



Leadership in Action Report

Evaluating Potential Expansion of The Red Hen Project in Abbey

Carys Williams

September 27th, 2026

Project Overview

The project brief was to evaluate the potential expansion of The Red Hen Project into Abbey Ward, Cambridge. Abbey Ward is the most deprived area within Cambridge, and struggles with systemic poverty. The Red Hen Project is a charity in Northern Cambridge who support families of young children facing barriers. They do this through running family drop-in activities, courses and one-to-one case work with family workers - focusing on a holistic approach to increase wellbeing and access to family support for those in need.

This project heavily focussed on serving the community based on their specific needs. By understanding the gaps and challenges Abbey families face, The Red Hen Project should be able to tailor their services more effectively, rather than predicting what may work.

My LIA mainly focuses on the 10th UNSDG - Reducing Inequalities. The work The Red Hen Project does helps minimise the impact of inequalities, particularly those such as poverty. They do this by helping families become more independent and fostering an environment for children to develop happily before secondary school, for example enabling them to learn crucial skills and make connections that are integral to build in early childhood to take with them into adulthood. The project also supports UNSDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) as these strategies will help with early prevention in reducing stress, increasing wellbeing and general increase in health outcomes. Additionally, as the charity receives the majority of referrals for one-to-one case work from local schools, this project supports UNSDG 4 (Quality Education), by providing support to children struggling with school, particularly children with SEND, and thus improving their experience in education.

Reflecting on SMART Goals

At the beginning of my project I curated a project plan, detailing the project scope, timeline, key deliverables and risk management - developing my project management skills. Within this plan I included four SMART goals with the overall aim to provide the charity with a detailed understanding of the area, along with recommendations and strategies for future implementation.

1. Community Needs Assessment

Specific	I will research demographic data, deprivation levels, health indicators, educational outcomes, and existing services.
Measurable	Complete a written community profile analysing literature, public databases and reports.
Achievable	Realistic as mostly desk analysis work. There may be constraints on what data is available.

Relevant	This aligns with The Red Hen Project's priorities as it will give a comprehensive profile of what the current community's demographics are and services.
Time-bound	This should be completed by the end of week 2 of the project. Ideally focus on schools first to complete by the end of week 1 for any potential interviews before summer break.

Status: Achieved

By the end of week 1 the community profile was completed, written into a section and referenced for the overall report. I found difficulty in locating online databases and resources focussing specifically on the Abbey area rather than Cambridge generally, and so the report mainly consisted of census data on the area.

Generally, this was relevant to the charity as it gave a good overview of the general demographics and some of the hidden statistics - some of which contradict stereotypes whilst others reinforce evidence for some of the inequalities. Therefore, it had a small contribution to the overall understanding of Abbey.

This section was completed a lot quicker than anticipated, mainly due to the lack of online information. By completing this section it made me realise how little can be told about a community from its online data, and how the only way to really understand an area is by asking those directly affected.

2. Engage with Key Stakeholders

Specific	I will email, call and potentially visit relevant stakeholders. This includes GPs, existing services and charities, schools, local authorities, to gain insight into their needs.
Measurable	Conduct and document interviews with all available stakeholders across a range of organisations using a standard interview template and document key themes.
Achievable	Arrange meetings through email, telephone, or in-person visits, supported by the charity's existing contacts where appropriate, and document information using a consistent interview template. Constraints may be timing and things like school closure. Within weeks 3-4 this should be realistic given earlier prep is sorted.
Relevant	Stakeholder engagement will provide first-hand insights into community needs and existing services, helping to identify collaboration opportunities and informing recommendations for the charity's expansion.

Time-bound	Complete by the end of week 4.
-------------------	--------------------------------

Status: Achieved

I was able to contact or visit eight other key services and charities in the area, four key workers from The Red Hen Project on their current experiences in Abbey, and a few families in Abbey. These services ranged from other children and family charities, religious and community spaces, sports initiatives and Abbey People, the key charity of residents in Abbey supporting their community.

Each interview followed a similar structure, with questions also being tailored to the stakeholder at hand. I then compiled a section in the report for 'Stakeholder Voices', stating the key points from each interviewee so that The Red Hen Project could see what was said individually and exactly what each stakeholder already provides/has in the area. This was important for the charity as to not replicate an already existing service without it contributing to the community.

In practice, this goal allowed me to begin making connections between The Red Hen Project and other charities. Many noted that they were eager for further discussions or potential opportunities for collaboration in the area.

Along the way, this section took longer as it was very integrated. Most interviews were completed within weeks 2-4, however as these went on stakeholders would often suggest new contacts to try. Therefore during weeks 5 and the start of week 6 there were a few interviews still being conducted.

Additionally, I noticed that there wasn't a clear avenue to speak directly to families on what they wanted for support. Therefore, I created a paper and digital survey to be distributed during the project and afterwards for an accessible way to provide feedback.

This taught me that leadership doesn't have to follow a series of tasks straight after each other. Taking initiative and opportunities are key for expanding reach, so long as they remain within scope. Tasks can also be integrated, I was able to move onto some of the remaining goals during the free time between interviews to optimise my time.

3. Identify Gaps and Opportunities

Specific	Analyse the community needs data along with the secondary research to identify the main gaps. Understand the current services The Red Hen Project provides and evaluate how they can incorporate or alter these in Abbey Ward.
Measurable	Identify at least 3-5 gaps and 3-5 opportunities for adapting or introducing services, supported by community needs assessment.
Achievable	It should be achievable with the research being conducted in weeks 1-4 with proper documentation.

Relevant	Directly aligns with their goal of understanding what new services they can bring to the area.
Time-bound	By the end of week 5 this should be completed.

Status: Achieved

Initially, my intended measure of success was for a specific number of gaps and opportunities to be identified and analysed. However, I did not initially indicate how I would analyse these. Throughout the project, I identified these gaps and opportunities through numerous methods. Firstly, I produced an asset map of the area using Google My Maps to pinpoint exactly where each service was and also what wasn't available. This was crucial to visualise accessibility of resources to families - for example the neighborhood didn't have a post office, cafe or pub. By creating the map and using public directories of service providers, I gathered further information through interviewing stakeholders identified from the map and word of mouth. I then used the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework to curate an asset pentagon visually and quantitatively assess the five capitals of Abbey, making a clear to read graphic showcasing the strengths and weaknesses. These perceived gaps combined with feedback from stakeholders helped me to curate a recommendation plan, focussing on the short and long term with adaptable options fit to the community's changing needs.

This goal taught me that to be able to fully understand an area, it is most important to talk to the people who live there. Often they would give insight far beyond the desktop research and reaffirm or challenge prior research to show what Abbey's community actually needed. Additionally, they were integral in ensuring that any recommendations I posed for the charity would be of use in reality in the area.

By speaking to the workers at the Red Hen Project and similar charities, I also realised the underestimated value of building trust. In real-world contexts, it is important to be reliable to those who you are trying to help, only then will they have confidence in you and will be willing to access your services.

4. Produce Evidence Based Expansion Report

Specific	Produce a comprehensive report summarising the community needs assessment, stakeholder engagement findings, service mapping, gap analysis, and recommendations regarding the charity's potential expansion into the target ward.
Measurable	Deliver a completed report with all of the sections community needs assessment, stakeholder findings, gap analysis, and recommendations.
Achievable	Giving over a week to write the report should be achievable given that the prior goals will produce evidence and documentation, the report then would be compiling and evaluating further.
Relevant	The report will provide Red Hen with an evidence base to inform

	decisions about future service delivery, partnership development, and expansion into the new area.
Time-bound	This should begin by the end of week 5 and be completed at the end of week 6. To do so there should be comprehensive documentation and planning throughout the prior weeks.

Status: Achieved

I successfully produced a 30 page report combining all of my research and recommendations for the charity, with appropriate references and contacts. The report should give an overall evidence based understanding to the Red Hen Project workers, along with a plan to refine with potential collaborations.

Given that the document is large, I also provided a summary recorded presentation for family workers referencing key gaps and available resources. This should be an accessible way for them to have an overview of the needs of Abbey that will directly impact their everyday work.

Overall it should impact the choices they make going forward on what services to provide in Abbey, along with how they may approach families in their case work. It could be useful for acquiring funding for future projects.

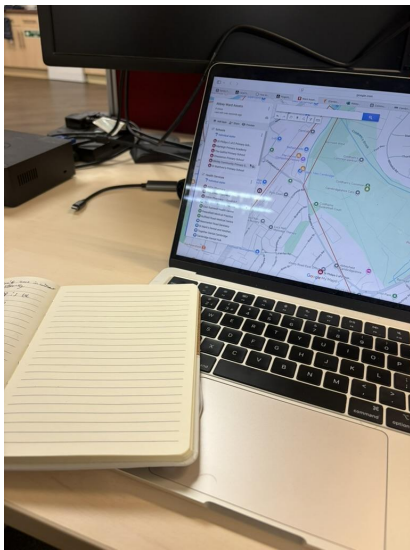
Insight into Global Systems

My project was largely involved in the Social Care and Welfare sector, with some overlap with Healthcare and Education. During my LIA, it became clear to me that systemic poverty bleeds into all aspects of a community. Through my gap analysis of the five capitals (Human, Environmental, Social, Physical and Financial), I saw how easily poverty impacts the other capitals. For example, understanding that an area with historical poverty does not have the financial capacity to develop infrastructure. This in itself reduces physical resources accessible to communities, such as a lack of third spaces or suitable living conditions. Without these there is an impact on social capital, with increased mental health issues and burnout, which can impact individuals' confidence, for example when trying for jobs.

The community I worked with had a large lack of trust in new organisations. I noticed that organisations were only able to have an impact when they built consistency and presence over time, showing the community that they were there to stay and help. Within the project itself there were a few barriers, mainly the inability to communicate with some key stakeholders due to time constraints (such as the project being in the school holiday period), along with difficulty in attaining many survey responses.

Structurally, funding and lack of infrastructure are what will impact how the area can be supported in the future. However, with consistency and a built trust there is the capability to increase family and parents' human capital through increasing their knowledge on things like finance and parenting, and making connections to other organisations that can provide more support. Additionally, as the charity hosts many drop-ins, it should be able to help foster

friendships and community, increasing family welfare in the area and thus confidence. Furthermore, they support many families and schools with SEND, and so can improve their support system.



My project is significant for the Red Hen Project's expansion as they can now visualise what resources are available and understand where they can support further. I believe some of the connections I made with other charities will mean that many organisations trying to support Abbey can collaborate to help the wider community in multiple aspects. The project strengthened their existing plan to expand, by reinforcing recommendations for the future whilst giving them a detailed understanding of the area and its needs, for example by exposing existing gaps of poverty, infrastructure and mental health. Realistically, my LIA influenced the Abbey community, and partially individuals by giving the family workers a deeper understanding of the family needs.

Meaningful systemic change would require a lot of funding in the area. Redevelopment is needed beyond adding more council housing. For example, having more shops in the residential area so that people can easily access food. There needs to be an increase in third spaces as currently there are no areas to socialise in the residential area, which is exacerbating isolation. By having new buildings within the area, this could create more accessible employment opportunities. Generally, charities like the Red Hen Project can help build the community to increase wellbeing within the area. However, even community building efforts need venues to host. Therefore, a lot of responsibility for long-term change lies on the council to invest in infrastructure that supports the community needs.

The project has changed my way of thinking about systemic change: it can be built by the community from small consistent efforts, along with policy and funding. I believe there needs to be more advocacy for change, particularly in affluent areas such as Cambridge which have the resources to make an impact.

I was aware that poverty was a key social determinant of health from my medical studies, however being able to explore it in more depth whilst talking to communities affected, it highlighted just how much of an impact poverty has and how medical professionals don't always consider this in the way they communicate with patients. From my LIA, I feel called to continue working and researching into preventative measures within healthcare and communities. Many of the challenges in Abbey could be preventable through increasing support for SEND specialists and capacity in schools, increasing community welfare interventions, general education and much more. Seeing how medical issues can be



exacerbated by poverty and its respective challenges, I understand how the systemic barrier makes it harder for people to make healthier life choices, creating a cycle of deteriorating physical and mental health. As a future Doctor, this is close to me as I believe firmly in community-based medicine as a form of preventative care within public health. The insight from this project will aid me as I work in healthcare, allowing me to make more considerate decisions as a Doctor and potentially help in policy making or other healthcare recommendations.

My Thoughts on Leadership

The biggest change in the way I perceive leadership is how variable it can be. One of my key reflections was that leadership had different styles. Previously, I was familiar with team based leadership. I understood that as a leader of a team you could have different roles, for example being autocratic and taking control of decisions, or my preference, democratic with shared decision making within the team. My LIA led me to consider leadership as an individual without having to lead a team. At first I thought many tasks such as doing initial research or emailing stakeholders were standard tasks required for the project, and I questioned how I was developing my leadership skills. I then came to realise that leading a team based project is very different to leading a project individually. The skills required for both are interchangeable, but for an individual project the subtleties of the project usually demonstrate leadership. For example, forging connections through interviews and emails is an example of collaborative leadership. Each task practised a different skill.



This led me to the belief that leadership is simply the act of taking initiative towards a goal. It involves taking responsibility for tasks and using your influence ethically to drive progress: whether that is as a team or individual.

It is also integral to be adaptive. Changing leadership styles for different phases of a project maximises efficiency. However, in real-life contexts projects very rarely go to plan. Having a risk management table at the beginning of my project allowed me to create contingency plans for when things inevitably changed. Additionally, unpredicted challenges arose during the project and I learnt as a leader you have to be decisive in your response, evaluating which areas require more time and effort and which are less relevant within the scope of the end deliverable.

Being a student within Cambridge, prior to the project I was only familiar with the city centre. Therefore, working in Abbey Ward, an area I had not heard of previously meant that I had to walk into spaces with humility. I aimed to be respectful and attentive when talking to

stakeholders and conducting my research as I was aware from the beginning that I was working with vulnerable people and that the only way I could help them was by listening to their stories. I showed integrity by being transparent with stakeholders on my project intentions and current understanding of the area, building trust. Generally, I demonstrated justice through my project's goal to further the charity's work in supporting those who needed it most to create a fairer community.



The character dimensions I developed the most were drive and courage. Despite having ideas and questions early on, I lacked the confidence to approach those who could help at the fear of looking incapable or unknowledgeable in my project. Over the course of the six weeks I made a conscious effort to force myself into seemingly uncomfortable situations created from my lack of confidence, as I was aware I would not be able to serve the community and charity to the utmost of my ability without taking initiative. I began this with simple actions such as sending an e-mail or asking for a meeting first thing in the morning to prevent myself from overthinking the situation. An example of this was when I suggested we create a survey for families. I found as soon as I had pushed myself to ask the question or send the e-mail, I was immediately more confident and comfortable in sharing my ideas. This

realisation made me more eager to brace uneasiness and take that first hurdle, within my project and personal life. Through making these decisions and dealing with setbacks, I realised how resilient I am.

The change maker values that guided my decisions were mainly determination, curiosity, bravery, acting fast and doing good. Throughout the project I was determined to fulfill my project brief and be able to contribute to some impact on the Abbey family community. I was curious throughout - constantly analysing data, interviewing for new perspectives and creating links to identify gaps. Personally, I developed my bravery by developing my confidence to act on my ideas unapologetically. Although I created a timeline for myself for project milestones, I worked efficiently and used extra time generated to create new opportunities and reallocate to other tasks. I also demonstrated doing good by collaborating with others and trying to make sustainable progress.

I utilised all three capacities during the project. I used my process capacities as the majority of my evaluation relied on project management and research analysis, however I was fairly confident in these to begin with. Performance capacities such as critical thinking, reflection and strategy are those I likely developed the most whilst analysing gaps and opportunities. People were relevant to my project, but the extent to which I demonstrated this capacity was constrained by the scope and nature of the project. I identified potential opportunities for collaboration with other charities, but recognised that I did not have the authority to establish these relationships myself. In future, I would like to develop my influencing skills so that I can more confidently communicate the value of these opportunities to relevant decision-makers and build a case for collaboration.

Conclusion

In summary, my LIA went successfully. I delivered on my project goals and provided resources to the charity for longer term impact. During the placement, I constantly questioned what it meant to be a leader and how I could develop my skills. Having completed it, I have come to the conclusion that leadership is proactively working towards a goal that will have a positive impact, and that it can take various forms. I have also gained a deeper understanding of poverty as a global issue and its impacts on communities.

I am grateful for the Laidlaw Foundation and the team at the King's College E-Lab Cambridge, for supporting my LIA placement. I am also thankful for the team at the Red Hen Project for being wonderful hosts and allowing me to complete my project with them. I'd also like to thank the Cambridge Laidlaw cohort for their support and guidance.

