

***“The cost-of-living situation is just compounding and exacerbating the mental health issues that so many people we work with are living with. It's another source of anguish and distress to people. It can feel like the final straw”***

**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 Michelle Davitt from LGBT Health and Wellbeing, Scotland's health and wellbeing charity for LGBTQ+ adults.**

Hi, I'm Michelle and I am the Service Manager for LGBT Health and Wellbeing in Edinburgh.

**Thanks so much, Michelle. Can you let me know what kind of work your organisation does?**

Sure, so we do quite a wide range of activities. We've been making a difference to the lives of LGBT+ people for more than 20 years now. That's across Scotland. We have offices in Edinburgh, offices in Glasgow, and we offer a service across Scotland via our telephone helpline, which also obviously nowadays is available online and by web chat.

A lot of our services are around helping people to strengthen their mental health. A lot of it's around the power of connection, so whether that's through the helpline, so that might give you some practical support, signposting and so on, or it might be more like emotional support, that listening ear. You might want to connect with other people through things like our Rainbow Families. So that's bringing queer families together, so kids grow up seeing families like theirs, as well as people meeting other people, making relationships, friendships, and so on. We've got lots of other social events and activities and a lot of that's around combatting loneliness and isolation. We've got things like groups, community groups. They're led by the community, for the community. A really amazing, inspiring range of things happen there.

We've got a trans choir. I think one of the things I would like people to think about with the trans choir, for example, is you think, oh, that's a nice idea, but what people don't necessarily think about is if you're trans and you're going through transition, your voice is going to change, and that's very emotive sometimes. Sometimes you might get some support with that. Sometimes you might not. Also, if you sing, your voice might change. How's that going to feel? So obviously, our trans choir helps to support folks through all those sorts of things. We've also got some movement groups like queer yoga. We're starting a dancing movement group. We are health and wellbeing but we don't do as much physical activity as we'd probably like to do because of the challenge of funding. But yeah, we do all sorts of things through those groups that people identify themselves, like we've got a board games group and so on. We also have our more formal services, like the counselling service. I think our waiting list at the moment is about five months, which, compared to other services, is pretty good. We also have a trans support project offering support to trans folk. So that's through one-to-one

appointments, also through, again, lots of social activities, a regular monthly group called Tea Time.

We also have other work we do for parts of our community that might need that bit more support, or their profile raised. So we've got an age project for older folk, and also for our older folk, we have a tele friending project, so that's like telephone befriending. In Glasgow, we have a refugee and asylum seeker project, although we do of course work with refugees and asylum seekers in Edinburgh as well. So yeah, that's just a wee sort of taste or zip through of some of the things that we do.

**That is wonderful, and much more than I was aware of. Really important work. Michelle, what's your role within the organisation?**

So my role is to oversee and manage our projects in Edinburgh. So there are about five projects in Edinburgh, some of which I've mentioned, so that's like counselling, trans support, mental wellbeing, our social programme, and the community groups. We have a very similar sort of range of projects in Glasgow, managed by my colleague Grant, and then we have what we call our sort of national projects, which are things like the helpline and the age project, managed by my colleague Annette. So there's a range of activity happening. We would like to do more across Scotland, but again, that's kind of where we're sort of looking for funding to see whether that might be possible. So I also see my role as helping to raise our profile and make connections across sectors in the community. So that's things like this opportunity that we have with Turn2Us.

**Thank you so much. So in your experience, or the experience of your colleagues, how have things changed for the people that you support since the 2020 COVID pandemic and with the rising cost of living? So just interested how that's impacted the work of your organisation, and also people's experience too.**

So obviously, as we all know, there was a lot of negative impact from the pandemic. The isolation that exacerbated the loneliness really, which was already an issue for lots of our community was made worse through that. But in terms of trying to take something positive from a lot of the negativity, the move to connecting online more is something that we know some of our community find really useful, and that some people need.

So for example, we work with unpaid carers as well, and if you've got caring responsibilities, it's really hard potentially to find time to do things in person to be able to make that space. So we also do an annual service evaluation, and the most recent one emphasised again that people want both. So they do want and really value the in-person spaces, but they do also want that option of still being able to meet online. So that's one of the things we're responding to. We'll keep ensuring that we're offering that. The cost-of-living situation is just compounding and exacerbating the mental health issues that so many people we work with are living with. It's another source of anguish and distress to people. It can feel like the final straw.

We don't currently offer benefits or money advice and that's something that would be amazing to have if we had the funding to do so. That's something we would maybe look to do in the future. What is good is that it means we have to link with and connect

with a wide range of other organisations. So we do have to signpost and refer people to get the help they need on that more practical front. But we are seeing that the cost-of-living crisis have made people's mental health worse for our community. Suicidal ideation, for example, has been a real issue.

We're seeing that again through this latest service evaluation, where over 300 people from the community completed that. That's rising. It's high enough as it is and for the trans and non-binary community it's even higher. So that's something that we're conscious of all the time.

**Thanks for sharing that with me. My next question was about what's the main challenges in your work? Obviously, you've mentioned there wanting to do certain work and it not being possible because of funding. Would that be quite a big issue?**

I think funding is always something that it would be nice to have more of. But actually, I think one of the other main challenges at the that aspect of our community's mental health becoming worse. I watch the increasing level of vitriol around the trans community. I don't see it coming to a sort of natural subsidence at the moment. But I also see trans people every day just getting on with living their lives with full humanity and dignity, despite the fact that they're facing these issues and have become, not to use cliches, but political football and so on.

We're seeing, as I was saying, more and more people having thoughts of suicide. It means that for us as an organisation, we don't only need to help those people. We need to ensure our staff are supported to work with people who are more and more at that crisis point. And we've always said, and this is accurate, that we are not, in inverted commas, not a crisis organisation, because there are mental health crisis services. Yet we, like many other mental health charities, see more and more people at crisis point. So that, to me, is a balancing act of a place to be in. So yeah, as well as supporting our community, we do need to ensure that the people working with our community are supported to do that and are trained to do that, but also have ongoing support and debrief to help them process that, really.

**What would help you in your role?**

I don't want to just keep saying funding, but I think probably unrestricted funding, yeah, sustainable multi-year funding. I think it is, this does happen, but it's rare, is funders, because it's easy to just say, I'm not saying just give us more funding, although potentially I am, but it's funders who build long-term relationships and think outside the box.

I've been involved, and I think Turn2Us is involved in the Regenerative Futures Fund. So that's an example in Edinburgh of them trying to create a 10-year fund. For me, it's not even necessarily what it is, it's the fact of doing it, thinking differently is the point of it, and showing that it's possible to think differently.

I think the same around Turn2Us and how you disburse your funds and how simple you've made that. I think I like to have concrete examples of things like Regenerative Futures Fund and Turn2Us, if people are saying, you can't do this, or this is just how

we do it. It's like, it does not have to be, here are some concrete examples of different ways of doing these things differently.

**No, I totally agree, and that was a big thing for us two years ago when we redid our grant making and changed that into a new model that was based on agency and dignity and respect at the heart of it. That was a real game changer for us too. What is rewarding about the work that you do?**

I think the rewarding stuff is off the back of some of the most challenging stuff as well, probably. It's seeing people feel better. It's seeing people come for counselling, for example, maybe at that crisis point, at the worst point in their life, and then after their 11 sessions, it's not that everything's changed, but that they are now able to go on themselves, to feel that bit better, to be able to then maybe even access some of our other services, for example, where they're going to connect with other people. It's also just seeing things like social events, particularly with Rainbow Families and so on, that's always a really good laugh.

There's always a lot going on there. It's things as well like our Pride breakfast, which has been happening for years, where the point of that is to get folk together on the morning of the Pride march so that they've got somewhere to go so that they might be able to connect with other people in the community to go on the march, particularly if you've never been before. Also, maybe you don't fancy going on the march as it's quite busy. There's quite a lot going on. You can still feel part of Pride. You can come and meet other folk and connect with your community. It's seeing things like that, as well as seeing the work that my colleagues do every day on that above and beyond basis, and how their priority is the people that they work with above and beyond all else. Seeing that difference happen every day is massively rewarding.

**That's wonderful. I love that, especially the Pride breakfast. That's just such a lovely, lovely thing. So, what are your hopes for the future, for your work and for the people that you support?**

So, I think for the people that we support, and I guess this feeds into various aspects of the work that we do, I'd like to see the tide naturally begin to turn away from the toxic way the trans community are currently being talked about, and that we can continue the work that so many people have contributed to and are still doing on increasing equality. So, like organisations like Turn2Us, we're all aiming, and all the other charities I meet across Edinburgh every week, that we're all trying to increase equality in our society, not reduce it. So, I feel we were on that path. I'd like us to just feel that we could continue on that path and actually get where we were going, which I think we will. I think to have resources to help more people, to empower them so they can thrive, so they're not just surviving. And I think for us to help the queer community we work with to keep having fun as well.

I think fun is something that's really undervalued in society and also in services sometimes. To keep having fun, enjoy themselves, be creative, have those connections, and that the impact of those is valued to the level that it should be.

**We've almost come to the end of our conversation. Can I ask you what Edinburgh means to you?**

Sure. It means lots of different things to me. I think if I think of Edinburgh, probably like a lot of people, I think of the architecture and the vistas that you see, like the monuments in Calton Hill or the view along Princess Street and Arthurs Seat and so on. I heard somebody on a podcast the other day describe the Scott Monument as a soot, blackened, gothic spaceship. So I thought I quite like that.

### **Love that.**

Its good eh? For me personally, it also means Leith. That's my spiritual home. I've lived in Edinburgh for nearly 30 years, for about 20 years in Leith. I'm Glaswegian and I still feel fundamentally Glaswegian. But if I had an Edinburgh identity, it would probably be more as a Leither than an Edinburgh. I feel like the Leith spirit's closer to Glasgow than the rest of Edinburgh potentially. It's also the place where I've added to my family and friends. It's the place where I've had a massive amount, if it's possible to have too much fun, I don't know, but I've certainly had a lot of it. And it's where I've built my career in the third sector in Scotland and through that met and continue to meet the most amazing people, working against the odds to make a real difference and real change in people's lives every day. I see people do that every day. So yeah, that's just been one of the amazing things that Edinburgh means to me.

**That's really beautiful. Thank you for that. So if anybody wanted to learn more about your work, funders, people wanting to use your service, how could they do that?**

The best way is to go onto our website, [www.lgbthealth.org.uk](http://www.lgbthealth.org.uk), or to just email me directly and I can always point people in the right direction. That's [michelle@lgbthealth.org.uk](mailto:michelle@lgbthealth.org.uk) and I'll make sure they get to speak to whomever they need to speak to.

**Michelle, thank you so much for your time today. It's been a real pleasure to sit and talk with and to hear about the incredible work that your organisation does. So thank you.**

Thanks, Ems. 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](http://www.turn2us.org.uk)**