

Meeting John Loughton of Scran Academy

John Loughton is a changed man these days, and notwithstanding his years, a pretty tired one these days too.

His own life has been entirely transformed with the coronavirus lockdown. He was until then working in Spain and Portugal with the global leadership company he founded nine years ago, Dare2Lead.

Now he is overseeing a reorganised version of Scran Academy which he set up as a catering social enterprise to help change the lives of disadvantaged young people.

The cooking is done by trained chefs, and there are at least 100 volunteers who help to serve up cooked meals for those who need them, six days a week.

This week they will reach the important milestone of serving the 30,000th meal since the lockdown began.

John spoke to us a week or so ago for our podcast to explain how it all works, and how his life has changed.



He said: “Covid-19 has probably transformed the entire focus of my days and life in a way. I guess we started to hear about it seven or eight or nine weeks ago.

“I’d got back from doing work over actually in Spain and in Lisbon and other places with my day job which is Dare2Lead We run a leadership training company.

“As lockdown approached, every bit of work we had booked was cancelled. So, I was scheduled in for doing a TED talk at St Andrew’s University, we had a lot of NHS training, we had lots of big bits of event based work for me and my team in Dare2Lead.

“I essentially had to close down the business because every pound that I had scheduled to make for the rest of the year, had just shrivelled to a halt, really. So I had to make the tough decision to pause the business for the first time in nine years. And then very quickly, I started to come down two days later with COVID-19 symptoms myself.

“We sat down with Scran Academy, which is now the vehicle with which we’re serving meals in Edinburgh. Scran was not my side project, but it was just kind of something I had set up out of my passion to give back to the kind of community I come from, and help people like myself.

“But we had in essence, three part time youth workers. We had no real full time office or anything for ourselves, we worked with local partner organisations.

“And we sat the team down and said, there’s a lot of people out there who have a really hard time day in and day out already. You know, Covid-19 is just going to exacerbate and create further problems for those people who already struggle. Are we on board to try and help people?

“Food is very important. community relationships are very important. We love what we’re doing, we love who we help, and we chose to try and respond. That first Friday, with the schools closed, when the Prime Minister announced lockdown, we’d served I think, 269 portions of food that first day.

“We were a bit like Dad’s Army. We had, you know, colanders for helmets and baby spoons when you needed big spoons and odd jobbing people in here, there and everywhere in a patchwork of people. We thought we were Gordon Ramsay that day doing 269 portions of food!

“And we were ready to do that again on the Monday. But that’s when I had to go into self isolation with severe cough and fever and all the rest of it.

“And we thought that might compromise what we were doing. But the need grew and we decided just to dig deep, work every hour, every hour of the day we could and as I speak to you now, we’ve now got over 100 volunteers, six different kitchens active have served over 20,000 portions of food to people.”

We asked John to tell us a bit more about Scran Academy and how it began.

John said: “Two months ago, we were a very small North Edinburgh based social enterprise. We existed to help young people from some of our most challenging communities, who we know have different life barriers to succeeding at school. They are struggling through different reasons, maybe family issues, background issues, and for whatever reason, they’re not succeeding the mainstream education.

“So we helped set up what was essentially an alternative education provider, an alternative school provider, where the schools and us work in partnership We take the young people in to a community setting a youth work setting and we get them to run their own catering enterprise.

“For kids from bad backgrounds like myself, to be honest with you, we’re often measured by everything we don’t have, we’re often told everything we can’t do. We’re often having our deficits in life or our challenges rubbed in our faces.

“And Scran Academy is about helping young people especially measure themselves on what they can do, not what they don’t have. We’ve run a wee social enterprise for a couple of years. So we’re already in catering in community.

“What we just chose to do is to put the raw heart of our community and the enterprise skills of our catering into helping people during Covid-19. People have been told to stay at home, and we were looking at those stockpiling and the carnage in supermarkets.

“We knew the most vulnerable, often silent, people were going to need help. And so we just, I just pulled in contacts. I was phoning everybody I’ve ever met and knew using, my social media platforms to just push out the call to help so that we could respond to the need.

“And people were desperate. We now have families who we know are struggling to give a safe free hot meal to their kids. They’re not at school and free school meals creates a big gap. We know there are pensioners who are alone and poor who now cannot leave their houses. We know disabled people who can’t get out, the fragile and the frail.

“People who don’t have a regular house or a home who are maybe in homeless, temporary accommodation or have been put into hotels. They don’t have a kitchen. What good is a food package of shopping items to them when they can’t cook? And that’s the people that we exist to be there for.”

Who are Scran Academy feeding?

49% are aged over 65

26% are young people & families (including school families, young carers & young homeless)

8% are referred from housing and homelessness organisations (excluding CEC housing depts)

48% identify as having significant underlying health conditions

29% highlight poverty, no finances or cooking equipment as a main barrier

Edinburgh Council referrals make up currently 17% of the referral numbers

Scran Academy is making meals at the Out of The Blue Drill Hall, they are using the kitchen at The Edinburgh Academy and the kitchen at Fettes College and are also based at Fet-Lor. This is really the home of Scran Academy anyway.

“Fet-Lor has been a long standing great partner of ours. They’ve helped get us going. Fet Lor, for those that don’t know, is an independent community hub, a youth club in the north of the city, and we’ve been great partners for a long time. They’ve all started to take all their youth work digital, so we’ve essentially occupied the building. And it’s

been great. And that's where we ran for the first weeks. We then entered a partnership with PrepTable.

"And there's the NHS building the Comely Bank Centre at the bottom of our street down by Stockbridge. So we run the social enterprise cafe there with through Prep Table. So we have that – that's our bread and butter heart. We then started to scale.

"So we then entered partnership with Out of the Blue Drill Hall, and we use them as a prep kitchen. So they've come on board to enable us to place our chefs there.

"And we have Fettes College which are providing one and a half thousand meals per week to support our overall 7-8000 meals we need. And The Edinburgh Academy is our main partner now in terms of distribution. Because what they do is producing around 3000 portions of food. They've given us the keys essentially to their catering suites. We portion, we label we have driver pickups out of there as well. So we now have two distribution hubs with a number of kitchens feeding into that one at Fet-Lor where we cater to the North and the west of the city and one at Edinburgh Academy where we cater to the south and the east and the remainder of the city, which is entirely populated now by by volunteers."

The Edinburgh Academy is very well-suited to a distribution operation as they have a huge playground/car park in front of the building.

John stressed that Scran Academy is unrecognisable to how it was just a few weeks ago. He continued: "We have completely built a new organisation in seven weeks – everything from our supply chain to our wholesalers, to our risk assessments to our Covid-19 driver delivery instructions to the personnel we employ and work with. For the first month or the first few weeks, we put a stop to young people coming through our doors.

"It became my catering manager who then was part time, Will Bain, our youth development officer Charlie Johnson, our youth

worker, Jane Airlie and myself. That was the core team. And since then, we've embedded our staff team from Prep Table, so a number of them have essentially merged operations with Fiona and Ella at Prep Table so they're our core backroom function.

"YMCA Scotland provide support with volunteer management. So they've essentially seconded them. Gillian oversees the work. Every single person in our kitchens headed by Will Bain my catering manager is a trained, qualified long term experienced chef, not a single young person is in our kitchens.

"We have people from easily more than a dozen restaurants around the city, from catering contractors like Saltire Hospitality who are coming on board next week, to provide thousands more meals to support us.

"We provide the food, we give them the infrastructure, the menus, the apparatus to come under our model, but they're helping literally feed in to the Covid response to make sure the most vulnerable in the city get support.

"We have two independent schools, a number of community hubs delivery apparatus like the Pilton Equalities Project, which usually delivers elderly people to lunch clubs and community support. They're part of our fleet of delivery vehicles with over 100 different volunteers.

"A lot of them are, you know, Joe Bloggs and Joe Public who are stepping up to the plate, pardon the pun, to help us out to make sure we get food out every single day to well over 1000 people now, delivered direct to door. We're buying, cooking, prepping the food, putting it out in our driving fleets through our distribution hubs direct to customers and people's doors. And we're doing it all to individuals completely free of charge."

The next question then was an obvious one. We asked

John how are you funding it in the first place? Where do you get the food from? How do you actually buy the ingredients even before you start making all the wonderful meals on your menu?

He said: "That is ongoing. I believe genuinely sometimes when you're an entrepreneur, when you're a campaigner, when your heart believes that something needs done, you have to jump off the cliff. And then I started Googling how to fly!

"So we took the jump, because we can and we needed to, and people just desperately needed others. And that's the beauty of being a grassroots local organisation, when you bring local authentic connections, and you merge that with a willingness to help, and an ability to entrepreneurially scale, that's a very powerful recipe.

"At the moment, the way we're sourcing our food is through a number of different routes. At the very beginning we were relying on donations and all these big shops were shutting. I mean Greggs gave us a thousand litres of milk and Starbucks had this and TK Maxx were offering that, and Morrison's were doing this. And that was amazing, and as best we could we, you know, we had warehouse space and empty gym halls, and we were trying to take in as much as we could.

"But we decided very early on, it's really important we understand what our offer is and we are going to stay in our lane. We decided we knew how to cook. We knew how to have a safe, proper hot meals operation. So we needed things in bulk. We needed large ingredients to make food. So you know, ad hoc drop offs were very generously received, but very quickly, not that useful to us because we weren't doing shopping lists or food hampers. We're caterers. We know how to make healthy large scale food.

"So now we have some great donations from the community champions through Morrison's, Waitrose at Stockbridge have been tremendous, and lots of small suppliers from farm yards

and farm owners in Perthshire to gamekeepers sending us pheasants in the Borders.

“People have mobilised just to really help support us, but we are buying our foods wholesale. We’re relying on donations, some government and third party funders are bringing our funding in. We’ve got you know, we’re out there trying to demonstrate our impact as much as we can. So a whole range of funders have checked in from Foundation Scotland and the Big Lottery Fund to now The City of Edinburgh Council, Edinburgh Airport, a whole range of different funders who are chipping in to help us fill the gap.

“But we went five weeks without a single penny from council or government. So we relied on the generosity of individuals through our Just Giving page and from funders who were able to respond very quickly.

So how do you find the people who get your help?

“So in a way it’s not hard because a lot of people in the communities that need us already know about Scran Academy Our initial offer was to make sure the young people we were founded to support did not have food access at the barrier, they were able to observe the lockdown measures the social distancing rules. They were able to ensure that their parents, grandparents, carers were all looked after So we went in to support their families and the people we know, that need us. So that started off small.

“And as we started to grow through our partner organisations you know the consortium of charity friends and supporters we have round the city, that message started to grow that we could offer that end to end service.

“And very quickly, we entered a partnership with Pilton Equalities Project who had a whole suite of pensioners who relied on lunchtime clubs, day centres that they came to and that is where they got their only hot meal quite often.

“So we had an immediate, you know, at risk set of demographics, young people and struggling families, school partners of ours, who knew that kids weren’t getting free school meals and a lot of frail, unwell or elderly people who were having their services removed because of lockdown.

“That was our initial patchwork of people that we started to look after. And we had no intention of growing this big, but the demand started to find us. People would start to hear about us on social media. Social Work were referring to us, big charities like Cyrenians and Social Bite were referring people to us, and building partnerships and, just trying to work together properly as a big community.

“And that escalated and, you know, the early people who funded us on our JustGiving page were Ryvoan Trust as well who were very generous. They were the people that enabled us to continue to just build the platform. I have a view that there’s a lot of people when things go hard want to rush out and be heroes. I don’t have any need to be a hero.

“What I have a need to do is make sure that we treat people with dignity, with love, with kindness, with respect and part of that is about investing in organisations like Scran. Also like Out of the Blue, Fet-Lor, Prep Table who are there year round for people, they’re not just turning up on a database all of a sudden, because they’ve got free time, or they’re furloughed or they want to feel good.

“We want to invest in the infrastructure of these communities, the backbone and body of the communities that are there for these people year round. And that’s the model I’ve built. You know, we’re not just trying to swoop in and parachute top down. I’m trying to empower people bottom up.”

So how is this impacting on John himself? We asked if he was taking a day off here and there.

He replied: “Yes, where I can. It’s really important that we

work smart, not just work hard. It's really important. We are in a very unsafe climate. Lockdown is serious, and we can't just be running around like motivated idiots, or well-meaning do gooders, cutting corners. That is dangerous.

"We have to take an almost clinical approach to how I monitor physical distancing handwashing, you know, volunteer training. That stuff's been really important. And part of that is about wellbeing of my staff, my volunteers, and myself.

"I just have a view, I won't ask anyone to do anything I'm not willing to do myself, you know. I was in at the frontline inside the Western General Hospital, giving an address to the entire senior team of the clinical nursing staff of that hospital with the director of that hospital. I heard about how they are talking about the number of beds they've got. We were talking about the red and green wards, learning about those numbers. Then they're asking us to give a presentation as we launch a partnership, direct with NHS, about being round that table and the many front lines of COVID-19, if you like.

"And then in the afternoon, we had Ben Macpherson, one of the government ministers in visiting us in one of our distribution sites.

"You know, we're talking about trying to look at how we sustain, looking at funding. We've got 30 odd distribution lists of drivers to get out each day, and portioning. But I've got an amazing team behind me, and I believe delegation is key.

"And I always say, while I do work hard, it's much better for us to work smarter, and that keeps us safe as well. But, I'm young, I'm fit, I'm capable, but we're doing this as a team, and I'm no hero, I'm just conducting the orchestra, but the people playing the instruments with me are who's making this all happen. It's really important to recognise the whole range of partner organisations, who are truly chipping in.

“We’ve got breweries donating hand gel, we’ve had salons giving us gloves. There’s a whole range of different people who have come together as Edinburgh – the spirit of Edinburgh is what’s coming alive. We’re not just delivering people food. I genuinely believe we’re delivering portions of love, portions of community, portions of happiness and kindness to people. Everybody deserves a hot meal every day right? Everybody deserves a smiley, safe face just saying, Good morning or Good afternoon. How are you? Just remember we’re here all together.”



The Edinburgh Academy Photo: Martin P. McAdam
www.martinmcadam.com

What can people do for Scran Academy – we asked if it is just about donating money?

John said: “I don’t want to underplay the importance of that, but we are desperate. We are willing to receive donations. We’ve got the JustGiving Page which hopefully they can share out there somehow. Quite literally every penny that comes in,

is going out the door.

“We know that with about £12-13 that enables us to feed an at need person or a vulnerable person for an entire week with a healthy, hot free meal,

“It’s enabling us to start to systems plan, to look long term. It enables me to continue to provide the emotional support we give to young people through our Youth work and our family support. So that is a really important element.

“Other things people can do to help out and support us at the minute is to please spread the word, help us raise awareness. If anybody needs help from people like us, reach out to us at scranacademy.com People who really do have severe needs who are struggling, can sign up for support with us and that that’s that’s very, very important.

“We’re trying not to be a universal service. We want to be there for those who cannot attend to their core needs themselves. We don’t want people who are high risk feeling that they have to go and be compromised in a supermarket.

“Now if any of you’ve been to a supermarket in the last month, which most of us have, you’ve had your two metres breached, it’s bloomin’ annoying. And often it’s staff doing that. That is real risk factor, so where we can mitigate that for people who can’t, you know, maybe have the skills or the ability or the access to cook, that’s what we do.

“For others, there’s different support out there. But we are continuing to take on volunteers and they can get in touch through the website as well. But we’ve got such a response of volunteers. We’re just trying to manage that appropriately and safely as well.

“I genuinely believe the community and charities I know we’re hearing a lot about social care and we’re hearing a lot about the NHS workers but please, Edinburgh, hear the message that

small charity key workers, volunteer key workers, doing the kind of thing that Scran Academy is doing, I genuinely believe they are the fifth emergency service.

“They are keeping people safe, we’re keeping people out of hospital, we’re enabling people in dignified ways to stay at home. And that is saving lives. And that is a very precious thing, to have that love fuelling us as a community.”

You can donate to Scran Academy [here](#)