

**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Project
Leadership in Action Report**

Leadership in Action Placement with Experience Cambridge CIC

Designing a Homelessness Signposting Training for Cambridgeshire

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Acknowledgements

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I want to thank the people that shared their experiences of homelessness and rough sleeping with us and continue to work on making this system better. Their commitment, honesty and perseverance are both humbling and inspiring.

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I would also like to thank Alexander Dann for his laptop charger. I promise I bought my own now.

The organisation

For my Leadership in Action placement, I spent six weeks working with Experience Cambridge CIC, a local charity that works on ending Homelessness in the Cambridgeshire area and has joined other local charities in their effort to do so by committing to the "Cambridge Homelessness Charter".¹ The charter is intended to foster cooperation between local organizations and charities as a response to an often disjointed support system (I will address this more in depth later on). Experience Cambridge is coordinating many different projects and is generally more concerned with long-term support than immediate help, such as providing long-term employment for people with lived experience.

My work concerned itself with the Information Pillar of the Homelessness Charter which aims at "keeping everyone informed on actions, progress and how to help". Why exactly the members of the charter have proclaimed this as one of their main priorities becomes clearer if you look at the existing networks in the support system – or rather lack thereof.

Cambridge Homelessness Support: Existing structures and systems

Cambridge is a city of stark contrasts. While many will think of it as a place of prestigious research and a booming tech sector, the wealth that comes with these developments is distributed very unequally.² With over 40 people sleeping rough each night, over 2000 in emergency accommodation and roughly 800 new applications on the city's housing portal

¹ Link to the Charter's website: <https://cambridgehomelessnesscharter.org.uk/about/> (25.09.2026)

² <https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/news/2025/09/24/leaders-blog-we-wont-accept-poverty-in-cambridge> 2025 Report of the Cambridge City Council (12.09.2026)

each month, the need for a holistic and adequate response to homelessness and housing instability is evident³. Much of that response stands or falls on national legislation, financial resources and public funding, respectively a lack thereof. However, one of the biggest obstacles is – and this is where many services and service users agree - also a lack of coordination.

According to our current data, there are over 80 services in the Cambridge area offering services targeted at people experiencing Homelessness or a Housing Crisis⁴. Some of them are explicitly set up by homelessness charities. However, for many of the organizations fighting homelessness is not what they are set up to do – like libraries, Churches or local businesses. Instead they offer specific support like weekly community lunches, food hubs, the distribution of SIM-Cards or places to recharge your phone. These places often function as a crucial first point of contact for many people experiencing homelessness. They allow for them to access support without having to register into a system, without the need of a local connection. People that might have been banned from other services still have a variety of organizations they can approach for help. They allow for actual human connection and for people to build work relationships on mutual trust.

Problems and pitfalls of this structure

Ineffective communication

However, this also brings its difficulties. Not only are the people working in these institutions not trained as professional support workers – the different organizations are often shockingly bad connected. And even if workers are aware of other services, their information – due to a lack of communication between the services – is often out of date. This lack of coordination has several grave consequences, the first of them being misinformed service users. During my six weeks I have heard countless stories of people being sent to Foodtrucks that do not exist anymore, shelters that are closed that day and services they are not eligible for. These “rejections” can have a detrimental effect on a person’s well-being, considering they are already in a precarious situation and likely in a state of bad mental health.

A lack of effective communication can also lead to a kind of bottleneck effect on those services that are well known; in Cambridge these are institutions like Wintercomfort, a well-known day center offering a range of services. Because many people that signpost service users are not adequately informed about the range of support available, many send them to well-known spots like Wintercomfort; which is not necessarily wrong, but often not specifically tailored to their needs either. Maybe even more importantly, it leads to the staff at Wintercomfort being chronically overworked and, according to some service users, overwhelmed with the sheer amount of clients in urgent need of help.

Non-professional support staff: gaps in training and guidance

Another problem that comes with greater involvement of non-professional workers in the support system is the fact that they are exactly that – not trained as professional support

³ <https://www.jimmyscambridge.org.uk/2026/02/26/homelessness-is-rising-what-the-new-2025-figures-mean/>
2025 Report from Jimmy’s Cambridge (Accommodation Provider)

⁴ <https://www.streetsupport.net/cambridgeshire> (12.09.2026)

workers. They have not received the necessary training and background checks an “actual” support worker has to go through. Yet many of them are determined to help as much as possible. Their common approach as a more “community-focused” point of support is often less rigid and hierarchic safeguarding procedures of many charities. While this can help to build trust with service users it also often leads to a grey zone concerning expectations, boundaries and power dynamics, difficult to navigate for both service users and volunteers.

The Project: Simplifying Process, Coordinating Responses

Due to the lack of effective communication between the services as well as gaps in the training of many volunteers, Experience Cambridge decided to update the information on the different services available on platforms like Street Support as a first step. The second step was the design and launch of a signposting training to equip all people encountering homelessness in their daily (work)life with the necessary information to adequately support people looking for help. This was the part my project focused on.

While I will explain more of the actual content of the training later it is important to note that our intention was not to design a training that in any way compared to the training actual support workers receive. In some ways it was the opposite: a great focus of our training was to highlight the differences in support non-professional workers are able to offer and to provide them with guidance on how to draw clear boundaries.

The value of Lived Experience

My organization made it very clear from the beginning that working with the input of people with Lived Experience⁵ was integral to designing the training. Firstly, this meant talking and working with people with LE of homelessness. Although they are the ones these systems are designed for in theory, their opinions and knowledge is often dangerously underrepresented in shaping them. What makes this effort complicated is the lack of a “shared” LE- ask ten people for their opinion on a service and you will get 10 different perspectives. Ultimately, whatever we would design would be one version of the truth, but in order to make it a good one we needed to make the system as flexible and adaptable to differing needs and cases as possible.

But LE of homelessness was not the only experience that influenced my work: through conversations with many volunteers in the sector, especially the library staff, I was able to learn more about their side of the story and the challenges they faced.

Getting to work: the different stages of the project

Before starting my placement, I had already tried to map out a rough idea of how I expected my work to develop over the weeks. Naturally, in reality my (often overlapping) tasks did not always align with that order. Still, I have found it helpful to reflect on my work as progressing in multiple stages:

⁵ For reasons of simplicity referred to as LE in the following

1. Absorption

On the first day of my placement, I was immediately introduced to many people working at the different services, through a [Co-Production meeting](#). Co-production meetings fill an essential gap in the charity sector; as many of the charities are competing for the same grants and public funding, cooperation doesn't always occur naturally and often, workers are forced to advocate for their organization first and the actual cause later. In these Co-production meetings, both service workers as well as people with LE come together to discuss new projects, inform each other and work on solutions collectively – people are explicitly asked to bring their knowledge and experience into the room but “leave their organization at the door”. This first meeting was incredibly valuable for me in order to learn more about the structural challenges of working on homelessness. The rest of my first week focused on meeting as many of the workers as possible, learning more about their struggles and daily challenges. With the supervision of my mentor Elliot, I also met many people with LE of homelessness. Through their stories it became clear that whatever we were building was going to serve as what Elliot called “one version of the truth”. With every person I spoke to, I heard another story. A service that some had made negative experiences with for example, had been an important contact point for others. I realized that there was also not one way in which people had entered the system and if we wanted to build an effective directory we had to accommodate for various user journeys and needs that greatly differed from one another

2. Conceptualization

In my second week I was asked to visualize the network of different organizations working on homelessness in Cambridge and what a service user's journey through these organisations might look like. This was to both assure that our training would accommodate for the different user journeys as well as to give myself a better understanding of the different services that there are. In order to have an overview of the services, I worked with the Website [Street Support](#), which is intended to work as a local Homelessness Service Directory, however is used rarely and mostly unknown by service workers. While much of the Services there were not up to date either, it was still a helpful resource to actually grasp the variety of organisations active in Cambridge.

users that are underaged and immediate mental health emergencies. In these cases, sending them on a “regular” user journey through the often complicated and lengthy support system would have put both them and potentially service workers at risk which is why clear external contact points with a more holistic approach (for example Women’s Aid in cases of domestic abuse) needed to be involved.

3. Build Training

The next step was to actually build a first draft of what the training would look like. It is important to emphasize that whatever input I have put into the training, my work was constantly supervised and revised by Elliot, my boss. Otherwise, this project would have implied a level of independence and decision-making power I – having not received the training of a professional support worker - was simply not qualified for.

As I had mentioned above, whatever training we designed should accommodate for different user journeys: However, recognizing the greatly varying levels of expertise, qualifications and capacity many of the volunteers and workers brought to the table, our training had to accommodate for different levels of volunteer-involvement as well. Below, I have briefly mapped out the different levels on which we planned (and plan) to deliver the training.

Level 0: The Public

Encountering homelessness on a basic level and directing people to first points of contact

Level 1: Basic Signposter

Giving out handouts on immediate needs and/or housing

Level 2: Advanced Signposter

Using a service directory to find information, asking questions to uncover underlying issues

Level 3: Navigator

Making calls for clients, helping to access services, specializing in different areas

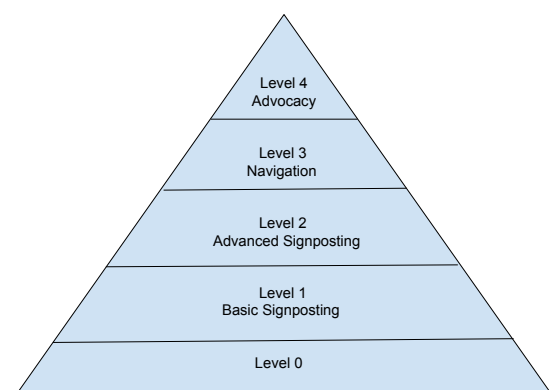
Level 4: Advocate

Accompanying clients to meetings and advocating for their interests, specialising in different areas

Hidden Level

Level 5: Support Worker

Provide ongoing casework support with emotional and practical support → explicitly not part of the training scheme!



In many ways, this system did not come up with new ideas, instead I tried to formalize what many volunteers had been doing for years. The advantage of this draft was, that it provided them with a clearer idea of the boundaries of their job, of what help they were qualified to deliver. In order to help them communicate these boundaries clearly, I also designed “Expectation Cards” which outlined their role more in detail and started out with a clear explanation of what they can and cannot do.

Together with the cards, they were provided with information on both support on immediate needs (like food hubs, showers, places where people could charge their phones) and general information on housing applications/emergency accommodation, with a continuously updated version available on Experience Cambridge’s website [FIND HELP HERE](#). This was integral this projects mission, as it intended to streamline information and make it more accessible to both service users and signposter.

Launch Training

Thanks to the close cooperation with the Cambridge libraries and their staff’s enthusiasm to help us further develop this training, we were able to launch a first version of it at their monthly team-meeting. This was an incredibly helpful experience as we were able to assess to which degree our work actually resonated with their experiences; whether they thought there were gaps in our resources or whether we had not considered certain scenarios.

Luckily, there feedback was really positive; especially our emphasis on making information on different services easier to find and more accessible was a high priority for many of them.

Reflection

The six weeks at my placement have been an incredibly valuable experience. I found it very satisfying having such a tangible output to my work. As I had not worked on homelessness directly before, I was also confronted with many pre-assumptions I was not even aware of holding. Much of that was connected to my ideas on what it actually looks like to work *with* people with lived experience of homelessness, instead of just for them. That process was in many ways more challenging than I anticipated – in hindsight, what I was probably expecting was a group of people giving us instructions on what worked and what did not with the current system. I quickly became embarrassingly obvious that this work was much more complex and complicated than I had expected. Many of the people we worked with are obviously facing multiple disadvantages, due to a lack of social stability, racial and gendered discrimination or mental health issues (and the list goes on). Much of the help they provided was not compensated financially. And as mentioned before, on most issues, ten different people will have ten different opinions. This instability often made work much more challenging and complicated but nevertheless very rewarding and I am grateful for the people with lived experience who, despite often not having many spoons at their disposal and constantly spending their energy on basic survival, come to our meetings, draft out ideas and continue to work on making this system better.