town, lovely city, you get to know people and they are really friendly and it's a really good place to live. And Leith is different as well. Leith has its own soul and I would love to see Leith and Edinburgh thrive again cause it's a good home for people. And that's what you do with your grants, you help them to transform the house, the flat into their home. So that's what Edinburgh Trust has always been good at.

Thank you Leo. Thanks for your time today. If somebody wanted to learn more about the work of your organisation, how could they do that?

Oh yeh. Yeh definitely. Always more than welcome to share our experiences and to outline our work.

So people could go to your website and learn a bit more and contact you if they wanted more to?

Definitely. Our website is about to change too so it would be great but people can get in touch through my email or Fiona so that would be good.

Thank you so much Leo. It was a pleasure taking to you.

If you want more stories just let me know, I just have to remember! I have many success stories.

I will do, thank you so much.

Thank you Ems.

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