

A call for solidarity: Community support for the Tollcross Community Action Network amidst the Covid-19 Outbreak.

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Introduction

In late 2019 and early 2020 the coronavirus Covid-19 spread rapidly throughout the world, resulting in national lockdowns and extreme anxiety as supermarket stock became sparse and health services were pushed beyond capacity. Amidst the panic buying on the ground and failures to react appropriately at the UK Government level, a wealth of community-run initiatives rapidly developed throughout Scotland, the U.K., and beyond. Newly motivated and seasoned community organisers quickly established Facebook Groups and appropriately-named Twitter hashtags that sought to identify those with the means, health, capacity, and time to help others suddenly faced with unemployment, homelessness, and either self-imposed or healthcare sector recommended isolation and quarantining. During this time, an organisation for whom I am the sole paid and part-time employee, the Tollcross Community Action Network (TCAN), has sought to sustain our weekly Community Hub (operated in partnership with the Tollcross Foodbank) for as long as possible, continuing our frontline support for those living in social or economic isolation, experiencing food poverty, or in need of assistance in understanding medical correspondence or bills. This article briefly describes the struggles, support, and lessons we learnt during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. Clearly, there will have been further developments since this article was produced.

About TCAN

Established in late 2016, TCAN was born out of a community co-investigation in the mould of the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who advocated co-operative means of struggling towards social change. Over several months, long-established organisations such as Edinburgh's Adult Learning Project (ALP) and the Central Church joined with community activists in the Scottish capital's Tollcross and

Fountainbridge areas to address local needs, with support for homeless people, queer people, and access to affordable housing among the key issues identified. This investigation ultimately led to the creation of the Community Hub which has been in operation since Spring 2017 offering tea, coffee, social support, signposting, and guidance to those who generally first become aware of the Hub when accessing support around food poverty. Until recently, we were able to provide specialised one-to-one aid, thanks to a partnership with Citizens Advice Edinburgh - a service we funded at fairly significant cost, but one that offered highly individualised advice, guidance, and aftercare. That was until our funding ran out at the start of 2020! A generous donation from the Tollcross Community Centre Management Committee, the organisation overseeing the community centre in which we often hold our monthly Board meetings, has temporarily safeguarded our organisation for three more months. With a range of funds recently made available through the Scottish Government, Martin Lewis, and Neighbourly, we've applied for financial aid to keep our work going for the duration of this crisis, with several larger applications to other funding bodies. We should know by summer whether any of these applications have been successful.

Though I am the only worker with TCAN (a part-time one at that), we are fortunate enough to receive support from two volunteers: one is a former foodbank user whilst the other is a retired school music teacher. Our Board of Trustees comprises both working-class and more middle-class members, all of whom have significant experience in community-based organisations - several as community workers. Our broader work has included running political education events around the 2017 U.K. General Election and the impact Brexit may have for European citizens, as well as an annual Christmas Lights event that brings together community and school choirs and orchestras. The relationships we've fostered with our regular attendees have allowed us to provide vital assistance with understanding medical letters and advice on further support available for specific issues. Some people simply join us for a coffee and a chat on a weekly basis. The Hub, we've been informed, has been a fixture in the lives of our regulars. Indeed, the fruit we try to provide is often the only fresh produce attendees have access to each week. In my time with the organisation, we've endeavoured to establish a more family-friendly space through the temporary hiring of

a Play Worker, purchasing colouring sheets and children's books, as well as encouraging a dog-friendly space where attendees can spend time in company, sheltered, and safe off the streets. One dog, a staffie named Cooper, has become our unofficial mascot, featuring frequently in our social media posts and serving as the group icon in our Volunteer WhatsApp Group.

Covid-19 outbreak and a call to action

As the Covid-19 virus spread throughout much of the world, many individuals and families struggled to purchase essential food and hygiene items, and, gradually, community organisations were forced to suspend their activities in order to slow the spread of the virus. With the Community Hub partnership no longer able to provide the space many local people have come to depend upon for regular social contact, and guidelines banning us from making tea and coffee for folk in the Hub, the nature and dynamic of our work was rapidly forced to change. Guidelines issued by the coordinators of our partner's foodbank network, the Edinburgh Food Project, led to a one-in-one-out policy. Everyone wishing to access urgent food support therefore has had to queue up outside the venue - an act that may, ironically, have made the policy around entry to the venue redundant as 'social distancing' (or rather 'physical distancing') is difficult to achieve on a fairly busy street corner.

My usual role within the Hub therefore shifted from facilitator and coordinator. Instead, I stood outside for the two hour period catching up with our regulars, reassuring those accessing a foodbank for the first time, and offering guidance in a more casual and relaxed setting than usual. Adhering to UK Government, Scottish Government, National Health Service, and City of Edinburgh guidance, both of TCAN's regular volunteers, who have been with us for between eight months to two years, faced the need to self-isolate. One of them has several long-term underlying health issues; whilst the other falls within the 'vulnerable' age category. In this time of crisis, the Chair of our organisation was kind enough to donate her time to the Hub, assisting the Tollcross Foodbank team inside the venue. However, the Covid-19 outbreak threatened our capacity to authentically support those in dire need, and consequently a call of support was issued via our social media channels.

Community Response

As one would expect, those already living in some of the most precarious positions within contemporary British society faced greatly exacerbated difficulties in navigating their survival, as traditional support mechanisms closed down - with staff working from home - or to all intents and purposes ceased to operate. One regular Hub attendee arrived on the first morning after the lockdown with a black eye and bruised ribs having been attacked over his chosen rough sleeping spot. Another two men revealed that they were now sleeping in a skip close to a pub in the city centre as the ventilation shafts blast heat over the container every ten minutes, helping keep them warm at night. Many of Edinburgh's homeless folk were experiencing rapidly increasing difficulties in finding safe locations to sleep as temporary accommodation and hostels, as well as access points, were drastically overcrowded. Whilst a handful of hotels in London began to offer free-of-charge overnight stays to those rough sleeping, no such offers have yet become public in Edinburgh at the time of writing.

In my role as Development Worker, I contacted hotels, hostels, and other accommodation asking whether they would consider following suit. I sent a similar message to many charities and community-run initiatives asking whether they would continue to provide support, community meals, or other assistance during this period; yet some two weeks on since that email, I've had no responses. In addition to emailing businesses, I tried connecting with the range of emergent local Facebook Groups, including Coronavirus Volunteering Edinburgh and the Coronavirus Action Group - the former being the final space in which I posted this call to action in relation to our Community Hub. At the time of posting, the group contained just over 7,500 members which has continued to rise, with many members looking for ways to offer aid to those in precarious positions - including offers of data handling and administration support from those facing sustained periods of quarantining or isolation.

Some members offered assistance to those in their immediate vicinity - supported through the division of the Facebook Group into localised units organised by postcode. Suggestions of dog walking, pet-sitting, and even online lessons and entertainment for children facing lengthy periods out of school were posted on a daily basis. Eventually, given the obvious legal challenges those coordinating large-scale community organisations may run into if deemed to be directing volunteers rather than just

providing a space for connections, co-ordination of the group was handed over to Volunteer Edinburgh, an organisation with around fifty years' experience. Social and emotional support amongst group members was clear, though the combination of social distancing, self-isolation, and the scarcity of many essential resources has had an impact on the precise acts of support some individuals can take. Furthermore, the numerous posts made to the Facebook Group, and subsequent wealth of notifications Facebook Users would therefore receive, at times made it challenging to identify and respond to the diversity of requests for help and offers of support, though many people dedicated their time to checking back frequently and responding to posts.

As with many other posts to the Coronavirus Volunteering Edinburgh Facebook Group, support for the work we've been undertaking at the Community Hub was clear. Amongst those who responded to the TCAN post was an STV news reporter who asked for an interview about our work at the Community Hub, as well as several offers of in-person support. Grateful for the opportunity to publicise TCAN's work and to encourage people to continue donating to our foodbank partner if they could, the reporter was invited to attend our next session on the morning of Thursday 26th March 2020 as this would offer a chance to hear directly from those among the most severely affected. Unfortunately, staffing issues and workplace guidelines meant the interview was conducted via Skype, but we were able to film a brief statement made by one of two folk sleeping in an industrial skip. With his permission, that statement is included below. We thank Mark for his willingness to publicise his situation and share his experience:

When I've gone to the homeless accommodation team, I've been turned away with no accommodation for a week, despite turning up on time [for my appointments]. I've done all I can do and was told to do, yet I have nowhere to stay. I've had warnings from the police that I could face a fine or even jail if I'm out on the street for other reasons than to find food or accommodation, so I wonder what will happen to the homeless like me...

Other issues of deep concern are the risks many people, primarily women, may now face as they're forced to self-isolate in the company of abusive partners, as well as the

potential loss of bodily autonomy for those unable to access free contraception when local medical centres are closed to walk-in patients. As the quote from Mark, and the stories we've heard from many others demonstrates, many folk enduring periods of rough sleeping or unstable tenancies are terrified for their safety and their already precarious financial situation should the proposed threat of fines for those caught out on the streets for sustained periods of time, or seen gathering in groups, be carried out. At this time, we would encourage all to share important support lines for those facing dangerous or even violent situations, including the LGBT Helpline (0300 123 2523); Scotland's 24 hour Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline (0800 027 1234); Shelter Scotland's housing advice helpline (0808 800 4444); and the numerous local helplines local to where you are (e.g. the Streetwork Helpline in Edinburgh on 0808 178 2323).

Conclusions: Lessons learnt

What's become clear to me during this period of crisis is that many folk are ready and willing to support community initiatives despite their own anxieties. It's something I've both witnessed and been a part of on many occasions during this past decade of Conservative-led austerity in the UK, ranging from demonstrations and protests at a moment's notice through to mutual aid and practical support at individual, community, and organisational level. In North Edinburgh, this has recently included the North Edinburgh #SaveOurServices campaign which sought to challenge the drastic cuts made to long-established and seemingly vital organisations, as well as incredible support offered by organisations such as Low Income Families Together (LIFT) for local lone parents and other marginalised families. Where I believe frustration lies is in the difficulties most people face in knowing how to enact that desire to be supportive. This was demonstrated through more than fifty positive reactions to a post made in the aforementioned Facebook Group on behalf of TCAN, requesting support in identifying which services would continue, albeit often with amended provision, in the immediate weeks of the lockdown, compared to just five comments of specific advice around ongoing support during this period and a further offer of furniture. Some days later three women contacted me, offering their time at the Community Hub, for which TCAN will long be grateful.

The desire to help is clear, yet the recommendations of self-isolation and minimal social contact could deter many. Even accounting for that well-advised caution, the biggest barrier remains resources. Whilst the three folk that contacted me through the website and email address could donate their time and presence to support local people, the family that runs a local cafe called La Viola were kind enough to donate tea and coffee to those lined up outside the foodbank - an act that is particularly appreciated after a multinational coffee chain further down the street charged their normal full-price! As this crisis continues, it's becoming worryingly clear that the UK Government will continue to support insurance companies at the expense of protecting workers, their income, and their jobs. Even in instances where money has been allocated by the UK or Scottish governments to provide urgent accommodation for rough sleepers, there is concern that the money is being used to purchase these spaces, as councils UK-wide already do for Bed & Breakfast rooms to serve as temporary accommodation. Organisations with the means to do so, have generally not opted to demonstrate their understanding of social responsibility by donating their time and resources to supporting the survival of our communities.

There have been some exceptions locally, with the Edinburgh Gin Company turning production from their global brand of alcohol to producing free hand sanitisers for local charities - something we at TCAN have requested to be part of. However, one of the most remarkable efforts during this period of struggle has been that of the Living Rent Campaign. Despite promises from the Scottish Government to support 'mortgage holidays' as in some other countries, these measures have failed to prevent evictions that could mean more folk like Mark, facing life on the street. Whilst the Edinburgh Coronavirus Crisis Accommodation Facebook Group has emerged, many of those we work with at TCAN do not own a mobile phone and now, with the public libraries closed, no longer have internet access. Living Rent's success in pressuring the Scottish Government to implement a six month evictions ban in the private rental sector, after delivering a 15,000 strong petition in an act that protects some 15% of the Scottish population, is arguably one of the greatest victories for the Scottish working class in many years.

In addition to the thousands who have died as a result of contracting the virus, many brave people have already lost their lives in this struggle to contain it - among them Dr Shirin Rouhani in Iran who continued to treat patients whilst on an I.V. drip and Father Giuseppe Beradelli, a priest in Casnigo (Italy) who died after giving his respirator to a young patient struggling with the coronavirus. Each week thousands of people across the UK demonstrate their appreciation for those working in the NHS through a moment of clapping and bell-ringing. We at the Tollcross Community Action Network may only be doing our small bit with the means we have and for a very local community, but every organisation like ours, every community campaign, and every mutual aid group plays their part. Please continue to support and show solidarity with your local groups, charities, and workers however you can, with whatever resources and knowledge you may have access to.

If anyone would like to lend their time as a volunteer, support the Tollcross Community Action Network financially, or may be able to offer any other kind of assistance - including any manner of partnerships - please get in touch at: contacTCAN@gmail.com