Britain's most unequal city: Understanding homelessness in Cambridge

Leadership-in-Action Project 2026
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Intro: With the bottom 20% of earners receiving just 2% of the city's income, Cambridge claims the title of the country's most unequal city. Consequently, many find themselves without safe and stable living conditions, with 2,000 people living in emergency shelters across Cambridgeshire. I worked with *It Takes a City* (ITAC), a charity which aims at tackling these issues by understanding and addressing their underlying causes

My LiA was made up of two components: interviewing people with lived experience of ***hidden homelessness*** (homelessness that isn't "visible", i.e. sofa-surfing), to bring greater awareness to the issue, as well as to utilise their testimony to improve support services. In addition, I set up a ***Partnership Programme*** between ITAC and the Colleges of the University, to increases the latters' engagement with homelessness support

How can homelessness support services be improved?

- **Integrated care model:** Fragmented provision creates gaps in services through which service users can fall. A holistic approach is needed to address the complex needs associated with homelessness
- **Continued support once housed:** Addiction/mental health support must continue post-housing to ensure long-term, sustainable recovery
- **Independent complaints mechanism:** So that those experiencing homelessness can hold services to account, and address broken trust
- **Proactive, not reactive service models:** Services should reach out to people with experience of homelessness, rather than expecting individuals to navigate complex systems
- **Greater support for service workers:** Individuals cannot be expected to provide adequate care when they themselves are under huge pressures, due to excessive working hours, funding cuts, and the huge volumes of emotional labour the profession requires



What insitutional change is needed?

- **Destigmatisation:** In the form of education in schools and wider public information campaigns
- **Community:** Provide underlying support and sense of normalcy that cannot be replicated by more formal care services



What did the Partnership Programme achieve?

EDUCATE

- Facilated people with lived expierence of homelessness to speak to students and staff, including during freshers' week events

Uptake: Eight Colleges engaged with the programme over the course of the LiA

ENGAGE

- Provided Colleges with information on a wide variety of volunteering experiences to be advertised to their student bodies, with opportunities relating to subjects from medicine to sociology
- Committed to regular, consisent food and clothes collections for local shelters

COLLABORATE

- Developing relationships and contacts at Colleges to ensure long-term, future collaboration continues after my LiA
- Encourage Colleges to join the *Cambridge Homelessness Charter*, which brings together >70 organisations across the city to develop a coordiated strategy to end homelessness

Overlap and coordination with other LiAs: Whilst separate and distinct, three other Laidlaw Scholars also focused on homelessness as part of their LiAs, providing an opportunity for collaboration. Through contact sharing, organising joint meetings with stakeholders, or simply brainstorming concepts and plans - collaboration greatly increased the quality our of LiAs, and provided an invaluable network of support

Reflections: The perspectives and testimony given by people experiencing homelessness provided insights largely absent from academic papers and government reports. If we are to address seriously the homelessness crisis, we must look to the community that is in the greatest proximity to it for solutions

Although the Partnership Programme was partially successful in increasing university engagement, it aimed to initiate this, rather than act as a finish point to it. In a city so defined by its higher education sector, greater involvement by both Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin Universities is key to solving its homelessness crisis

""Even people with a castle in the sky should have a cushon to fall on", Sam - person experiencing homelessness

Charter To End Homelessness

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