

Edinburgh Reporter chats Sophy Green – the new CEO of Streetwork

☒ Sophy Green is the new CEO of [Streetwork](#) – an Edinburgh based organisation dedicated to helping some of society's most vulnerable people. Their reach is vast, working with homelessness, domestic violence, drug addiction and prostitution. Six weeks into her new role, The Edinburgh Reporter caught up with Sophy and her colleague Claire Gibson who is Head of Services to find out more about their work...

So how did you become CEO of Streetwork?

Streetwork wasn't an organisation I knew a great deal about to begin with. I had seen information about Streetwork and spoke on the telephone with a Glasgow based recruitment company about the position of chief executive here, and subsequently handed in my CV. I went through the interview process here in Edinburgh, met with the Board and some staff members, and was then offered the position.

I have a broad experience of working within the Social Enterprise Sector and am Chair of SENSCOT (Social Entrepreneurs Network Scotland) and am very interested in the development of social enterprises to further support Streetwork activities. I am also a Fellow in the Royal Society of Arts and I intend to use both of these positions to assist me in developing a strong network here in Edinburgh for the benefit of Streetwork.

Was this environment different to what you've worked in before?

I spent seven years prior to coming here working in a similar style of organisation in Aberdeen – [Instant Neighbour](#) – which

also works with people living on the streets. One of the things that really attracted me to Streetwork was the values demonstrated by the Board and staff, their commitment and passion to the client group and their needs. We make a difference by working directly with those who need us most.

What do your team do here at Streetwork?

We enable a life off the streets – which means we spend a great deal of our time out on the streets finding people who are having to cope with very difficult situations. They may be homeless or living in temporary accommodation. They may have mental health issues, drug addiction issues, relationship issues or family issues. We try to encourage them to work with us to address the issues they're facing in life to come off the streets. So basically our strapline "enabling a life off the streets" is what we endeavour to do with people.

When it comes to funding – how does it work?

It's a complete mixture to be honest. We have contracted work through the [City of Edinburgh Council](#) but we also have grants through [Children in Need](#), [Railway Children](#) and the [Big Lottery](#). Each project has a strand of funding that comes with it and Women Against Violence funding has just been renewed and so we go through a process fairly frequently of re-tendering for contracts. If, for example, the Youth Team (who work with runaways) come across a situation that they think could be dealt with in a more creative and effective way we will try and find some funds that work alongside that. A lot of runaways at the age of 14 or 15 will become homeless people in their late teens because the relationships have started to break down at that point within their family environment, or there's something personally not working for them – be it mental health issues or drug misuse. If we can work with them at that stage it can prevent that potential situation in the long term. It's a challenge.

We provide three strands in this particular area. We hold workshops in schools which – while runaways may not attend school – means we can give information and advice to other young people who may know them and make them aware of our work. We also provide one-to-one support to mediate between families and young people to rebuild relationships and avoid a street based lifestyle. We also go out and find young people in crisis out on the street and we intervene there immediately. We try to reach them where they are work with them on their terms at their pace.

How many people work here?

We have a full time staff of about 50, and around 25 part time.

To deal with how many homeless people?

Last year in the crisis centre 1,400 different people came through the door, looking to engage with our services. Annually across all of our services we work with around 2,000 different people.

Your website mentions not only homelessness, but care leavers and domestic violence – are these preventative measures?

We have lots of strands that Streetwork works within. Enabling a life off the street is a huge part of what we do, but there are many others, like women fleeing domestic violence. These women will often find themselves suddenly without accommodation, or in a position in which they are desperate to rescue themselves or their children from. Streetwork seeks to find ways to prevent homelessness while at the same time helping them regain self esteem and self worth.

Is it mostly younger people that Streetwork deals with?

There's also the other end of the spectrum which involves older people. We are an ageing population so the reality of

that means less money as we get older, unless you're lucky enough to have a huge pension or savings. So we're facing an ongoing issue which prompted our "Out of the Cold" team, who work with people over the age of 50 in particular, to try to prevent them from becoming homeless, and working to support them in their own accommodation. Some old people don't want to go into a state-run care facility and so choose to live on the streets, we have a specialist team who help them too. A lot of our work is out on the streets trying to find people who are disconnected from mainstream services.

This team's outreach shift is normally between 6am and 9am because we need to be there when people who sleep rough are waking up and moving on from the graveyards and parks they sleep in at night. This group are normally unseen so working between the hours of 9am and 5pm is pointless – it would be reactive rather than proactive. If we know a person normally sleeps in a certain place and they're not there, we'll leave a Streetwork card to let them know we were there and to provide them with contact details. We spend at least 84 hours a week on the streets.

Do you find with this particular client group that word of mouth is an effective way of those in need becoming aware of your service?

We have a team that works with the [Harm Reduction Unit from NHS Lothian](#), who I was out with two nights ago. They carry backpacks with clean needles in them to do needle exchanges with addicts, and most of the people we spoke to knew about Streetwork. Liaising with other services is hugely beneficial. One of the first things we did when we went out on the street was to pick up a person who we were told was severely depressed and took him to our 24-hour [crisis centre](#) to get warmed up. We also continued to work through the slow process of encouraging him to face the issues in his life. We had promised to meet him and we followed through with it – which often means the person will live through and not harm

themselves because they know they have someone watching out for them.

Normal working hours of different services are difficult for this group because many sleep during the day as they're too terrified to sleep at night so when the services are available, they're not up and about. The challenge is trying to encourage them to engage with us at times these services are available. We go to where they are, on their turf, at their pace. We're hugely dependent on our street reputation, trust is important. If we say we're going to do something, we do it – it's about integrity and respect for the people we're working with. We never impose ourselves on people – we ask if they need any help first, and if they say yes we ask permission to sit on either side of them – we don't stand towering over them. It's about maintaining the person's dignity. You should never judge someone by your own values – you're not that person, you don't know where they've come from.

What about non-English speaking homeless people?

A particularly vulnerable group in Edinburgh is Romanian and Polish nationals. They have no access to funds and previously have not involved themselves with any type of service – be it educational, social or medical. The language barrier is a real issue for this group. We designed an information leaflet in Romanian and Polish and started handing it out – at first to one person, then they would tell another, then a few more would contact us. Seeing a group's need first-hand makes us innovative in our methods of engaging. Our staff group are amazing – they're committed people.

Security must be a real concern in this line of work?

We always go out in pairs – always. On Tuesday evening I was out on George Street – two guys told us in no uncertain terms that they were not interested in engaging and told us to leave

– so we did. It's also about how you position yourself – we make sure we face each other most of the time so we can see what's going on behind each other. If we feel at all threatened, we leave. If anyone comes to our crisis centre intoxicated they don't get in, and there's also a standard of behaviour we insist on – for the safety of the staff and of the other service users. There's never just one person on the door, and we have cameras running at all times. We also provide lockers so that people can store their belongings through the day, and shower facilities.

I was with our Prostitution Outreach Team last week and the doors of the minibus we sit in are locked until someone actually approaches to engage. Keeping yourself safe is fundamentally important. Last year we worked with 70 women who were involved in prostitution. We also implement a measure called Guardian Angel, which involves one member of staff monitoring another when they go out on the streets, to check up on them and call to make sure they're safe.

What are the main causes – do you find – of homelessness in Edinburgh?

It could be a woman fleeing violence, a young person running away from home, a young person leaving care for the first time, a family breakdown, a redundancy – anything that causes a significant life change. Most often in an emergency situation, things become too much for people. The sooner we meet somebody the sooner we can intervene. The statistic for young runaways is that 1 in 6 will end up on the streets – we try to reach them before it gets to that stage.

There's also a difference between a homeless person and a roofless person. A roofless person is one who sleeps on the streets and has absolutely nowhere to go. Many who are begging on the streets of Edinburgh in fact have temporary accommodation to go to, or are "sofa surfing" (sleeping on a friend or relative's couch). These people are homeless, not

roofless.

City of Edinburgh Council have released a [Draft Commissioning Plan](#) which aims to set out arrangements that will guide the Council in the commissioning of future advice, support and accommodation services to prevent homelessness. The emphasis is on prevention which is absolutely right but we know that there will always be a need for crisis service and it is impossible to predict exactly when an emergency will happen.

You also have a social enterprise cafe...

Yes – Captain Taylor’s Coffee House – and I have it on good authority from every Edinburgh local I speak to that it sells the best coffee in Edinburgh! [Claire nods in agreement] It’s wonderful – it was in [The List](#) too which we thought was good! All the profits go towards the work we do with homeless and disadvantaged people in the city.

To donate to Streetwork click [here](#) or contact [here](#) . If you or someone you know is homeless or at risk, call 0131 556 9756