

Social Bite Village is ready to 'make homelessness a thing of the past'

The Social Bite Village in Granton was looking particularly pretty today. The Council Leader Adam McVey suggested it looks a bit like a Highland village, and he was right, although it will not always look like this. But this prettiness and making things look and feel good was evident through all the interviews we conducted today with all the various partners involved.



Josh Littlejohn

It is no longer good enough simply to give a homeless person a home. It has to be a home of a certain standard and now in Granton it will be a home with all the support around it that is required.



The Tiny Houses which are now erected on a site leased by the council at zero rent to Social Bite are the design of Jonathan Avery, architect, and they are lovely. They each have two bedrooms, a small living and kitchen area and a shower room. We are told they will be warm and cosy in the winter. There is a community hub building in the centre of the village, but each Tiny House has space around it and a feeling of light and colour.

But it was Avery's wife Jo who told me about one of the most remarkable aspects of the new village. She was busy spreading hand made patchwork quilts over beds when I met her and she told me that she has been organising patchwork quilts for the village. These will then be chosen by each resident. The idea is that the care put into the quilt itself is then passed on to the recipient who will take the quilt onwards with them as their own property even when they leave the village. (Jo also explained the quilts would be scooped up after the official opening today and then freshly packaged up for residents to choose from next month).

Cyrenians will be working there looking after the 20 residents chosen to live there. This is something they are well used to doing as they already have a residential facility out at their

farm near the airport. They are also well used to setting people on the right road. Ewan Aitken their CEO was keen to stress that they have a long fifty year history and experience to draw from. He said : "I am really proud to be here today because the mark of any society is how you look after those who are most excluded. This village today says an extraordinary thing about how we all want the world to be.

"Yes, it's about supporting a group of people from a tough place to a better place. But it speaks also of how we want all our societies to be. This is a powerful message of change and transformation where everybody matters and everybody is included. Our task now is to build the community that this place will create. Cyrenians staff will come and support people into jobs or into education, whatever it is that people needs to go from that place of exclusion to inclusion."

The Minister for Communities, Social Security and Equalities offered apologies on behalf of local MSP Ben Macpherson who had to be at Holyrood this morning to take part in an important committee, the Social Security committee. She loves the idea of the village. She said : "There are many approaches to solving homelessness, to ending homelessness to preventing it. The important lesson from the Social Bite Village that I am visiting today is the importance of housing and support. There are many ways to deliver this, and this is one way, a very special way to create that sense of community that is appropriate for some people."

The Social Bite Village has been created by the charity at a cost of around £750,000. Josh Littlejohn told The Edinburgh Reporter that it probably cost double that with all the help that has been given in kind by various companies, principally in the construction industry. We got so much donated in terms of expertise, with the architects, engineering and groundworks. Most of the materials that make up the houses were donated too. There are over 100 different companies involved. There has been an enormous amount of support to

deliver the project within that budget.”

Josh Littlejohn is still young. It is possibly as a result of his youth that he can stand in the midst of problems like homelessness and reach out for help from people he knows or gets to know. Through Social Bite the sandwich shop chain he has had some high profile publicity, inviting George Clooney and Leonardo DiCaprio to come along and have a cup of tea and a sandwich in Edinburgh. Then after the Sleep Out for CEOs in 2016, and particularly after the Sleep in the Park in December 2017, he finds that he is in charge of several millions all destined to be spent on solutions to homelessness in one form or another.

“Between this and the Housing First programme these are our main objectives in terms of our future plans. I hope we can keep up the momentum in terms of pushing the brand raising awareness around homelessness, and raising money.

I believes that it will be possible to reach zero homelessness in Scotland. The statistics as I read them if you break them down city by city, they are not that big. It is simply a matter of focus and I hope this project will help with that. With the Scottish Government and local authorities all behind this then I believe that homelessness could be a thing of the past.”



Josh Littlejohn MBE and Angela Constance
Minister for Communities at the Social Bite
Village