In Conversation With… Moira Bayne, Housing Options Scotland

Pedro: Could you talk a little bit about who you are, and what you do?

Moira: I'm Moira, I'm the Chief Executive of Housing Options Scotland. I've been with the organization since 2008, with our housing information and advice service which provides bespoke information and advice to a range of people. So older people, people with any form of self-identified disability, children in the same kind of category. It's a team that expands and contracts depending on our funding, which is primarily from the Scottish Government. We're all home-based, agile working, and we have been since way before the pandemic. We find that's a more effective way to work, it means that we can we cover the whole of Scotland, we can reach people whether online or in person if needs be, without having to pay for expensive offices or lots of time wasted on travel and commuting and things.

I think by anyone's standards we've been very successful. When I joined in 2008 we had 32 clients in a year, and I think we're now looking at between 800 and 1000 clients in a year, so there's clearly been a lot of hidden demand over the years. I think as well as sort of uncovering the hidden demand I think what we've done is we've, in a sense, generated our demand. We've publicized client stories, client journeys, etc., which has made other people realize, "actually I'm in a similar situation, if they can get help with their situation then possibly I can too", so it's very, well I think, a healthy organization, with lots of good stuff happening. That's it, in a nutshell.

Pedro: Do you want to talk a little bit about Homeless Housing Options, in particular?

Moira: So that's a Scottish Government funded project, that's got 2 years, so we're halfway through, we've had first year, quite successful. That was a bid, it's quite common, if people who listen to this don't realize how common it is in the third sector, you have to bid for money, money just doesn't get given to you, so we had a bidding to the CORRA Foundation, which is a charity that is distributing the homeless fund on behalf of the Scottish Government. So we got a bid in to really, I suppose replicate the service that we give to our mainstream clients, for want of a better word. So that very person-centred service, we wanted to see if that would work with homeless applicants, homeless clients. The other kind of secondary, but I think kind of probably equal, objective was to start to address, or, highlight, some of the myths and misunderstandings about homelessness. So, we had a section in our bid which was to look at ways we could actually let the people of Scotland and beyond know, this is what homeless people look like, the look like you, me, anybody else that you might see on the street. And the third bit, the casework side of things, the kind of amplifying the voices of homeless people side of things, lived experience, and also the getting out, the networking, the knowledge exchange, the raising the profile, the encouraging everyone that works in homelessness to kind of include us as part of that, and talk to us, etc. etc. So, we got the money, surprise surprise, and that's enabled us to employ 2 full time members of staff. Yeah, I think it's been very very successful, we've been very very pleased. We had an evaluation done of the first year. We exceeded the targets that we'd set in year one, and I think we are on target to do very very well in year two, which is a shame because you wouldn't want people to be homeless, but they do come to us, they get this quality, the most accurate advice, and they also get a Housing Options Broker who will stick with them through thick and thin, which I think we find doesn't always happen in the other, kind of, advice sector.

Gareth: Great, yeah, that's really interesting, thank you. So part of what we wanted to do with the "In Conversation" series is to open up discussions around ways in which certain groups of people are possibly excluded, and the barriers that they face with housing in the UK. So just from your perspective, what are some of the main contemporary issues in the moment?

Moira: Ah, that's a huge question. Ok, so I think there's lots of things and I won't have them in any particular order because I'm just sort of talking off the top of my head as per usual. But, I think, well, one of the barriers (and it's an absolute barrier that affects everybody in every walk of life) is not having

information, not having accurate information, not having a clear understanding of what their rights are. On the other side of that it's not just about rights, it's about being able to contextualize those rights. So, you may have the right to temporary accommodation for instance, but it won't be temporary accommodation in the street that you want or the town that you want. You may have the entitlement to access permanent accommodation eventually, but that won't necessarily be where you want it to be.

So I think that on the one hand, there's people who don't have any information about what their rights are, what's available. But on the other hand, there's also that ignorance about what's available, what the housing markets look like, so I think that quite often the people that come to us have got all sorts of other worries in addition to their housing worries. So they've got health worries, income worries, worries about their children, so housing quite often get sort of battered down in terms of the most pressing thing.

The people who are our clients come with a lot of what they call nowadays "baggage", and I think part of the job of the broker is to try and kind of unpick that a bit, and to try and, obviously we're a housing organization, so to try and focus on getting housing solutions for people. That's not always easy if you're speaking to someone who's potentially been up all night, who's very very worried, who hasn't eaten properly, then saying to someone "here's all the available housing in your area and here's how you apply" you already are starting at a disadvantage because they don't have the same baseline as other people might (they're fit, they're healthy, they're motivated, etc.). And that's the kind of thing that when we're speaking to brokers, it's not always easy for people to understand, and I think what we have to do is we have to work at our client's pace, no matter how frustrating that is. It wouldn't be our pace necessarily, but you do have to accept people kind of go off our radar, they disappear for weeks, months on end and they come back in the same or worse situation than they were before, there's nothing that we've done wrong or could have done differently, it's just the way things are for people. So it's just about trying to kind of scale back on our expectations and work at the client's pace and that's what we try to do. That's a big barrier. Knowledge and information and understanding. As well as all the other many many barriers that are out there, that we probably don't need to speak about because other people have much more eloquently.

But then on the other hand, lack of accessible housing, across all sectors, that's a huge problem. Not everyone can access (literally, physically access) and visit a house or live in a house because of steps, stairs, small rooms, small bathrooms. That's across all tenures - PRS, and owner occupation. We've got very very poor, in my view, housing design standards in Scotland. We absolutely build to the lowest common denominator, the volume builders, the house builders really aren't interested in building to accessible standards. They do what they have to do and no more, and part of the argument for that is that there's no market for accessible housing, in fact, it puts people off. If you happen to have a house with a wet floor shower then nobody wants it, because it seems it's been kind of stigmatized, so we've got a long way to go. So those are kind of underlying barriers I think that kind of the attitudes of the public towards physical accessibility. I could talk all day about barriers!

Pedro: Please do! That's why we're here!

Moira: Well, the mental health thing, that's another thing, I'm on a roll now. Mental health, that's something that's not hugely understood. We've got lots of clients with diagnoses that may not be accurate. A lot of people with personality disorder which is classified as untreatable. So that causes people, the mental health, the anxiety, depression, the personality disorders, they cause people all sorts of problems in their daily lives, and of course cause problems in their housing.

One of the big things we find is we've got people who've got children on the autistic spectrum, and, because their children have got behaviours that are very very hard, to live with, in effect, they might not be able to share a bedroom with a sibling, they might need a separate bathroom, all sorts of things but social housing allocation policies do not recognize those as a means to get extra points toward your housing application. Big frustration there, you know, these are parents who deal with many many issues with schools, with neighbours and things, so something like a request for an extra bedroom just seems like a very simple request but it's very hard to get, in any sector, so that's a big barrier for people who have got children on the spectrum, who will have those children in their lives, forever. And so it's a

problem that won't disappear but I think that a lot of the time if we kind of bring these issues to the attention of the "powers that be" whether that's a housing association or local authority, or a homelessness team, I really just often get the feeling that they just wish that that would disappear. It won't be dealt with today by that person, it will be somebody new tomorrow, who you will have to repeat your story to all over again.

That's a big barrier is access to systems to get through on the phone, to emails, to web based applications, there's nothing simple for people in this situation. Even the most sophisticated of people, the most educated of people struggle with online applications, or being able to do it on the phone, and that's something that we would be able to help with, but we haven't got a magic wand, don't have, you know, any kind of top-secret way of accessing people that the general public can't access. So yeah, that's a big barrier, just kind of getting in touch with somebody can be a huge problem.

Pedro: I think as well, we talk about, in terms of mental health problems, but even learning disabilities, for example, are something that we see a lot, where the actual bureaucracy of trying to access housing is so alien, and so impenetrable.

Moira: Yeah. And I think the other thing, while we're on learning disability, and this is a controversial statement, quite often in my own experience, and I've done quite a lot of work on this in the past. Quite often, I think the barrier to independent living is actually the family themselves, the mum and dad, who really, they might say that they want their son or daughter to live independently, but really when push comes to shove, those blocks were just put in place by the parents, by the carers, and sometimes that's for understandable motives, because nobody wants to see their children grow up and leave home, sometimes it's for financial motives, because that person and disability can be an income stream for the family, it can be access to a vehicle, so there's all sorts of reason for that. That can be a barrier, and the person themselves with the learning disability doesn't generally have the capacity to contact people like us. There's very little accessible information out there, either easy-read or something that literally speaks to people. And I think, well, we set up "Making Moves" which is separate service for people, primarily with learning disabilities who want to live independently for the first time. But generally speaking, those people come to us via their parents, so it needs the parents' consent almost. So that's a difficult one, very difficult one. But yeah, that's definitely a barrier.

Gareth: That's very interesting, thank you. And then, just, I guess a bit of a follow-up, really, because I know a lot of your work also focuses on older people, and housing, so I just didn't know whether, yeah if you could just talk a little bit to some of the particular issues faced by them.

Moira: Ok, right, that's interesting. One of the things that's changed during the pandemic, and I don't know if it's the same in the rest of the UK but certainly, up until the pandemic, sheltered housing was becoming increasingly less popular. Sheltered housing providers were struggling to fill vacancies, quite often they were having to try and reconfigure beds that were bedsit accommodation, which was no longer popular as people wanted bigger housing, they wanted to be able to take all their furniture with them, etc. etc. So during the pandemic, one of the key things that happened in my view is that sheltered housing providers stayed open, in effect, all the way through. They were allocating, they were moving people along, they were moving people out, they were really business as usual in comparison to the rest of the social housing sector, which pretty much stopped doing anything for 2 years. Some people still haven't started. For sheltered housing, it became more available, there was more of it. People's views changed, people wanted to be somewhere that was safer, they wanted somewhere with the security of some kind of warden control, alarms system. At the time they weren't able to provide communal activities but at least there was the possibility of in the future. Some of the things like the smaller space standards went from being a massive disadvantage to a massive incentive, because, you know, easier to heat, easier to furnish if you were, you know, 65, 70, 75, you don't want to start again carpeting and putting curtains on a big, big property. So sheltered housing has really had a bit of a resurgence in recent years, and I hope that continues.

I think the other issues for older people are, in some ways the same as for the rest of us. There's a big difference between a very fit, healthy, able 65-year-old, and somebody who is 85, who is in poor health,

who has got mental health issues as well as physical frailties or whatever. So I don't think you necessarily can say they're a homogenous group. The resurgence for sheltered housing has been a big thing in my view. The other thing is that there's a group of, most older people in Scotland are owner/occupiers, but there's a marked reluctance to move from owner occupation to downsize, to move to some form of renting. We did some research as an organization, a while back, on a particular part of Glasgow that's full of very affluent owner/occupiers. We did some research, it was interviewing these people and finding out what was the reason they were still living in a 5-bedroom detached Victorian villa, even though it was only the two of them. And, a lot of the barriers, well the two main things were, there was nothing in their area of the right size, so they would rather stay in the 5-bedroom house and maybe kind of shut-off half of it than move to a 2-bed house some miles away. So that kind of locational preference is very very strong amongst older people, and the other kind of barrier was family. And family either implicitly or explicitly, were saying, you know, "just hang onto this house, this in effect is our inheritance. We don't want you doing anything dodgy and maybe moving into owner/occupier sheltered housing where you might lose money on it" or whatever. So, a lot of the issues around why older people don't kind of move on the way that we would expect them to - I think your views on what's suitable change in later life, you are prepared to maybe put up with a bit more inconvenience because you've got the location. And we know lots of people who have closed off the top floor of their house, they just don't use it anymore, live downstairs. Because they've got the local community, their shops, church, etc., that suits them. If there was a sort of 2-bedroom accessible bungalow around the corner, would they move? I don't know, maybe, maybe not. But nobody's going to build that on spec.

Pedro: Do you think as well that, and this kind of ties in with what you were saying about knowledge and information, but, this sort of, as people get older, or have been in one form of housing for a really long time, for say, 40, 50 years even. When it comes to the stage of knowing what's out there, they just, nobody has any idea.

Moira: Yeah. I think in younger life, I can only speak for myself now but, we were all very absolute experts on schools and catchment areas and property prices, etc., and that was the kind of this other dinner party chatter amongst the middle class certainly, and everyone was very clued in. And then, you don't need to know that anymore, it's no longer relevant to your day-to-day life, I don't think you necessarily keep up to date with the changing world of housing, because you know how hard it is to keep up with the changes even for people who work in it full time, so yeah, I think it becomes less relevant. Until it becomes relevant, and then that's usually some form of crisis, hospital admission or something. And that's a frustration because people don't necessarily, when they get admitted to hospital, and they're then needing to come back home, and home isn't suitable. Again, it's that same sort of pattern of not having access to the right information and advice, and ending up in a situation that's less than great because they haven't been given the right information at the right time.

Pedro: Ok, so, we've talked about barriers, but I wonder if you can give any examples of good work that's being done to support older people or people with disabilities into housing? Obviously apart from us! Maybe at a statutory level, or any good housing associations, sheltered housing providers that do good work?

Moira: Well, see, that's very important and poignant. The way that we work, we don't know anybody influential (you know a couple influential people, we know a few), we tend to, you know, people say to me "do you know the Chief Executive of Aberdeenshire Council"? Well I don't. I might know a very good housing officer in Aberdeenshire, I might know a very very good homelessness officer, I might have met somebody at an event or something and saved the details for later. But we're not operating at that macro level, we are operating very much at the kind of grassroots. In terms good work, again another thing I want to say to be fair to the world out there is, people only come to us if they have got a problem, so we won't necessarily hear - well we won't hear if everything is hunky dory for them, so we don't necessarily hear about good practice.

Good practice, quite often, in my opinion is at an individual level. And it's about getting through on the phone to the right person, a person who wants to help. A person who is quite willing to share information like their phone number, which can hard to get a hold of. Some of the people would be quite good at

working at MI5, instead of housing organizations, because they're very good at not giving out information. So, I think all the good practice really does start with one person and that one person can open up lots of doors literally and metaphorically to whatever the organization has available. So it's very frustrating, because I think one of the frustrations I have is, you know that if you get the right person on the right day in the right mood, that can make a huge difference. Despite what their policies and procedures say, there's an awful lot beyond that that is discretionary, particularly in the world of social housing, but you really are dependent on the goodwill of the person that you're working with, and I think the brokers would all say that.

So, good practice, there's lots of good practice out there. There's all the sheltered housing providers, Bield, Trust and Hanover have got a one stop one-stop website application process, they're all very helpful, you can speak to them over the phone, and Blackwood is very well known for all its innovation, particularly in physical disability. I think we've done some work recently looking at whether social landlords have got any - if they recognize mental health issues as part of their allocations policies, and surprise surprise, they don't. But that's not to say that- somewhere out there, there'd be somebody who is doing really good work and we wouldn't necessarily be the best people to talk about that because our view is, we work with what's available right now, what's the here and now, rather than what might be available in 2 years' time or what might be available over there. Our client is over here, and over there's not particularly relevant is it?

Except we can say to X local authority that in Y local authority they're doing this this way. But then sometimes local authorities rival each other so that's the wrong thing to say. You don't want to point out how well the neighbouring authority is doing better or differently and kind of framing that… Yeah. So I don't know specific examples of good practice, I'm probably not the person to ask but there's lots of good practice there's general guidance from CIH, people like that. There's a kind of consensus view, there's nobody saying anything very different to anybody else. Everybody believes the same things, you know "housing rights are human rights" approach, etc. nobody's going to argue that. Just what it's like in practice when people are trying to access a very scarce resource, that's getting scarcer as the days go by. And in a context of PRS having lots of issues and worries about cost of living crisis and everything, it's not easy to identify huge pockets of good practice. Another thing I'll say just before I forget this train, is that housing is a cake, right? I don't want to sound like Liz Truss and her pie, but housing is a cake, and anything that you do in to the allocations systems, policies and procedures, it doesn't make the cake any bigger, it just cuts it up differently. So veterans might win in one area in terms of allocation policy but somebody will lose out, by definition, unless you make the cake bigger. Then, things are going to fundamentally stay the same. So that's, yeah, we just need to make the cake bigger.

Pedro: That's such a good way of putting it, I hadn't thought of it like that. You're just sort of swapping things around to make it a different shape but it's still the same size.

Gareth: I think this is one of the conversations we're having, within the spaces you're really highlighting the reason, sort of, when you say one-size-fits-all in mainstream development, it isn't actually really catering to all the right people in the right places. So that kind of variety as well is needed to make sure that people have choices around where they want to move. You know, depending on what they're living with, you know, disabilities and stuff like that…

Moira: One of the big things we've done is benefits-based mortgages. They really didn't exist until we became involved, and over the years we've helped thousands of people to get a mortgage based on their benefits to access owner occupation when social housing wasn't meeting their needs. And again, that's back to the information, that there are still people out there who have got a pretty decent benefit income but it's never occurred to them that they can maybe get out of their housing situation by buying something. Because nobody's ever told them and nobody kind of reaches out and says "you can do this". You have to come looking for the information and advice. In terms of barriers being removed, I think that's something that we can point to, we were really, hugely influential in that. And I don't think there's really any other people doing it to the same extent as we are for whatever reason, but that's been massive for lots of our clients.

Pedro: So, from another standpoint, we're talking about things on either a macro scale about supply and policy, and also the barriers that disabled people and older people face when trying to access these things. But, what do you think about in terms of the support or training or development that's given to the workforce, to the frontline workers within these organizations to ensure that services are being delivered for those groups?

Moira: Ok, well, that's a very good point as well. Well, in terms of social housing, training is of a very high standard within the social housing sector, but that is only a very small part of the Scottish housing market. So there's nothing in the PRS, there's no PRS landlord that I'm aware of that would even consider - well, most PRS landlords have one or two properties, so who are they going to train to provide information, advice, and support? So there's nothing happening there. In terms of owner occupation, I think most people that come to us from the owner/occupier sector come through Age Scotland. Well, most people come to us because they've found us through a search engine but people who come via another organization, it tends to be Age Scotland, a kind of umbrella organization, someone's got a housing problem they'll of refer them to us. Within the social housing sector there's lots of opportunities for training, there's lots of guidance, good practice, networking opportunities, conferences but that's only a minority of people that work in housing in Scotland, and nothing happens anywhere else. Unless you're going to tell me different, but I don't.

Pedro: No.

Moira: So that's a big issue. As the PRS becomes the more and more sort of dominant feature, there's no equivalent of TPAS in the PRS, there's very little in the way of standards, it's very much, you know, it's a business. You set up as a landlord, you provide accommodation to people, they pay you rent. You've got things you need to do, in terms of repairs and stuff but there's nothing in terms of support apart from Homes for Good. I don't know if you've spoken to Susan Aktemel because that's one thing they do.

Gareth: That's a name that popped up in our conversations, yeah.

Moira: Yeah, they're social enterprise letting agent and they do specifically employ staff to support their tenants, and I think that's the way forward. A lot of PRS tenants now would have historically been in social but, but that's impossible to access. Eventually it will make economic sense to support tenants in the PRS. Whether that'll only be as a result of things gone wrong, scandals, terrible things happening to people. I don't know that PRS landlords will be proactive in that, they'll wait until they have to do it.

Pedro: That's so interesting. That's something that I actually hadn't considered, in terms of when we were talking about inclusion, equality, and diversity, etc. We are thinking about it in terms of statutory services or charities, but actually, housing is so much bigger than that in terms of mortgages and making them accessible, and those kinds of services. Rather than, the ones when you need to ask for help in a crisis. It's like, making these sort of commercial, if that's going to continue the way it does in terms of properties. That needs to be looked at as well as, equally as much as embedding it in local authority processes or Housing Association processes.

Moira: Yeah. Because local authorities have got very limited influence over either the PRS or owner occupation, it tends to be at the planning level of landlord registration. We have had massive issues in the past with letting agents, and I know this well personally, people who don't want to even consider an application from somebody with a disability. And we've been very heavily involved in advocating on behalf of our client, but PRS landlords, they don't have to let their properties to anybody, they don't have to give any reason. I suppose you could consider taking some kind of discrimination claim against them but that would be, you know, very lengthy, time-consuming, and really at that point all you want is a roof over your head. We have had some very disappointing experiences with letting agents just literally refusing to answer our calls, refusing to speak to us. And again, that's just a few examples. There might be thousands of letting agents across Scotland who are absolutely fabulous but I very much doubt it. And again, in Edinburgh just now they're talking about several hundred people chasing each flat. I think I've seen an article about having to provide a CV for your pet to convince a private landlord to take you

on. My son had to write an essay about how he would be a good tenant, so, again, these are all sort of barriers for people who have got particular needs or whatever, who English isn't a first language, or maybe have a learning disability. Its brutal, absolutely brutal, it shouldn't be that way but it is and that probably isn't going to change any time soon.

Gareth: Kind of leads onto my next question, in a way, although I can get a sense of how this is going. So one of the things we are thinking about with the organizations themselves and support and the workforce, we know that we are talking about people who are facing particular issues because of maybe disabilities or their age and things. How are they represented within organizations? So, in your view how housing providers, local authorities, or other organizations you work with are they doing enough to make sure that their staff teams are representative maybe of wider populations?

Moira: Well the short answer is that I wouldn't know, because I would only see from the perspective of a member of the general public. I think that generally speaking, housing associations and local authorities in Scotland have been pretty good at recruiting disabled people in particular, becoming disability friendly, etc. Learning disability I think, not so much. I don't know, I couldn't point to any particular local authority or housing association and say "yeah, they're absolutely marvellous" but also I don't think that, and I don't know I could just be speculating, I don't think that there's any kind of massive direct discrimination going on, but then I would say that, wouldn't I, because I'm only seeing it from the outside. So I don't know is the short answer. I think on paper they all look really good, they've all got Investors in People awards and stuff like that, they've all got every sort of tick box and charter mark etc. going, but underneath, who knows.

Pedro: Ok so, if we're thinking, now we're looking more at a legislative level. So, what in your opinion, or how, could equality, diversity, inclusion and accessibility be improved at a more legislative level? How do you think that could be strengthened?

Moira: I suppose, and again you're talking about housing. Social housing is only a small part of housing overall, so I think, if I were in that position, I suppose it's the kind of carrot and stick approach, I would have some kind of public information and awareness campaign. I think the idea that people are "other", that there's something different about people, but not in a good way, I think that is something that we come across on behalf of our clients a lot of the time, so I think we kind need to have a better Scotland, if you like, a better society, and I think you can do that through public information campaigns. You can make it clear that first of all, that discrimination is not acceptable, and secondly that any sort of discrimination is excluding a whole raft of people that you'd want to be included in public life. That's what I would do, rather than having a sort of legislative hammer, which takes a long time to work its way through parliament, and then, you know, it doesn't become effective very quickly. I would do a fairly big campaign, because I think most people in Scotland are good, that's been my experience in my 40+ years in housing, I think most people do want to include their fellow citizens, and if they're kind of discriminatory, if they come across as being discriminatory its quite often because of fear or ignorance. So that's what I would do, I wouldn't do build any legislation, I would just get some big public information campaign and get people behind it. And that's happened before in all sorts of things. Seatbelt campaigns, drunk driving campaigns, they've been very successful. You could do that, it wouldn't cost very much money, and it could make a big difference.

Pedro: That's an interesting way to look at it, it's a societal problem rather than, if we're talking about "housing legislation" it actually strings back to society and beyond to attitudes of otherness, attitudes to people with disabilities, inherent attitudes to groups that don't fit the norm, whatever that means.

Moira: Up until 1945, I think people with a physical disability had no right to education. If you don't have an education you don't have any possibility of getting a degree, getting a really good job, etc. etc. so you weren't really part of Society. Same with people with learning disabilities, until the 1990s in Scotland, they were institutionalized, and then they moved to bring people into society and I think, I did a lot of work in LD hospitals and I think the biggest fears were from the relatives, because they were told "your loved one has a learning disability, don't worry, we'll take them, we'll look after them in a hospital setting with nurses and doctors and things, you can visit once a week or whatever, once a

month, and they'll be fine". 20 years later, you know, "actually we made a mistake. They're not safe in hospital, the very very reverse, and they're going to come out into the community" and the community was not necessarily entirely happy about this influx of people with learning disabilities. Now, 30 years on its been absolutely fine, there's been no issues at all, people are much more accustomed to seeing people in their community with learning disabilities or any other form of impairment. But if people didn't know about, if they were told these people were kept in a big hospital on the outskirts of town, there's an assumption there that they're scary, they're dangerous or something. But I do think that society, people's attitudes can change. All the debates that we're having right now about, you know, trans issues and things like that, these kinds of extreme debates are really born out of fear and ignorance. If you start to give people some information, some experience and most people are happy to change their views.

Pedro: And that leads to sort of, lived experience, doesn't it? I feel like that ignorance can be sort of sated by just hearing what people who have these experiences have to say, or seeing them in society, takes away that sort of "otherness".

Moira: Yeah, absolutely, and once the LD hospitals were closed, I moved on to long stay hostels, and I was working between three hostels in Glasgow, and I'd quite often get taxis from one to another, just because it wasn't always safe to walk to. Anyways, I would always speak to the taxi drivers, and sometimes they would say, "what are you doing at Peter McCann House?" (that's a big hostel), and sometimes he would say like "no you don't want to do that" and I'd say "be brave. I'm here to close the hostels and move the guys into the community with support if it's needed" and honestly 99 times out of 100 the taxi drivers were 100 percent behind that. Everybody, every taxi driver in Glasgow knows somebody with an addictions issue, every hostel worker has got a family member who is having to work in the sex industry to feed their addictions and things. People were much much more accepting and willing to come on board with the idea of hostel closures than I think the powers that be thought they would be. So I'm sure there's a tiny minority of people who would very much opposed to that, you know, who have got very kind of firm views, but fortunately I never really spoke to them. I do think, and I have thought for a long time that society is fundamentally good, and I think we can do things to influence what is kind of generally accepted in Scotland, particularly in Scotland because of the small population, and kind of distinct client group. And there's no reason why we couldn't do that… I'm off on a tangent again!

Gareth: No, no! That kind of brings us nicely to the next question, which is around research, and research that's in this space, so that's kind of where I come at this from, you know, we know some of what's happening in the space but we want to really encourage that kind of diversity. So it was just a question of are you aware at the moment of any research taking place around issues of older people/people with disabilities and housing at the moment?

Moira: No. No, but again, I wouldn't necessarily be, I suppose, the sort of work that I do wouldn't necessarily bring me into contact with that? Sorry to - well, I don't like to kind of leave you with that kind of negative answer but I really don't know.

Gareth: No worries.

Moira: There's probably loads but I haven't heard of it.

Pedro: That's the crux of what we're trying to ask, isn't it? It's about accessibility, you know, we should know if there is stuff, one would argue, we should know and people should be asking us.

Gareth: And I think we've got a role as academics, academic institutions, to make sure that our research is user friendly, accessible and getting to the right places. So I guess the question, which has led in perfectly, how would you like research to be presented? what would be useful to you in your day job, for us to do research on?

Moira: Well that's a big question as well. In terms of what would be useful to me in my day job, I'm sorry to say I don't really see research as being crucial to that, just in the type of role that I have, just being

kind of focused on that. I think what would be useful to me would be evidence that I can point to say that it's not just anecdotal, it's not just me that thinks that it's not just Pedro who told me that, that we know, because somebody with greater credibility than us has researched and has found it to be true. And, I think I've probably come across as somebody that has very fixed views, and that's true, but I'd be happy to see those views challenged, if somebody can give me some evidence to challenge that. So, I do think that the big lack in the sector (back to my previous point) is that the research does focus on social housing, which is really not good enough in my viewpoint. It's much harder to do proper research on the big population that isn't in the social rented sector, so I think that's what's missing, and I think in order for the research to be valid, anybody who wants to wants to question the research can say well, you've only done the research for say, 30 percent of the population, if that, therefore it's not valid, the other 70 are in a much different position but you haven't looked at them. So I think you should be looking to do more about the totality of people in Scotland's housing market. Sorry if that's not a good answer.

Pedro: I think that's a really good answer. I think that, ultimately, we see a lot of generalized research that doesn't take into account, and this is what we've been talking about, the sorts of ins and outs. It relies on an average of people in Scotland when actually in terms of the proportions of people that are accessing services, housing services, or need housing, particularly we are talking about housing needs, and are going to be much more complicated than sort of "Joe Bloggs" if that makes sense in terms of what their needs are, what values they face, and if we are thinking about it from an equalities standpoint, in terms of whether they're a Black & Ethnic minority, whether they're disabled, whether they're older, whether they're LGBTQ, there's million different things that are not, and I think this has come up in other conversations, is that that data is not there. So most of the information that we are going on is generalized, and is not specific, and doesn't take into account the specific barriers faced by individuals, if that makes sense.

Moira: Yeah. And so the other thing is, you'd asked me that question about what would make a difference to me in my day job, and I don't want to say nothing but I think I'm just going to say nothing, but I think that's partly because of the unusual nature of my day job. I mean, until recently we were funded, we had annual funding, so every year we had to bid for funding for the next year, we never knew what the next year was going to look like. That's changed a bit recently, but I think it's fairly common in the third sector to have a lot of financial uncertainty. So what we'd have to try and do, and that includes me, we work in the here and now and we work with what we definitely have. So, if you're going to produce some research in 3-5 years time, to be honest with you that's not of any real relevance to me right now, I'm sorry to say that, I'm really focused on what's possible just and now, just being very pragmatic. Other chief execs have got different types of roles and policy roles and strategic roles and everything, but I'm sort of focused on the right now, the sort of grassroots. Yeah, so that's probably my answer to that.

Gareth: That's really helpful, because it's helpful for us to know, if we are wanting to work with the third sector, what can we do? How can we make sure that things are packaged up in very clear ways that present the evidence that's helpful in the now, and in terms of your work, and in turn, I think as academics we need to be having these conversations and building these relationships up with these organizations so we can see – and that one of the things we wanted to do with this - to know what's happening in real time, so we can see what evidence we've got and respond to it. If we just talk amongst ourselves, then we don't know what on the ground looks like at the moment which is I think why these kinds of collaborations are really important.

Pedro: That's what we were talking about earlier, the idea behind this is to connect the right now to what's going to be happening ahead, in next year, 5 years, in 2040, whatever. Yeah, and I think in terms of research, I think there's a gap in sort of reactive research and research that's ongoing research where you're getting stats and you're getting evidence on a regular basis, monthly or even daily basis if possible

Moira: Yeah, and embedded in the organization itself.

Pedro: And embedded in the sector as a whole, so it's not constantly catching up with itself, because I think for the people on the ground, we are quite often, particularly for us that are working on the ground, when the research comes out, we're like, "yeah we knew that already. There wasn't a hypothesis there, like we knew that was what was going to happen." So I think it's sort of like, what do we do, like how do we use that knowledge, or a constant feed of that knowledge to act now rather than to act in 20 years' time.

Moira: I mean there was certainly some research, especially at the height of the pandemic, I think research that was kind of happening at the same time as whatever work was going on, and I think that's the sort of thing that, just speaking for our organization, I think that's the sort of thing that would be of help to us. Something that's actually in the here and now alongside what we do, it wouldn't make any academics less valid, just maybe looking at it from a different standpoint. And I'm not saying just because our organization looks like this that everybody should, just saying that this is the reality for us. A lot of what we would do if you want me to be honest with you with research finds is we would use that for funding applications, we would say that well, it's not just us saying that x number of people have this, University of Sheffield is saying it so therefore it must be true, and whether or not it's true is neither here nor there because it'll be managed by your organization. In my other life I am actually very interested in research and stuff like that, but in my day to day I'm just pretty focused on the here and now, getting outcomes for people based on what we currently have, and what we might have in the future as a sort of secondary objective, I suppose.

Gareth: That's really interesting, because knowing we can put outputs out that just literally give you the evidence, the stats, and then if you need it, to go back into the details and the methodology and all of that that makes the report really bulky you know where to go for it, but just knowing that our evidence can then be sort of signposted to the work that our academics are doing can still be used to for something that I'd say that, to get more funding into organizations that do good work is really important, I mean that'd be really very impactful for our researchers as well, so that is a really really interesting answer that actually does show that we can engage but we need to be thinking about what we can do to make that fit with your kind of work that you do as well, so that's really interesting.