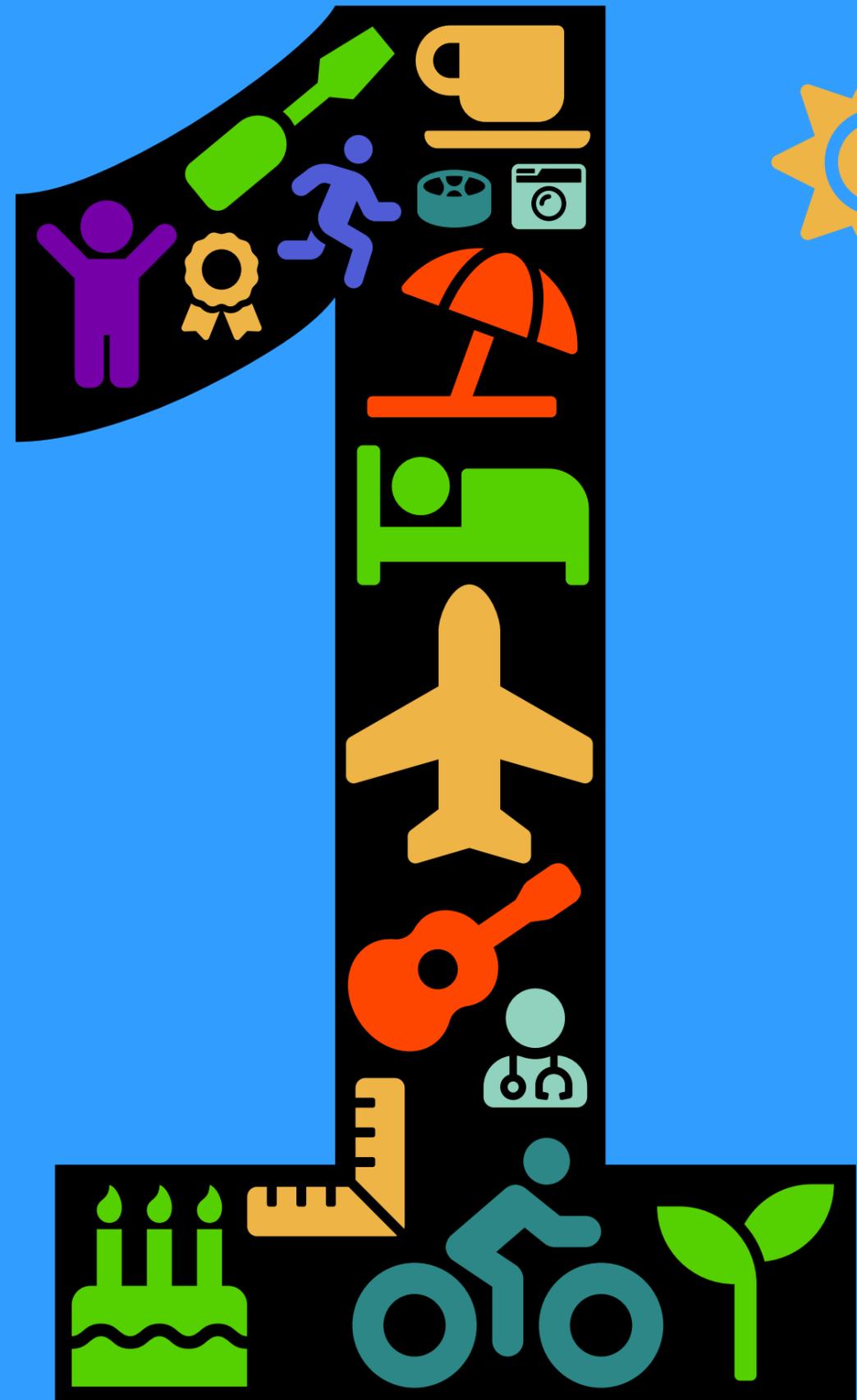


A year of firsts

Activities, achievements and new experiences at Rowan Alba's Thorntree Street in 2021-22.





A year of firsts

Activities at Rowan Alba's Thorntree Street

Introduction

Many years ago, Rowan Alba asked itself, what are our values? In the end, we settled on Accept, Support, Include, and these values underpin every thing we do and how and why we do it.

With low staffing levels across the board, it has traditionally been a challenge to meet the include value, especially in supporting our tenants at Thorntree Street to live a rounder life, and be included in the world outside our Thorntree community.

I am therefore delighted to see the amazing things that Anastasiya, her volunteers and the whole Thorntree Street team have done this year. In the words of Malala Yousafzai "You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream."

I'd like to say the biggest of thanks to Matt and the trustees of The Henry Smith Charity; without you, none of this would be possible.

Helen Carlin

CEO Rowan Alba

Anastasiya Adashkevich

Wellbeing and Activities Co-ordinator,
Rowan Alba Thorntree Street



“

You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.”

Malala Yousafzai

The
Henry Smith
Charity
founded in 1628

OUR FUNDER

Without the vision and commitment of The Henry Smith Charity our tenants would not have had the opportunity to take part in many new experiences this year. For a lot of them these experiences and regular human contact has given them a renewed sense of purpose and vitality in their lives.



Our mission

Our mission is to provide lifelong homes and high level support to previously homeless individuals with long term experience of trauma, mental health and addiction issues. This goes beyond providing them with basic support such as housing, bills and medical concerns.

We aim to provide more holistic support, based on the five pillars of wellbeing: connecting with others, being more physically active, taking notice, learning and giving back. Our mission is to work with individuals in a trauma informed way and to get to know people past their addictions. We focus heavily on harm reduction and creating a safe space for individuals where they feel heard, seen and are able to feel like themselves. We are not trying to change people or tell them that they cannot participate in activities if they don't give up alcohol.

Unfortunately there is very little funding currently available for this type of wellbeing support in the third sector. Often support workers do a great job, but are so stretched with regards to what kind of support they can offer. Without the funding from The Henry Smith Charity the Thorntree Street tenants wouldn't have had the chance to receive this extra yet crucial support and to partake in life-changing activities and events. The funding has allowed a dedicated wellbeing and activities team to put time and energy into delivering a wellbeing programme focused on active participation and with a person-centred approach. The team consists of a full-time Wellbeing and Activities Co-ordinator along with 7 volunteers.





Highlights of the year

One of the greatest outcomes of the wellbeing programme has been supporting individuals to try new things, adopt new perspectives and watch their confidence and self-esteem grow as a result. Let's look at some of the highlights from this past year;

- » A resident appeared as an extra in a film about a refugee in Scotland which will be showcased at film festivals later this year.
- » A resident applied for his first ever passport and afterwards took his first ever flight at the age of 70.
- » All tenants have tried new foods and visited countless new places throughout the year.
- » A resident completed his first ever 5k run.
- » A resident tried meditation and sound bath sessions for the first time.
- » A resident got a massage for the first time in his life – this was the first time he had received any physical contact in the last 20 years.
- » Three volunteers of the wellbeing & activities programme have started filming a fly on the wall documentary, to record the residents lives and the model of support that Thorntree Street offers. They have spent countless hours getting to know the tenants, spending time with them and hearing their stories.





Staff testimonial

Emma Henderson's (Senior Support Worker) account of the last year's wellbeing & activities programme.

I have worked as a support worker at Thorntree Street for three years; even though it can be challenging, it can also be rewarding, and I have always enjoyed my job. Before receiving funding for our Wellbeing and Activities Co-ordinator, it was always a struggle to find the time to take tenants on outings or even for a cup of tea. One of the essential elements of support work is building rapport with our tenants and allowing them to feel heard by discussing any issues they have, whether trauma from the past or issues they may be having with their mental health. Unfortunately, due to restrictions with funding and the many tasks that support workers are required to undertake on shift, there was not always time to support tenants with a trip to a cafe or short walk, which would help build good working relationships and offer the chance for tenants to discuss any problems they may be facing. Support workers would often feel guilty about not giving each resident enough time.

Everything has changed since Thorntree Street received funding from the Henry Smith Charity to employ our Wellbeing and Activities Co-ordinator. Tenants can now take part in activities and day trips each week. If a resident has a specific interest in

doing a particular activity, we can actually cater to these needs. The biggest surprise has been watching tenants participate in activities that I would never have dreamed they would experience three years ago; everything from chair yoga, to massages and meditation! I have observed some of our resident's confidence grow. For instance, one man who would often isolate himself from his housemates and support workers has now experienced several holidays and outings. On a trip to St Andrew's, he laughed and joked with volunteers and was observed happily basking in the sun with a big smile on his face. Having the resources and extra time to encourage him to try new ventures has improved his quality of life and wellbeing in inconceivable ways!

Support workers also appear to be happier and more productive in their jobs due to having the time to concentrate on their daily tasks and at the same time are also still very much a part of the social activities around the project. However, they do not have the added pressure of organising complex trips away or running quiz nights. I have been happy to work with our Wellbeing and Activities Co-ordinator and help support tenants on short holidays. A fresh pair of eyes has brought enthusiasm and excitement to Thorntree Street and has lifted the morale of support workers and tenants.





Type of activities

Tenants have had the opportunity to join in various activities focused on the different aspects of wellbeing

Physical Activities

It is well known that regular exercise has huge benefits to our physical and mental health. This is particularly important to the individuals we support as a lot of them have poor physical health due to long term alcohol use. Also working with men over the age of 50 means that some individuals we support have poor mobility and are at higher risk of falling – therefore we encourage them to engage in activities that improve strength and balance. Some of the activities have included: chair yoga, strength exercises, trips to the gym, 5k run, cycling and regular walks.



Taking Notice

With regards to how we feel, the world around us and what we feed our bodies. We've found that tenants have engaged particularly well with this. They were given the opportunity to try meditation classes, reiki, sound bath and massage sessions. Additionally, most of the men we are working with have a nutrient deficiency, have a poor appetite due to alcohol use and habits of eating food lacking in nutrients that were built over a lifetime. We have been trying to tackle this by not only providing healthier/more diverse meals by hosting different food events but also by running cooking classes to those interested. With the aim of getting individuals excited about good food and to slowly start to shift attitudes with regards to healthy eating.



Connecting

A majority of the men we support have been socially isolated due to their addiction, difficult family and friend situations, mental health issues and of course the added impact of the pandemic. To tackle this, we have tried to create safe spaces where tenants are able to connect with each other during group activities and also with the volunteers. We have ran several mental health and wellbeing workshops as well as developing individualized wellbeing care plans for each person we support. Aiming to connect individuals with others but perhaps more importantly giving them an opportunity to connect with themselves and to explore what they would like out of their life. We have taken several tenants for walks in the Pentland hills along with overnight trips to Blackpool, Belfast, St Andrews and North Berwick. Tenants have also enjoyed more local and frequent trips to the botanic gardens and trips to the beach. All of these have helped tenants feel more connected within themselves and with the communities and world around them.

Giving back

Research has shown that giving back to others and the community can increase your wellbeing and create a sense of purpose. Some of our tenants have got involved by making up quiz questions, by cooking for the whole house and by helping to grow vegetables and herbs in the garden.



Learning

After speaking to the individuals we support it was apparent that most wanted to learn new things, have the opportunity to be engaged in a new way and to be excited about life again. Last summer we ran a woodworking workshop where we supported tenants to build a table and bench for the garden. Our volunteers run regular quiz nights which have been very popular with the tenants. We have also taken tenants on various trips to museums, theatre shows and art galleries.





Facts and figures

Over the past year, a committed and energetic volunteering group has built the platform for full participation by our tenants.

During the first 3 quarters of the year we struggled to get all of the tenants to participate in activities. By Q4 all of the tenants were participating regularly.

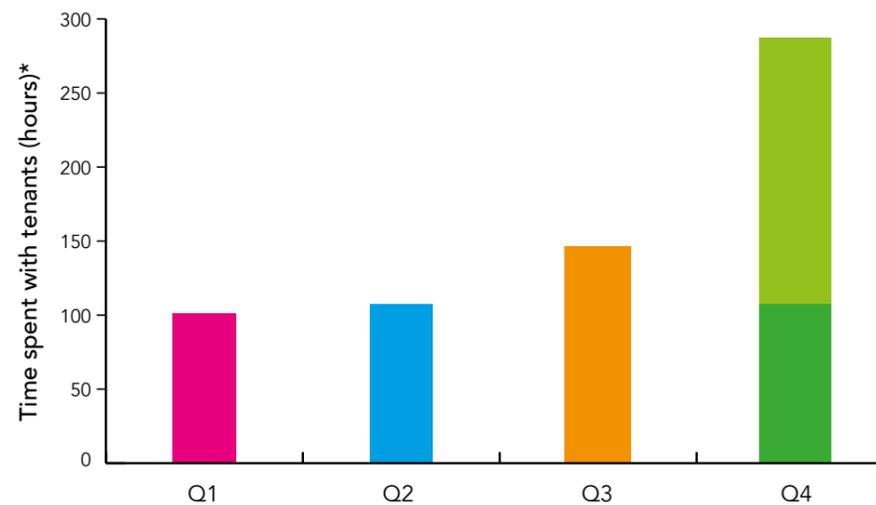
Q1/Q2/Q3 resident participation (91%)



Q4 resident participation (100%)

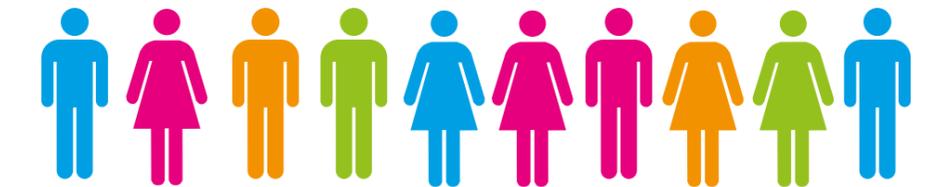


In Q1 - Q2, our volunteers spent on average 118 hours with our tenants. In Q4 we saw a big increase in engagement due to the strong interest shown in our documentary filming.



*Q1 – 101 hours, Q2 – 107 hours, Q3 – 146 hours, Q4 – 107 hours + 180 hours of documentary filming/engaging with tenants = 287 hours

Over the last year we have had 10 volunteers supporting our work. Their collective contribution has made our activity program a reality. At present we have 8 active volunteers



Since the start of this project, tenants have shown progress or achieved stability in:

Reducing addictions **78%**

Mental health **89%**

Physical health **63%**

Life skills **75%**

Social interactions **100%**

Maintaining accomodation **100%**

Self-esteem and meaningful activity **100%**



Case study J.B.

J.B. is a great example of someone who has really engaged with the outings out with the project.

J.B. has an adventurous heart. Since the very start of the wellbeing and activities program he has engaged really well and has loved going on various day trips with staff and volunteers. Despite all of this it was clear that J.B hadn't seen much of Scotland never mind the world. Before coming to Thorntree and getting involved in the activities J.B was moved from hostel to hostel, from one B & B to the next with little support. J.B didn't have many opportunities to be involved in social activities, found it difficult to trust people and had low confidence in himself.

The dedicated wellbeing team and funding has made a huge difference to J.B's life and has allowed him to visit places and partake in activities that he could only dream of before. J.B often comes to the office and gives staff newspaper cuttings which show ideas on places to visit such as articles on British beaches, towns and museums.

After several successful day trips staff and volunteers supported J.B. and another resident on a two-day holiday to North Berwick. After this trip J.B. identified that he has a dream of taking his first ever flight as he has never been on a plane before. Staff supported J.B. to get his first ever passport. After this staff booked a 4 day trip to Belfast which included a flight from Edinburgh to Belfast. This trip went really well and J.B seemed liked a new person over the last year. J.B. has started to pay big chunks of his own money towards the trips including covering half of the costs for the Belfast trip – this shows to us that he is really engaging and wants to use his money for new experiences etc. Since engaging in the activities J.B.s confidence and self-esteem have increased and he seems generally a lot happier.





Case study B.G.

B.G. is an example of someone who has engaged particularly well with the in-house activities as well as some outings.

B.G identified that he used to do a lot of sports and that it really improved his mental health. He then went through a long period of inactivity with regards to sports.

After coming out of prison B.G. tried to let doctors know that he was suffering from depression and poor mental health but felt like he did not receive the right support. This was around the same time B.G. stayed in a hostel which didn't offer any wellbeing activities so he was not able to connect with himself or with others around him. Since coming to Thorntree Street B.G has mentioned many times that he feels like he is living with an extended family/within a community and this has had a really positive impact on his mental health.

With the support of the wellbeing and activities team B.G has re-engaged in sports and has tried yoga, a trip to the gym, strength exercises, cycling and running. B.G was mostly interested in running and asked if we could support him to sign up for a charity 5k run. We signed him up for a 'Movember' run around Holyrood park where he and volunteer Claire successfully completed the run. B.G has also engaged well in cooking and baking classes where he cooked dinner and dessert for the whole house.

Alongside this he has also enjoyed being an extra for a short film about a refugee in Scotland which involved him travelling to the set location and engaging with the camera crew and actors. This was a great boost of confidence for B.G. and he was very grateful that this opportunity was available to him through the help of the volunteers.





Volunteer team

Q & A session with our Volunteer team members

What are you most proud of in the last year?

Isaac Making connections with various people and organizations in the community. I take pride that I can spread the word about what we do at Thorntree Street and letting people know about its existence. I really liked being involved in the woodwork and Burns Night event with partner organizations.

Claire Supporting and motivating a resident to complete a 5k.

Antonio I travelled here from a different county and was surprised at how quickly I managed to blend into the Thorntree community and the level of acceptance I got from people I didn't know well. I have been happy to have some genuine and sincere connections with tenants often unplanned and unexpected.

Mario Supporting a resident to go out cycling for the first time in 30 years made me feel proud. Also seeing one of the tenants who has really unhealthy eating habits eating and enjoying healthy food prepared by volunteers felt like an achievement.

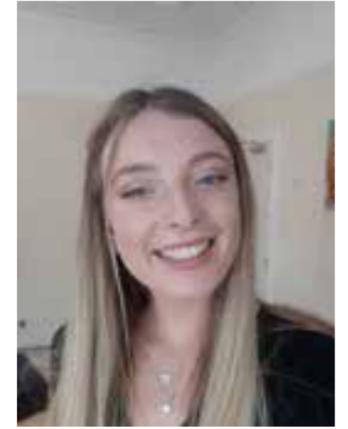
Nadja Taking various tenants on day and multiple-day trips was my proudest moments last year. You can really see it makes a difference to many of them just to be out and change their environment a little.



Mario



Isaac



Claire



Antonio

Andrew I did enjoy doing a quiz and although only one attended I still performed like the room was packed, giving the resident full attention and the whole quiz experience.

Antony I am most proud of becoming friends with the tenants and staff that work at Thorntree Street. The opportunities that the staff at Thorntree Street have provided for the tenants are really wonderful. Some of the staff have really gone out of their way to fulfil dreams and desires that the tenants thought could never be possible! I am really impressed with how much creativity and audacity the activities team have had to go beyond the status quo. This has included international trips, theatre events, sports events and so much more... I stumbled upon Thorntree Street but am so glad to have found such a great place. My personal favourite moment was when a resident and I went to a football game together. I grew up obsessed with football but didn't know much about the Scottish League. The resident taught me all about the Scottish League and watching the game together was fantastic. I hope he enjoyed it as much as I did and it felt like a couple of friends just going to watch a game together, I would love to do this again. I always want to be involved in a place like Thorntree Street and if I ever leave Edinburgh, I will dearly miss it and all the people there.



Antonio



Andrew



Nadja





If you could do one thing differently in the last year what would it be?

Claire To be more organized with regards to my volunteering.

Isaac To have more training on the physical and mental limitations that some tenants may have and how to make things less of an obstacle/barrier to participation. More training on difficult situations such as how to talk to people in heightened states of anxiety and depression.

Antonio I would have made the quiz questions slightly more accessible/easier. I found that having different levels of ability in the room triggered self-esteem problems in some of the tenants so I would be more mindful of that in the future.

Mario I would try to find new ways of encouraging some of the tenants to take part in more activities, especially some of them which do not engage much. Although I am aware that it is very difficult due to the unpredictability of the tenants.

Nadja Create some kind of volunteer schedule for myself so I am more present and have a constant flow of activities - but as my work schedule was never constant this was a bit impossible to accomplish.

Andrew Nothing stands out, it has been a learning process for me.

Antony To be perfectly honest, I would have loved to volunteer there more frequently. Additionally, I would love to be more adventurous with my own volunteering activities. Anastasiya and the activities team are very creative with their ideas looking to go above and beyond to make the tenants happy. I would want to put more effort into being more adventurous.

What have you learned whilst volunteering/working with people in a service like Thortree Street?

Claire I've learned a lot about addiction and using a non-judgemental approach.

Antonio My attitude to addiction has shifted.

Mario I have learned to not judge people for their issues, appearance, past or actions.

Nadja I learned how every person is much more than their addictions, everyone is different and hence has different needs and wants, so it is really important to take all those into consideration when planning activities.

Andrew I have learned that tenants of Thortree Street are not, should not, be defined solely by their addiction, alcoholism, that they are open to new ideas and willing to venture and explore.

Antony I have been inspired by the work of the staff at Thortree Street - mainly by the way the staff deal with the tenants in a fashion that is dignifying and full of love. I was not aware that such activity organizations existed before I started volunteering here and really think they should be more widely available. The success is due to the passion and willingness of the staff to live for others.



If you could change one thing in society to help support those who are experiencing addiction issues what would it be?

Claire To have more compassion and understanding.

Isaac Giving the wider community an opportunity to see the type of work that goes on at Thortree Street, see why we do things a certain way and how it makes a difference as there are a lot of assumptions and pre conceptions.

Antonio Shift in attitude from seeing addiction as a disease rather than a conscious choice/weakness of character. De stigmatize it and not blame the person who is addicted for making the wrong 'choices'.

Mario To make society understand that we need to help each other and have more empathy. I believe that the education system should change. Values, emotional intelligence and self-knowledge should be taught from a very early age.

Nadja Work on educating people widely about the cause and proper treatment of addiction - starting at trauma level instead of addiction itself. I feel like it is the most commonly disregarded thing amongst people in general.

Andrew To keep in mind change can be slow, try and persevere, overcome hurdles together.

Antony Often those experiencing addiction issues can be extremely vulnerable. These people need substantial support and to be treated with dignity and respect. I think it's important for us to also know that any of us could experience addiction and that those battling addiction don't need our judgement but our support. Volunteering at Thortree Street has made me realize this and that some of these people are the kindest people I've met despite their own battles.



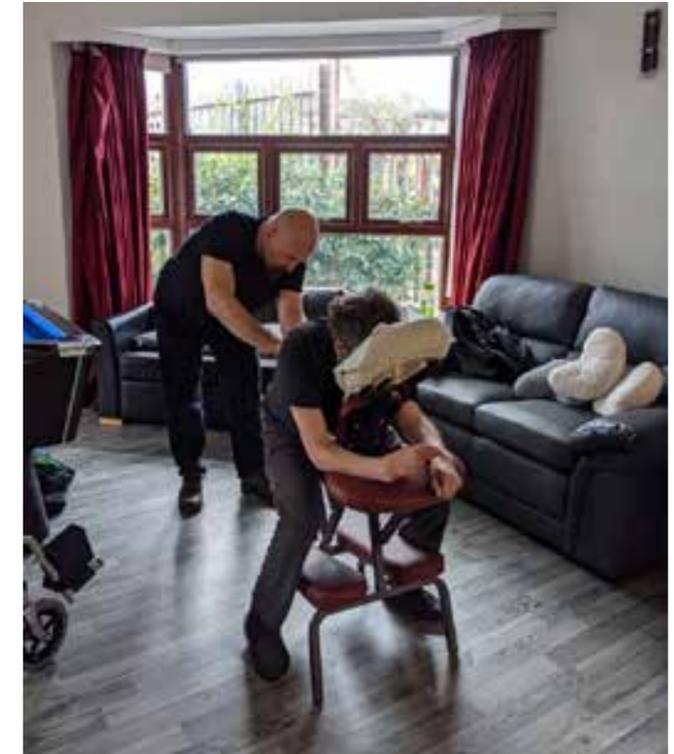
Exploring alternative therapies

In the past year we have come to understand the barriers to participation for our tenants.
As a way of breaking down these barriers we have introduced alternative therapeutic activities.

Many of the tenants we support don't engage well or often with mental health services or conventional therapy methods. Over the last year we have tried to get more creative on ways we can explore the subject of mental health with tenants and found that they engaged well with a sound therapist and other alternative therapies throughout the course of the year.

After noticing this we invited 5 drama therapists to Thorntree to run a group therapy session with 3 of the tenants. Over the course of the 3 hours the therapists got to know the tenants, listened to their stories from the past, listened to their concerns/worries/regrets/reflections etc. After building a connection with the tenants the therapists then would act out in front of the group certain scenarios/scenes from tenants past lives. They also wrote poems that reflected those stories and the emotions that were attached to them. The poems were then given to the tenants to keep.

All three of the tenants reported back that they found the experience extremely valuable and unique - noting that it was much easier/more accessible to engage in this type of therapy. We hope to run more similar sessions in the future, maybe doing a mixture of group and individual therapy.





A year of firsts

Activities at Rowan Alba's Thorntree Street



Partnerships built

We have worked with several organizations over the last year who have helped us deliver some amazing activities.

Edinburgh tool library

We worked with them every week for a course of two months and they supported our tenants and volunteers to build a table and bench for the garden. There was a lot of skill sharing and we had a great time connecting with the staff and volunteers from ETL.



Edinburgh food social

Staff and volunteers from EFS have delivered cooking workshops to our tenants and also hosted a three-course meal for burns supper along with a poetry recital.



Fareshare

We have been getting regular food donations from FS of food that would otherwise be thrown out. We use this to create delicious meals and snacks for our tenants to eat.





Lessons learned

Through our experiences this year we have made learned several important lessons which will inform our practice for the coming year.



Perseverance and persistence are absolutely key to successfully engaging tenants with an alcohol dependency.

Plans would change often at the last minute as tenants may be too intoxicated or unwell to engage. Unlike most other services we engage with tenants who may be actively drinking even during some of the activities therefore we often have to consider in our risk assessments the likelihood of withdrawal, if the resident has enough alcohol with them and where the nearest shop to purchase alcohol may be. Several things have been very obvious over the last year and that is engagement has been very high at almost 100% if plans are not cancelled but instead postponed to a different date or time. If individuals are given a second or third chance/opportunity to engage in a certain activity they will almost always take it. Having this flexibility means they can participate when they are feeling better and this works much better than giving ultimatums. The second thing that has been clear is that even the heaviest of drinkers engage well and frequently in activities – again our guess is that the lack of ultimatums provides a safe space for an individual to thrive and builds trust and acceptance.



Poor mobility/general physical and mental health, along with alcohol dependency were the biggest barriers to participation.

Both group and individual activities have their place and are useful in their own ways but group activities have been a lot more challenging to plan and deliver due to a huge variation in each individual's mobility levels but also their different drinking patterns. It has been a real learning process trying to figure out the boundaries of each individual's mobility and planning trips with wheelchair access. Some things have gone really well but others such as the Blackpool trip not as much due to the difficulty of taking wheelchairs onto public transport especially with transfers. Some things were worth the risk and other situations were very challenging both for the tenants and staff/volunteers involved. Also having one wheelchair for the whole building with multiple people experiencing mobility issues hasn't been ideal and more specialized equipment is needed for activities. Furthermore, more needs to be done around balance and strength training with the tenants. Due to many tenants having poor mobility and having frequent falls, in the future it would be beneficial to focus on this particular type of exercise training.



Having a variety of activities on offer along with having the opportunity to explore new things has been a huge success.

Just having a fresh pair of eyes from the coordinator and volunteers has meant that old and perhaps even unconscious biases could be put aside allowing for new ways of being to grow and develop organically. There have been times where staff and even individuals themselves thought they wouldn't like something but then the complete opposite turned out to be true. Making presumptions might be part of being human but what we have learned over the last year is that people surprise you and nothing is set in stone. Having a dedicated wellbeing team and funding has been crucial in this exploration process. As a result of having a diverse team in terms of ages, nationalities, world views and experiences so many opportunities have opened up to the tenants because of this. It has given a new life to the project as the volunteers are enthusiastic, each bringing their own distinct gifts and talents in the way they support the tenants.



Looking to the future

The role of healthy eating and nutrition in the support and recovery of our tenants is pivotal.

Nutrition

Over the last year we've had many activities focusing on healthy eating, cooking classes and trying new foods. However, this has not been enough and much more needs to be done in the coming year. It is widely known that eating a nutritiously rich diet is one of the best things we can do for our physical and mental health. With the clients we work with there are several barriers to eating healthy. These barriers are: having limited cooking facilities in their flats, excessive drinking and as a result having a poor appetite, poor physical and mental health, years of living on the streets and being only used to certain types of food (survival mode), not having previous education on healthy eating, different traditions whilst growing up therefore not developing a taste for healthier ingredients, staff not having the time or resources to make nutritious meals.

Therefore, a stronger effort is needed from everybody involved to have more emphasis on healthy eating, more events such as frequent cooking classes, making healthy food simple and accessible for staff to make.

Some suggestions going forward:

- » Engage night shift staff in helping to cook healthy meals as they might have more time at night.
- » Educational workshops and posters on healthy eating.
- » Engaging all staff in how to make quick and healthy meals.
- » Engaging all volunteers to run more food-based activities especially around eating healthy.
- » Wellbeing and Activities Co-ordinator organizing more cooking classes for tenants to be involved in and engaging with outside organisations to promote healthy eating in fun and innovative ways.

It is hoped that going back to and taking care of this basic but fundamental need we would see improvements in other areas of tenant's lives.





For more information about this project and the work Rowan Alba does, please contact:

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