

Showcase: Education Learning Support Hub (ELSH)

[ELSH](#) started in 2015 as a centre for teaching English to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Barnsley. It has since developed into a safe space and provides lessons in English, maths and IT, as well as supporting people to make applications to settle in the UK, to address housing problems, help with further training/study signposting to professional services and provide support when applying for jobs.

To learn more about how ELSH builds and maintains trust with the communities they serve, the CCSF Learning Strand team spoke to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Founder, Florentine Bootha-King.

Tell us, how did you start ELSH?

My background is in teaching and I'm a churchgoer. I realised that we had some Eritrean and Romanian people in the church who couldn't speak English, so I offered to teach them for one hour during my Monday lunch break. There were 8 of them in the first week and within six weeks there were over 100. It spread by word of mouth - I just couldn't believe it! I started looking for church people to help as volunteers. We ended up with 300 people who we support.

So, we ended up becoming a community group. I am founder and CEO, but I do everything and don't really have a post or a title because I don't get paid. I've been volunteering for six years now. I cut down my hours and went down from full-time to 18 hours a week and then, a year later I thought - no! These people need my help more than those in college, and then I quit my job. So, I thought "I'm just going to do it and see how it goes". I started using my family money and then I thought,



ELSH centre

“oh no, I’m not working”. And then I started asking around, and I found out I could apply for funding.

Can you tell me more about the impact of COVID-19 and the national lockdown on your organisation and work?

It was hard because we had no money. I started bidding for funding during COVID-19 and the first money we got was the £10k from The National Lottery Community Fund and we were like “Wow!”, but we were using it to pay for an empty property we weren’t occupying. We applied to the Cadbury Trust and got about £3,900 to buy three laptops for myself and two other teachers to teach people over Zoom.

This didn't work because the people we support didn't have Zoom or laptops, but they did have WhatsApp on their phones. So, we started teaching them through WhatsApp and it was very successful. We posted the textbook to them and then we'd phone them and talk to them while using the same book.

We found that this was taking ages for one person, so we changed it and started voice recording on WhatsApp. We'd take a picture of the book and say, “page 1-3, this is what we're going to talk about” and we'd record what we wanted them to know, how we wanted them to do it and that really worked!

We applied to Coalfield Regeneration for funding to help us to purchase more books and get one more volunteer to join our team - that was very helpful. It was very intense, but it was just brilliant helping people.

Do you feel like that, when your beneficiaries saw you helping, it increased their trust in you?

Yes. For example, one lady's husband died and she didn't know what to do. I had to start phoning funeral services and then the council to ask for help because she had no money. I became a Power of Attorney. Now she knows me, she knows my number and, if she wants to, she could continue to stay in touch.

What are the particular challenges of building relationships with the communities you support, including refugees and asylum seekers?

Building relationships is very hard because of the journey the people we support have been on. Some were tricked when they came. So, they're wary and start to open up to you really slowly, only when they see what you're doing. Some will then tell you their full story about what they were running from and the hurdles they faced. Sometimes, you just cry.

There was a lady escaping a war who didn't know she was six months pregnant until she arrived at the Calais camp. She was brought to the UK but then she lost the baby. She doesn't know where her husband is and that baby was going to be a way to remember him.

When people are granted permission to stay in the UK, it's like heaven touched the earth. They're happy and try to integrate with the community, but it's hard because Barnsley is very deprived and there is a lot of racism. You don't see Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) people working in the mall, just white people. People will often shout and call you names. When you don't know the language you can't defend yourself or even explain to the police what happened.

We don't just teach, we help people complete immigration or Jobcentre forms. Some aren't written in plain English, so people struggle to do this alone.

During COVID-19 some of the people we support got really ill but were scared to go to the hospital because they thought they'd die there. So, we helped them understand they'd be treated there and feel better. We also supported their mental health. I don't have mental health experience but we're working now with the Recovery College in Barnsley. We signpost individuals and they do remote counselling.

One of our volunteers with an employability background helps people write CVs and puts down their work experience from back home. That's why we call it a Hub, because we do everything.

How has this journey impacted you as an individual?

I came to realise how privileged we are. You're helping these people who can't speak English and you can speak English. You're helping people who left their families behind and you've got your family with you.

To those working with similar communities, what would you say are the most important ways of building trust?

You have to respect people and take them as they are – then they trust you. Like I said, I don't ask about their journey. Our job is to help them learn English. If you work collaboratively with people and give them the support they need, trust comes.

Before we reopened, we said to the people we support, "if you want to come, you've got to have the vaccine, then we'll give you a mask and you can start coming and we can teach you". We thought they were going to say no! On the first day, 11 turned up! We said we're opening on the 15th April and we said if you're coming, you need to phone. I think only 3 phoned! The

others just turned up, I think because of word-of-mouth they all knew and they talked between them!

We don't turn anybody away – we never do. A lady came with a baby, but she didn't have a pram. We thought, how can she sit and learn with a baby on her lap? Then one of the volunteers said, “Oh, I've got an old baby chair, I'll bring it!” So, when she comes, the baby sits on it. So, we help each other, and we build trust by just respecting people, working in collaboration. When I say, “what do you think we're going to do?”, we just talk and then make a plan and then put it right.

We make sure everybody's happy; everyone knows what they're doing, and everybody's safeguarding is there. We just process with what they tell us – we don't dig.

We're working now with hate crime because some of the people we support get bullied or harassed by neighbours – petrol or dog poo through their letterbox, bottles of coke chucked at them, people spitting at them. So, we started working with the police, who've been coming to say hello. Some of the people we support, because of their previous experiences before they came to this country, when they see the police they think they're coming to arrest them and when they see an army person they think they're going to kill, rape or stab them.

We had two weeks of sessions to help them understand that we're now a Barnsley Safe Place, so if you're being harassed or don't feel safe you can come and sit here. If someone is following you, we have a different number and can phone the police for you. We're making them understand that they're protected and cared for here.

What would be your biggest recommendation to the sector about developing trust with these communities?

Don't give up! Someone will hold your hand and walk with you. It's not been easy. I really want us to be paid, especially me. I'm under a lot of pressure: this year so far, I've bid for funding three times and been unsuccessful twice. I'm going to do three more, but you can start to think, “really, what's the point?” All my time and energy and I'm not even getting paid. But persevere.

Also, just be honest. I've said it's going to be a bit tight on travel expenses, so if you still want to give time to come and teach, we will pay but it won't be like what we normally pay. And they say “Oh yeah, Florentine, don't worry! I'm here not for that, I'm here just to help!” It's a nice journey. You meet people you never thought you'd meet and hear stories you didn't know existed. The faces of those people lightened up when you have helped them, that's the way they say thank you.

What are your plans moving forward?

We've got a room downstairs that needs re-doing and we need someone to give us the money. It's nice that you've valued us and you're interested in what we do. I always say, if funders could come here when everybody is here, see their faces and ask questions, maybe small charities like us could get more money than big charities. Big charities are known because they do big things, but we can't even afford to have a media person update our website. People doing those jobs need to be paid to make it worthwhile.

Every time I see something going on, I put my name down because I'm always learning. Me, becoming a charity owner? Never in my dreams. These people, it's a story for their life that you've helped them on their journey. You don't forget that - it stays with you.