



**Half a century of working
with the homeless in
Cambridge:
Cambridge Cyrenians
1970-2020
Anna Clarke**



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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	0
Foreword.....	3
Introduction to fiftieth anniversary edition.....	5
Chapter 1 – Origins (1963-1970).....	7
Chapter 2 – Early years: struggles and growth (1970- 1977).....	17
Chapter 3 – Getting established and branching out (1977-1986).....	31
Chapter 4 – An expanding local scene (1986-1997).....	41
Chapter 5 – A changing national scene (1997-2010).....	52
Chapter 6 – Austerity, growth, and pandemic (2010-2020).....	64
Conclusions: Fifty years on.....	83

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Anna Clarke is a social researcher who focusses on housing and homelessness. The first book was researched and written while she was a Research Associate at the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research in the department of Land Economy, University of Cambridge, and this second edition in a freelance capacity. Anna also worked with the homeless in Cambridge in the late 1990s.

Foreword

Half a century is a landmark for any organisation and Cambridge Cyrenians accomplishing 50 years of helping the homeless population in Cambridge is something we are truly proud of.

While Cambridge Cyrenians has no religious affiliation, much of our work and ethos are mirrored in the values of Christianity and a natural synergy still exists. The name Cyrenians is a biblical reference to Simon of Cyrene an unknown stranger who was made to carry the cross for Christ at one of the stations of the cross, where Christ stumbled and fell.

Anton Wallich-Clifford founded the Simon Community (which takes its name from the same biblical character) and felt that the actions of Simon symbolised the actions of someone who would do the work that others would not.

This book is about the history of just one of a large number of Cyrenian groups that were set up in the late 60's and 70's around the country. The Cambridge group was founded following a talk from Anton, who inspired local people to take the matter into their own hands and directly help local homeless people.

This 50th anniversary book builds upon the original 40th book, which gathered the history and documented what had been achieved by this original group of local people and what could be learnt from the experience of the last 40 years. Not wanting to lose that valuable history, the past decade has been added as an additional chapter bringing us up to date in 2020.

Over the last decade much has changed, and, perhaps mirroring modern life the, organisational changes during this time have also seemed to happen more rapidly than in the previous 40 years. Surely a contributing factor of this has been how support services have moved to a more contracted model as they have become part of the statutory or state funded support offered to homeless people. While this has moved Cambridge Cyrenians away from some of its radical origins, the intervention of the state has helped to ensure the quality of services, driven evolution and better standards, and provided (time limited) stability for support services.

One of the things that has been highlighted is that despite Cambridge Cyrenians' changes and growth over the last decade, this has not matched the rise in homelessness and rough sleeping which has increased dramatically since the economic collapse in 2008.

While writing this foreword the coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc on all aspects of life and will undoubtedly have a considerable effect on homelessness in the decade to come. Although the impact of this cannot

be predicted, past events tell us that the most vulnerable (including those facing homelessness) will be some of the most adversely impacted by the knock-on effects of the pandemic.

Once again, our thanks go to Anna Clarke for researching and putting together this book.

James Martin

Cambridge Cyrenians

Note of thanks from the Chair of Trustees

It was clear from discussions with Trustees and James as our Director that there was strong support for producing an update to our book published in 2010, to set out key issues, challenges and developments over the last 10 years - for us and the environment within which we operate. It also provides an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate Cambridge Cyrenians 50 years of working with the homeless in Cambridge and the contribution of our team of staff, volunteers, trustees, partner organisations & funders throughout this period.

Neil Offley

Chair of Board of Trustees Cambridge Cyrenians

Introduction to fiftieth anniversary edition

The city of Cambridge is associated with its world-famous university, beautiful architecture, wealth, and a booming tech sector. Yet Cambridge was recently found to be the most unequal city in the UK – alongside prosperity, there are people on the streets, and whose experiences of Cambridge could hardly be more different than the image the city likes to project.

Cambridge Cyrenians has been working with the homeless in Cambridge for more than half a century now. They provide accommodation for over 100 formally homeless men and women in a range of shared houses, bedsits, self-contained flats, and a small hostel. They also provide mental health outreach work and a focus on “meaningful activity” such as an allotment for residents to spend their time on. The last ten years in particular have seen growth in the size of the organisation, and 21 staff are now employed, as well as five full-time volunteers who live in and help run three of the shared houses.

A great deal has changed over the past 50 years. In 1970 there was just one Cyrenian house where the homeless, together with resident volunteers, shared rooms to sleep in. Food was often begged or scavenged. Around 14 men could stay in the house, and when the bedrooms were full, additional homeless visitors would sleep in chairs in the living room.

From the 50-year history several identifiable themes have emerged illustrating the way in which small, radical, volunteer-led projects (as the Cyrenians were when they formed) can evolve into professional support providers.

Cambridge Cyrenians today are a professional organisation with an annual turnover of over £1m. Raising money from fundraising was gradually replaced by tapping into statutory sources. This affected the Cyrenians' control over their own work, and their relationship both with the local authority and with other agencies working with the homeless. This was something concerning the Cyrenians back in 2010 when the first edition of this book was published – yet the last ten years have shown that commissioning can bring opportunities as well as threats, and there continues to be a strong role for co-operation between local charities who have a common aim of improving the lives of people who find themselves homeless in this unequal city.

Acceptance of people has remained a core part of the Cyrenians' philosophy, though its practice has over the years thrown up many thorny issues. The difficulties in meeting the needs of both alcoholics and other homeless people remained apparent throughout the 50 years.

As the Cyrenians learned how to care for the homeless, they developed different kinds of accommodation and support, adapting as they came to appreciate the different needs of the diverse population with whom they worked. This branching out to meet the needs of the diverse homeless population has been particularly apparent in the last 10 years. This includes today a small hostel – though the dominant aspiration to create “homes not hostels” remains apparent.

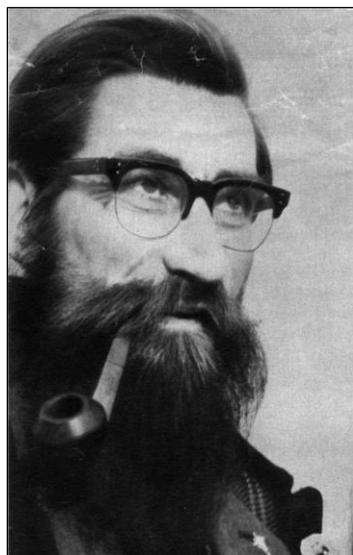
This book was first written in 2010 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Cambridge Cyrenians. This edition updates the first edition, adding on a final chapter on the last ten years – the 2010s. The research made use of archive material that Cambridge Cyrenians and Cambridgeshire Archives hold. Staff, volunteers, trustees, residents, and those from other local agencies who had been involved from the 1960s to the present day were interviewed.

Chapter 1 – Origins (1963–1970)

The creation of the Cambridge Cyrene Community in October 1970 marked the formal beginnings of the organisation. However, its origins go back a few years earlier as part of the Simon Community.

The origins of the Simon Community

Anton Wallich-Clifford, a probation officer in Bow Street in London, was shocked at the lives of many of the people who came through the courts. In 1963, he decided it was time to do something more radical to help these people. He gave up his job as a probation officer, obtained money from friends and persuaded his mother to sell her home, using the proceeds to purchase a new house for them both, to share with other volunteers and the homeless. This, he announced to a sceptical press, was to be the beginnings of the Simon Community. It was named after Simon of Cyrene, an unknown stranger in the Bible who was called upon to carry Jesus' cross. A weekly journal, *Simon Star*, appeared, reporting the development of early Simon Community.



Working as probation officer, Anton Wallich-Clifford had developed a somewhat unconventional approach to his job, included sleeping out with the meths drinkers in the skips and bomb sites they used by night, whilst returning to his desk as a probation officer by day. Deriving inspiration from the Catholic worker movement, as well as from Abbe Pierre's Emmaus movement in France, Anton was a charismatic character, who achieved almost messianic following within the early Simon community, making references on occasion to his "hotline to God".

The concern of the early Simon community was very much with those left behind by other agencies. Theirs was a 'mission to the misfit' or 'socially inadequate', people in need of care and friendship:

"The homeless whose cause I espoused were and are those people for whom the state of homelessness is only a symptom of their own insufferable social inadequacy... it is love that each and every one needs, and in his own way demands."

(Anton Wallich Clifford, *No Fixed Abode*, 1974)

Homelessness in the 1960s

Homelessness in the early 1960s was on the rise. Slum clearance, the decline of private rented housing and overall housing shortages were making it harder for people to find cheap rented housing. An increasingly mobile population meant that growing numbers of people were coming to London, often from Ireland and Scotland where poverty was still rife, in search of work but were struggling to find accommodation. There were many who had served in the war and never settled back into civilian life afterwards. The closure of large mental institutions had also started in 1959, moving many mentally ill and institutionalised people out into the community, and at times ending up on the streets.

Most who slept rough were middle-aged or even elderly men, some of whom were in and out of paid work and slept rough only at times.¹ Others were permanently on the streets, living very much outside of the rest of society, drinking meths on old bomb sites. For many, the main contact with officials was with the police.

Homelessness in the mid-60s was not yet the political issue it was soon to become. Shelter, Crisis and CHAR (the Campaign for Homeless and Roofless) with their campaigning focus were all yet to form. Instead, Reception Centres and lodging houses were the main providers of accommodation.

Reception Centres were government-run institutions “to make provision whereby persons without a settled way of living may be influenced to lead a more settled life”.² They were the successors of the old workhouses, which closed in the early 20th century and ‘casual wards’ which offered just one or two nights’ accommodation and were largely closed by the Second World War. Reception Centres, almost all of which catered only for men, were intended to tackle the problem of vagrancy and homelessness by concentrating on short-term assessment and referral, though in reality some men ended stayed in them for many months.

On arrival, new arrivals at Reception Centres were read the rules, required to bathe under supervision, and had their clothes inspected for vermin and if necessary disinfected. Unless employed, they had to perform work in the morning. (Reception Centres retained the name ‘Spikes’ from the old casual wards, apparently after the work that was traditionally given to the men, breaking large stones on spikes.)

¹ The National Assistance Board 1965 survey of rough sleepers found 70% of them to be over 40 years in age. Around half of those found were low paid workers and the others classed as permanent vagrants

² National Assistance Act 1948

By the 1960s, however, they were in decline.³ Government policy favoured moving away from large-scale institutions and handing power instead to local authorities. The ones that remained were no longer full, often located away from the centre of towns and cities, and disliked by the men because of their rules and regulations.

The other main type of accommodation at this time was lodging houses such as those run by the Salvation Army and Church Army (which later became English Churches Housing Group). Most of these were large institutional hostels, providing cheap food and accommodation, usually in large dormitories, often catering for migrant workers moving into new cities. Most were quite selective, not accepting people who were drunk or aggressive, and in many cases also banning the mentally handicapped, 'coloured persons', homosexuals, or bed-wetters. Women were also excluded from almost all provision.

The Simon Community set itself up to be quite different in style and ethos. They preached a doctrine of total acceptance, with a house open to all comers at which people could remain for as long as they wished. State aid was rejected and poverty espoused, with workers (usually full-time volunteers) encouraged to dress and speak like the homeless people they lived with and to beg for food from markets. Anton himself was a deeply religious Catholic, though the Simon Community was self-consciously open to all, rejecting the 'prayers at breakfast' doctrine of the likes of the Salvation Army.

Anton drew an analogy to the homeless people being at the bottom of a pit: other agencies stood at the top and threw ropes down whilst the objects of their charity failed to grab the ropes. The Simon Community, he said, was instead descending down into the pit and making the climb upwards with them.

In 1964 the Simon Community established what was to be their longest-running house, St Joseph's House of Hospitality in Kentish Town in London. They quickly achieved some degree of public interest, particularly for their work with the meths drinkers, and much of Anton's time in Simon's early days was spent travelling round the country living in a van with a band of followers and speaking to different groups about the work of the Simon Community. He was eventually to inspire new Simon Communities both in Britain and abroad.

³ Reception Centres: An Index of Inadequacy. *British Journal of Social Work* 1975 5:2, Peter Beresford

Simon in Cambridge

In 1965 Martin Wright, who had recently moved to Cambridge from Aylesbury, was asked to arrange for Anton to visit Cambridge. He arranged this via a student group, the Cambridge University Social Service Organisation, and a Christian voluntary group, the Society of St Vincent de Paul. On 17th May that year, a group of people assembled in Cambridge to hear Anton speak and were motivated to set up a group in support of the work of the Simon Community, called the Cambridge Companions of Simon. They were aware that there were rough sleepers in Cambridge, but knew little about them. Anton inspired them with tales of the work he and his followers were doing in London, so a decision was taken to start some similar work in Cambridge.

Some key individuals – Nick Boyle, Pat Ellis and Michael O’ Laughlin – first became acquainted at this meeting, unaware at this time what a large part of their lives the Simon Community would soon become.

“The first evening that I remember was Anton Wallich-Clifford addressing a meeting at Blackfriars in Buckingham Road.”

(Nick Boyle)

“After Martin’s appeal in the local press I joined him with Herbert and several others forming an ad hoc committee to organise soup runs etc.”

(Pat Ellis)

“The upshot was that people said ‘Well we ought to have a Simon group in Cambridge. . . I said ‘I don’t really want to be involved so I’ll be the acting Chair, I don’t want to be the actual Chair, wait for somebody else.’ But then nobody else came along, so about two or three years later I gave in and said ‘All right I’ll be the Chair’. So that was the start of my involvement.”

(Martin Wright)

Initially, this group advanced at a cautious pace, recognising that they knew very little more than Anton had told them about the ‘tramp’ or ‘misfit’. The aim from the start was to open a small house in Cambridge on Simon Community principles, though they had little idea how many people were in need and were unsure whether the numbers would justify this.

They therefore organised a series of talks from local people who were more familiar with the problems of the street homeless, including the officers in charge of the Church Army and Salvation Army hostels, County Welfare Officers, the Probation Officers and the Manager of the National Assistance Board (the predecessor of the DSS).

Existing provision for the homeless of Cambridge was in decline at the time. The nearest Reception Centre in Royston had closed in 1964. A government-

run hostel in East Road was demolished in the mid-60s. The last common lodging house, run by two monks, closed in 1962, and Bene't Hostel for destitute girls in Drosier Road was shut in November 1966.

What was left was the Salvation Army's 43-bed hostel in East Road and the Church Army's 34-bed hostel in Willow Walk (in use to this day). This left no provision in Cambridge for women, or for the men unable to access the Salvation or Church Army hostels, which were generally full.

The 'club' and soup run

The Cambridge Companions of Simon were formed from a mixture of students and townsfolk. Some of the students in particular were keen to begin practical work as soon as possible. Eventually a room was borrowed from the YMCA in Falcon Yard (near to the current Grand Arcade) in Cambridge, where a 'club' was run for the homeless, serving tea and biscuits on Friday evenings.

The food for the soup runs had to be brought by the volunteers themselves, or paid for with money raised from fundraising events. A weekly lunch for volunteers proved a popular way to raise a little money, as well as to chat about the rota for staffing the club.

The soup run involved taking flasks of soup and sandwiches to those they could find sleeping out. Cambridge at this time had some very run-down areas destined for road-widening schemes (later abandoned) and the redevelopment of the Kite area, meaning that Petersfield in particular had large numbers of derelict houses scheduled for demolition or otherwise abandoned. It was in these that many of the homeless people sought shelter and where the soup run would find them:

"One would climb through the windows of these houses looking for people, sometimes knowing roughly where they were, to bring them something in the middle of the night. What they thought of it I can't imagine!"

(Nick Boyle, early member of Cambridge Companions of Simon)

It took time to make the contacts with the homeless. Numbers at the club were initially low, and volunteers on the soup run recalled scrambling round in bushes in the night hunting for homeless people, and debating whether they should leave food out for them, in case they were hiding and would come out when they'd gone.

Contacts were eventually made, and relationships formed. The volunteers of the mid-60s later remembered with great affection some of the characters they met and, Cambridge being quite a small place, frequently ran into them

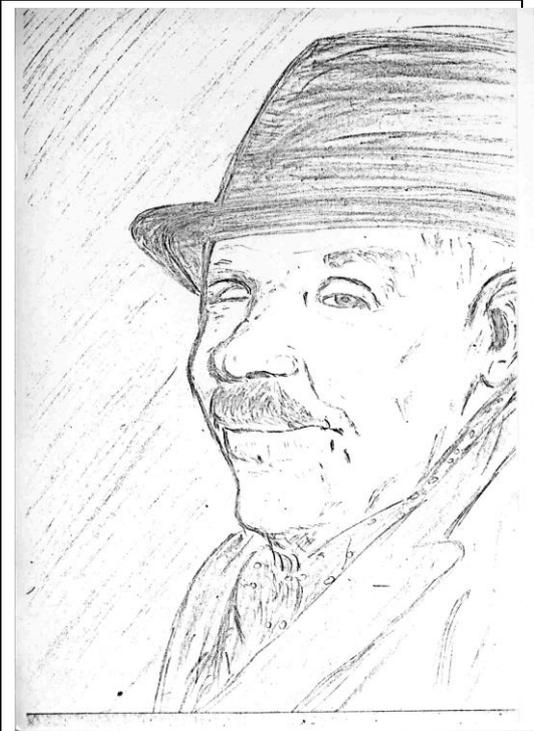
in the course of their lives, gave them lifts to places and helped them out when they were in trouble.

These early contacts quickly brought to light the very real problems of the homeless in Cambridge. The Cambridge Evening News in June 1967 reported the Simon Community as having found a man “half starved” in some bushes and one early soup run uncovered a man living in a coal bunker, sick with tuberculosis, who later died.

The search for the first Cambridge Simon house

At the club too, the early volunteers soon found how uncomfortable it was to spend an evening with people who would then have to return to a blanket or derelict house for the night. Initial doubts over the level of need quickly faded and the pressure was on to find a house for a few of the men to call home.

*“Among the very first of the figures that I remember from the Falcon Yard club was the Gunner, Thomas Rigg was his name. He was a tremendous character who eventually died of cancer. I remember visiting him in hospital not long before he died. It was very sad to see someone who, even when he was drunk on surgical spirit and was living rough as he always had been in his long brown overcoat, with his moustache half burnt off by his fags, nonetheless had tremendous life and willingness to sing and to lecture one in a rather incomprehensible way about events, real or imaginary, from his past.”
(Nicholas Boyle, early volunteer)*



Drawing of 'The Gunner' by Pat Ellis, early volunteer.

Throughout 1966 and 1967 great efforts were made to find a property suitable for use as a Simon house, one that was sitting empty and which they could obtain for free or very little rent. There was strong support for the Simon Community from many local councillors and also from quite a few of the churches in Cambridge. The Salvation Army was more measured in its enthusiasm, complaining in the press at one point that the Simon Group's practice of giving out free food attracted people to the streets and enabled them to save more money for alcohol.

There was also stiff local opposition to any specific house that was identified as potentially suitable. Councillors were divided over their support for Simon; Councillor John Hughes, expressed concern that Cambridge was becoming “all right for a soft touch” for the street drinkers:

“Frankly, I don’t subscribe to the way the Simon Group deal with this problem. A short sharp dose of discipline is what some of these meths drinkers need.”

(Councillor John Hughes, reported in Cambridge Evening News, 26.4.68)

The notion that the work of the Simon Community would only attract greater numbers of ‘dossers’ or ‘tramps’ to Cambridge was to be a recurring theme throughout the next 40 years.

Meanwhile, a great deal of effort was also put into fundraising and raising the profile of the Simon Community. The food needed by the club and soup run had to be either begged from market traders at the end of the day, scavenged from skips, or bought by the volunteers themselves. Funds were also needed for campaigning and to put towards setting up a house, so sponsored events were organised and local people asked to donate.

Attempts were made to count the number of homeless. In 1965/6, for the first time, the government had carried out a nationwide survey of rough sleepers, which found only three people sleeping rough in Cambridge. The Companions of Simon, sceptical of this figure, carried out their own survey, finding 69 people sleeping rough or in derelict houses.

There were also ongoing links with the wider Simon Community at this time. Anton made several further visits to Cambridge to speak about his work in London and elsewhere. Members of the Cambridge Companions of Simon were also involved in travelling round to other cities, spreading knowledge of Anton’s work.

The Granville

Eventually, in spring 1968, a property was identified which looked particularly promising for becoming a Simon house. This was a former public house, known as the Granville, on the corner of Broad Street and East Road (where St Matthew’s School playground now stands).

It was owned by the City Council and had been empty for several years in anticipation of a road-widening project. Because of this, it had no immediate neighbours, a clear asset in light of the local opposition encountered elsewhere. The club by this time had moved from its initial base in Falcon Yard to rooms lent by the Zion Baptist Church, which was also in East Road just a short distance away. The Granville was a detached building in poor condition. The roof leaked, the wiring and plumbing were bad and one

downstairs room was uninhabitable. However its size, lack of neighbours and central location meant it offered what was most needed.

It took many months before the lease was finally signed. Local people were unhappy about the Simon Community using the premises and a lively debate raged for several months in the press.

In May 1968 traders and parents from the nearby St Matthews Primary School presented the City Council with a petition with nearly 400 signatures. There was, however, strong local support for the Simon Community too, with the Council receiving many more letters in support of the Simon house than in opposition.



The first Simon House, the Granville, seen from East Road, with Broad Street off to the right.

Late 1960s

Because the Cambridge Companions of Simon had no legal constitution, everything had to go via the Simon Community in London. They felt that certain Council restrictions were contrary to their ideals of acceptance and were consequently reluctant to sign the lease. Eventually, compromises

were reached and the lease was signed giving two years' notice of the scheduled demolition of the property in October 1970.

The initial group of residents were selected from those using the club and on 11th November 1968 the first residents moved in. Twelve beds were provided for homeless men, and occasionally women, in rooms shared with the two full-time volunteers. An additional three spaces for 'casuals' were also made available for one-night stays.

From Simon to the Cyrenians

It was soon obvious that running a house with 24-hour a day staffing was a very different type of project from a twice-weekly club and soup run. Volunteers ('workers') had to be recruited, supported and given time off. The National Assistance Board paid some rent money for some of the men, but a great deal more was needed to purchase food, pay the workers some pocket money and to heat and maintain the rather dilapidated building. It became clear that the workers needed some kind of back-up in the form of supporters. Whereas the club had relied on a room lent by the YMCA, and the soup run needed only volunteers' own cars, there now had to be a bureaucracy with somebody to sign the agreements with the City Council.

All these tasks fell on the Committee, some of whom found themselves working almost full-time for Simon, raising money and publicising their work as well as being called upon at all hours of day and night when problems occurred in the house.

The Simon Community with its headquarters in London was not really in a position to provide this kind of back-up. The legal situation of many early Simon Communities was unclear and confusion existed over as to whether finances were held centrally or by local projects. Anton Wallich-Clifford, whilst exceptionally skilled at inspiring projects, proved less able at the day-to-day administration needed to keep them afloat. Of the many Simon Communities which were established during the 1960s, all but a few were either taken over by other projects, became independent or closed within their first few years. Anton was initially reluctant to let Simon houses go their own way, fearing that they might "degenerate into hostels" and fail to live up to his ideals. By the late 1960s, the more established local groups, in particular Cambridge, Oxford and Exeter, felt increasingly in need of an effective administrative structure, but increasingly doubtful as to whether this could be provided within one hierarchical organisation. Anton also became seen as a bit of a wild card to have at the top, frequently changing his interests and announcing at one point that he was going to set up a

monastic order. His 'mission to the misfit' was parodied as a 'mission of the misfit'.

In August 1969, Charlotte Lebon (a Simon volunteer and later Coordinating Secretary) contacted new volunteers outlining various problems with Simon. As a result a national working group was formed to consider a more democratic structure. There was substantial involvement from the Cambridge group and in October 1970 the Cambridge Cyrene Community was established as an independent charity, as were Oxford and Exeter, soon to be joined by newly forming groups and other Companions of Simon groups seeking independence. Anton Wallich-Clifford remained with the Simon Community, but a close associate of his, Tom Gifford, and his wife, Brigid, left Simon to found the National Cyrenians, a national body set up at the same time to support the independent local groups.

The re-naming sought to establish the Cyrenians as a distinct organisation, separate from the Simon Community, which remained largely in London, but, by retaining the link with Simon of Cyrene, also emphasised the continuity of approach in terms of ethos. The administrative structure changed, but the ideals of acceptance, group living and the need for a personal approach remained central to the growing movement.

Chapter 2 – Early years: struggles and growth (1970– 1977)

In 1970 Cambridge Cyrenians had just the one house, the Granville in East Road. The next few years were to bring many challenges, but also saw rapid expansion of the work. By 1977 this first house had closed, but three new houses had opened and a succession of nightshelters had run most winters. The organisation itself was developing and the first paid staff member had been taken on.

National Cyrenians

The National Cyrenians grow quickly into a substantial organisation, active both in setting up and supporting local groups and in national campaigning. The number of affiliated groups mushroomed from just three in 1970 to 27 groups running over 50 projects by 1975.

Supplying all these projects with enough volunteers required huge efforts in publicity and recruiting. Most volunteers were young people in their late teens or early 20s, who gave six months' of their time. Training events became well established, and a quarterly journal, *The Cyrenian*, was circulated amongst local groups, carrying articles about all aspects of Cyrenian life from how to make good soup to the latest campaign and national policy developments.

Campaigning work was strong in these years as the government sought to update the 1948 welfare provision that often left homeless people falling between housing and social services departments. In 1966 the Ken Loach film *Cathy Come Home* was screened on television depicting dramatically how easily families could be torn apart by homelessness. Shelter and Crisis both formed in response to the public outcry that followed this film. The Cyrenians were soon part of a much bigger movement to improve the way in which society helped people who found themselves homeless.

Early challenges for Cambridge Cyrenians

The first Cambridge Cyrenian house, the Granville, had opened in November 1968 and was soon in heavy use. It was staffed by around three live-in volunteers at any one time, who shared meals, living space and even bedrooms with the residents, in keeping with the ideal of making the distinction between workers and residents as unobtrusive as possible. House meetings were held weekly to make decisions in which all could participate.

There was also a strong emphasis on self-reliance and thrift. In these early years, much support in kind came from the Committee, with people taking on tasks such as making curtains for the house, or donating furniture.

Most of the residents were alcoholics, though the house itself was 'dry' (in other words, drinking was not allowed on the premises). Workers were therefore required to frisk people on entry for bottles. However, this was not a fool-proof method of keeping drink out: "The captain of the Salvation Army once saw a man walk up to the house and throw a pebble at a window on the first floor. A rope was lowered and a bottle carefully tied to it; this was hoisted up and the man knocked on the door, to be duly 'frisked' before being let in!"⁴



Sleeping arrangements at the Granville. Volunteers and residents shared rooms

Alcoholics, whether drinking outside or in, were a difficult client group to work with. A particular group of street drinkers, who became known as the 'heavy gang' caused huge difficulties inside the house, intimidating both workers and other residents, damaging the property and at one point causing siege-like conditions with bricks being thrown through the windows of the house. Local residents were unhappy and continued to put pressure on the

⁴ The Development of Cambridge Cyrenians Ltd 1965–1973, dissertation submitted to University of York, Roy Wiskar, 1974

Council to find alternative premises for the “colony of cheap spirit drinkers”⁵ somewhere outside of Cambridge (not an option that the Cyrenians considered feasible) or to shut it down altogether. The proximity of the house to the club in the nearby Zion Baptist Church meant that trouble could spill over from one project to another. In December 1969, the club was forced to close for good after being damaged by some of the Granville’s residents who had been refused entry.

On several occasions, the house too was forced to close for a number of nights when the drinkers took over and workers could no longer cope. In January 1970, the workers took the decision to shut the house for three weeks, and to reopen it only for people whose problems were other than alcohol. This decision brought further debate in the local press, who were sometimes derogatory, describing the job of the house leader, Mike Prewitt, as “sitting in the gutter smoking a fag and listening to drunks and tramps”.⁶ The student press, whilst sympathetic to the cause, felt strongly that the homeless had been let down by the decision⁷. In February 1970, a group of students squatted in an empty house (25 Chesterton Road) in order to provide for those the Granville was now excluding, and as a protest towards the City Council for failing to provide for homeless alcoholics. Reluctant to evict the students and ‘dossers’ in the midst of a cold winter, the City Council had asked the Cambridge Companions of Simon to take over the house. However, the hostility from some of the ‘dossers’ and difficulties envisaged in establishing a different set of rules for the house meant that the Companions of Simon felt they must turn down the offer.

This decision to close the house and reopen only to non-alcoholics was controversial at the time when the Cyrenians were forming out of the Companions of Simon, as some felt it to be a betrayal of their ideals of acceptance and working with those whom no one else would help. Many felt that the difficulty had lain in trying to do too many things in the one house and that what was really needed was separate projects, or ‘tiers’ as they termed them.

The three-tiered approach was central to Simon/Cyrenian philosophy, developed from Anton’s early ideas. Tier one was intended to accommodate people on a very temporary basis; tier two was for a more settled community, though still intended as a temporary form of housing, whilst tier three was intended for people who were unlikely ever to want to live independently and so could instead remain indefinitely in a Cyrenian Community. The Cyrenians, at this stage, did not see themselves so much as

⁵ Councillor J. B. Chaplin, in a letter to Cambridge Evening News, 9th May 1969

⁶ Peterborough Evening Telegraph, 3rd November 1969

⁷ Stop Press, 2nd February 1970

providing temporary accommodation for people until they could access permanent housing, but rather as providing a range of living options for people ill-suited to living independently – the ‘socially inadequate’, as they termed them.

It was clear that if the Cyrenians were to meet the needs of the diverse homeless population, they would need more than one property.

A second Cyrenian house: Station Road

With a growing positive reputation in Cambridge, the Cyrenians found it less difficult to acquire a second property. The use of a large house at 24 Station Road was offered rent-free to the group by a landlord wishing to remain anonymous. The main condition of the generous arrangement was that the building had to be vacated at the end of three years when it was due to be demolished to make way for a block of offices.

On 17th December 1970, even before the completion of legal formalities, 24 Station Road was occupied by a group of residents chosen from those at the Granville and several workers moved over to run the new community. Unfortunately, the building was not really yet fit for habitation. The numbers of residents rose to 17 by the end of December. Chaos reigned for a short while and two workers left disillusioned.

“With no water, no heating and a cold spell into the bargain, with too many residents and too few workers, we learnt an enduring lesson how not to move house.”

(Chairman’s Report, 1972)

Numbers were eventually limited to 12 and the house was made a ‘third-tier’ project, taking only residents selected as suitable from the Granville. Slowly, things improved and a sense of community began to emerge. By the end of 1971, it was reported that the house was now running smoothly with only three workers, and that the biggest problem was finding a use for huge numbers of donated apples!⁸

Developments at the Granville

This left the Granville still trying to cater for both tiers one and two – in other words, trying to form a community but whilst offering beds to all comers. It also continued to experience tensions between the drinkers and the other men.

⁸ Chairman’s Report, 1971

In May 1971, the outbuildings in the back yard of the Granville were opened as a shelter to run alongside the house with the intention to provide for both groups of men, or as one volunteer put it: “in the hope that it would cut out the antics of the then resident Glasgow Alcoholic School within the house and remove the theatre of war out of our home and to a slightly more comfortable distance”.⁹

A soup kitchen opened at 6pm and the sheds, which acted as rather austere dormitories for men only, were available from 7.30pm until 7.30am.



The Shelter in the back yard of the Granville with volunteers washing up. The writing on the wall reads “Please! No bottles. No violence. No conning”.

At first, having the shelter did improve things in the house. Workers found it easier to turn drinkers away knowing that there was somewhere else they could go. However, the shelter’s proximity meant there were constant tensions and jealousies between the projects, and workers were stretched between them. A group of aggressive drinkers took control of the shelter and on three separate occasions during the next 12 months the Cyrenians felt they had no option but to close it after violence or damage to property. In May

⁹ The Development of Cambridge Cyrenians Ltd 1965–1973, dissertation submitted to University of York, Roy Wiskar, 1974

1972 the shelter was closed for a final time. It was decided that its effect upon the house and the strain placed on the volunteers was too high a price to pay.

Short Street

The Granville had been offered to the then Simon Community in 1968 with an intended lifespan of just six months but by 1970 was still in use. Efforts were made throughout 1970 and 1971 to find a replacement. Eventually another former pub, the Duke of Cambridge in Short Street, was identified. This was owned by the City Council, along with its immediate neighbour, also an empty terrace house. These properties remain in use by the Cyrenians to this day.

However, when the lease at Station Road was terminated earlier than had been anticipated, there arose a pressing need to find a replacement for that house by September 1972. The Short Street house was not, however, due to be ready for occupation until December. Eventually, the problem was solved by farming out most of the residents of Station Road elsewhere. Several went to the Salvation Army, one was accommodated by a Committee member, several were moved away to Cyrenian Communities elsewhere and others were squeezed into the Granville, which remained open for the time being.

This did, however, give the Short Street house an opportunity for a fresh start when it opened. In order to placate the neighbours it was to operate as a third tier house for a small settled community of carefully chosen residents, the neighbouring house being used initially as accommodation for workers only. This worked well and the Short Street house never suffered the difficulties of the Granville or Station Road.

Nightshelters

Despite the problems encountered in running a shelter in the back yard of the Granville, it was clear that there was a real need for a shelter in Cambridge, especially since the closure of the Salvation Army's White Ribbon Hotel in 1973. The Granville shelter had often had to turn men away, and in the winter the need to keep people off the streets was particularly pressing. The Cyrenians Committee was already stretched, running two houses. So a new organisation, Cambridge Nightshelter was formed, also affiliated to the national Cyrenians but as a separate entity with the explicit purpose of setting up a nightshelter in Cambridge.

Finding suitable premises was a major challenge. Arguments continued to rage in the local press over whether setting up a nightshelter might just attract more 'dossers' to Cambridge.

After visiting other nightshelters throughout the country, including Oxford, Glasgow and Leeds, the new group opened the first nightshelter at 94 King Street in November 1973. Over the course of the next three years it opened each winter but moved frequently between locations. In February 1974 it was forced to close, opening again in King Street in October 1974. It had to move in January 1975 to 12/13 St Paul's Road where it remained until the end of May. The final Cambridge nightshelter was opened on 17th November 1975 at 146/148 Mill Road. This closed prematurely about 13th March 1976 and did not reopen.

The nightshelters offered simple food and a bed for the night to around 15 men. Conditions were basic:

"We weren't allowed to have any bed clothing because of fleas and lice and things like that so what we did was we got rubber covered mattresses from the hospital that were old stock. The men lay on them. Because it was winter we had to have heat so the gas fires were turned on all night long. Even then some of the men used to unzip the rubber covering on the mattresses and make it like a sleeping bag. No blankets or pillows or anything. A lot of them if not incontinent would just go to the toilet all over the place . . . At 8am in the morning we'd kick them all out to face the day and we'd start clearing up."

(Nightshelter volunteer 1974/5)

Working in the nightshelters was also one of the toughest roles for volunteers. Outbreaks of violence were frequent. The volunteers were given a room at the Short Street offices to sleep during the day, but the offices were also doubling as a clothing store, the shelter workers struggled to get much-needed sleep. For a few, the strain was too much:

"I had a nervous breakdown and got taken into Fulbourn psychiatric hospital. That was in the March. I think it was brought on by doing over 100 hours a week . . . It wasn't the Cyrenians' fault I got ill. I just wasn't strong enough mentally to cope with it."

(Nightshelter volunteer 1974/5)

The committee struggled with replacing and supporting workers on the one hand, and a constant effort to find new premises on the other. After three winters they decided they could no longer operate unless a permanent building could be found. But the Council was not forthcoming in such an offer.

The need for paid staff

During this period the Cyrenians were running entirely with voluntary input. Bookkeeping and finances of Cambridge Cyrenians were in the hands of

voluntary committee members. Graham Burghall was persuaded in 1972 to take on the role of treasurer and went on to keep the books for many years. Other committee members took a variety of hands-on roles visiting projects, carrying out maintenance and getting to know the residents. The day-to-day running of the houses however was largely in the hands of the live-in volunteers, who tended only to stay for short periods of time – six months generally being considered the norm, though many in fact stayed less. The Chairman's report of 1972 bemoaned the fact that in the past year, 58 new volunteers had arrived, of whom 16 had stayed less than two weeks. The National Cyrenians did a lot of work in searching for new volunteers but difficulties in recruiting also meant that it was hard to be very selective about who to take. Some volunteers were not really up to what could be a pretty tough job. The expertise and knowledge that was being accumulated needed to be passed on to new workers. This too was something that the National Cyrenians took a role in.

In 1972 they published Charlotte Le Bon's Cyrenian Handbook setting out in great detail many of the things the new workers would need to know, from how to eradicate lice and cope with men who want to snatch a kiss from female workers to how to deal with the local health inspectors:



The Visit of the Health Inspector, Charlotte Le Bon, Cyrenian Handbook, 1972

It also offered advice to volunteers on how to form good relationships with the residents:

“Don't, if you are a student, use jargon terms or sophisticated arguments, or talk too much about your own branch of study. Don't knock the police, or Salvation Army, or respectable society, just because this provides an easy area of agreement. Don't puppy-fight with anyone (especially if the person is drunk): it could turn serious. Don't pass money in the Shelter, especially not for drinks.”

In addition to the Handbook, the National Cyrenians also published Gordon Matthews' *Nowhere to Go* around the same time. This was a detailed guide to working with other agencies and knowing what other kinds of support and accommodation were available for homeless people. Being a national publication, it didn't attempt to give the details of local agencies. Maintaining contacts and good working relationships with other local agencies was something that the Cyrenians found particularly difficult with the high turnover of volunteers they experienced.

In 1972, Ken Harris, who had worked in the Granville for six months, wrote a reflective report setting out the difficulties the Cyrenians were experiencing and making the case for a long-term paid worker who lived outside of the Cyrenian houses. The main concerns were that the lack of pay and stresses of a live-in job meant that volunteers could not be expected to stay for long. A paid worker living outside of the houses would however have the opportunity to develop better relationships with the wider world.

His report was well received by Cambridge Cyrenians, who began to look to how this could be achieved. The Cyrenians had become quite skilled at fundraising; 'Cyrene Week' held each year saw an extensive programme of concerts, raffles, and sponsored events, raising between them an amount of money roughly equivalent to a low-paid worker's annual salary. By the mid-1970s, they were also starting to tap into statutory sources of funding, securing an annual grant from the Home Office (for their work as a 'reception centre') and from the local Council. The National Assistance Board also paid some rent for at least some of the residents. Wages, at the time, were also not so very much higher than the pocket money paid to volunteers. In October 1973 Shirley Firth, who had worked previously at the Granville as a volunteer, was taken on as the first paid 'liaison worker'.

Changing staff roles

Paid staff caused no overnight transformation in the way in which the Cyrenians worked. The role of the Liaison Worker took some time to be worked out. Shirley Firth stayed only a few months and was replaced in 1974

by Irene Rolph who stayed until 1977, when she was replaced by Willie Sugg. These workers were all relatively young and inexperienced. They had all worked previously as volunteers with the Cyrenians and struggled in establishing what the role of the liaison worker should be:

"The next liaison worker must be fully aware of the difficulties to be faced in not having a strictly defined role and must be prepared at the beginning to say 'No, sorry, I can't come to East Road today, I'm having a night off'."

(Shirley Firth's goodbye note in a 1974 Newsletter)

"I always said in my career it's been the most difficult job I've ever had when I was the least experienced."

(Irene Rolph)

"I felt I was sort of caught between the Committee, the support group, the volunteers, the volunteer workers and the residents. So there were all these people making demands on me and I never clarified what my role was to each one."

(Willie Sugg)

The presence of paid staff did, however mean that volunteers now had someone to turn to for help. They also took some of the pressure off the Committee by carrying out some of the recruitment and local publicity.

A change in direction?

It was not just a lack of money that had made Cyrenians reluctant to use paid staff. The early days had seen a strong belief in using volunteers as a means of breaking down the barrier that existed between homeless people and professionals in other agencies. But by the mid-1970s quite a bit of the original philosophy inherited from the Simon Community was being challenged, not just in Cambridge but throughout the Cyrenian movement.

In 1975, a national review of the Cyrenian philosophy and approach was launched called the '*Rethink*' and local groups were asked to contribute. It is apparent from the responses received that Cambridge, along with several others of the more established groups, was struggling with some of the original ideas. A couple of the early Simon ideals had been quietly left behind without further ado – Anton Wallich-Clifford's Christian ethos and the espousal of poverty were not a philosophy the Cyrenians ever really promoted.

The central ideals of acceptance and working with those that others left behind and with trying to offer a home rather than a hostel were, however, ideals that were at the heart of both the Simon community and the Cyrenians.

But ten years of working in the field had brought home the very real practical difficulties that living out these ideals entailed.

It became apparent that making accommodation directly accessible to those on the streets could result in quite a rapid turnover. A tension was clearly felt between forming a working community where people looked out for one another, and being open to all comers, especially given that many of the people who turned up on the doorstep might themselves be difficult to live with and potentially damaging to the coherence of community life: "If we have an 'open door' we will not have a 'community'".¹⁰

There was also a growing acceptance of, and even enthusiasm for, rules and policies:

"Workers do not come programmed to operate a house on community lines. They should not be put into a position of having to decide how to run the house as they can only learn the hard way – by making mistakes . . . New workers should not destroy the stability achieved and sense of purpose the residents may feel. For the residents will probably be there long after the workers have left."

(Cambridge's submission to the 1975 Rethink)

When trying to run a house, workers soon became aware that worker and resident equality was not really an achievable ideal: someone had to have the keys to the safe, someone bought the food and decided who could eat it, and someone had to have the power to evict people if they threatened the safety of others in the house. It was the workers who took on these roles, thus exposing the inequality:

"I mean if you've got the supply of bread and cheese the temptation is to have one round of sandwiches to each of the men and two to yourself. You could do that 'cause you control the cheese and the bread."

(Nightshelter volunteer 1974/5)

The Rethink showed that many Cyrenian communities were uncertain that equality was achievable, asking: "Who can really identify with the state of the homeless individual? – especially if he comes from a comfortable middle-class family and has just graduated from university?" Cyrenian groups were recognising that there was a need for workers to lead, and to manage the house, as opposed to just 'being there', and that accepting people's habits and ways of behaving was not always good for anyone. As the Oxford Cyrenians put it in their submission to the Rethink:

¹⁰ Guidelines for Cyrenian Houses

"We now see our role as being a very different one to that with which we started out six years ago. Then we were attempting to live a communal life with Oxford's homeless. Yet we were not homeless ourselves. We now feel, in retrospect, that we were in many ways attempting to impose something of our own needs upon the men who came to stay in our house. We had no right to do this and it did not work. The end results of our very muddled thinking were violence and absolute chaos."

Oxford Cyrenians also threw up a very direct challenge to the original ethos by describing their project as a 'small friendly hostel', hostels no longer being something they feared 'degenerating' into. The Cyrenians no longer saw themselves as part of an alternative society:

"Links with local authorities and central government are closer and we are nearer to being part of the 'establishment' while the Simon Community was more 'outside' society . . . The Cyrenians are not the new and radical pioneers that the Simon Community were in the 1960s"

(Cyrenian Rethink, 1975)

The Campaign for Homeless and Rootless (CHAR), formed in 1972, had become recognised as the mouthpiece for the voluntary sector working with the single homeless. The National Cyrenians were very involved in campaigning in the mid-1970s and worked closely with CHAR, thus linking themselves more widely to other organisations working with the homeless.

The Cyrenian groups of the mid-1970s were becoming more comfortable with the idea of managing accommodation for the homeless in a manner not so unlike other agencies. They were recognising the need for different types of projects to meet different needs, acknowledging that communal living was not for everyone.

From the Granville to Gonville Place

Meanwhile, throughout all these developments, the first Cambridge Cyrenian house, the Granville, was still open. The road-widening had been delayed (a change of policy meant the plans were eventually dropped), but by the mid-1970s it was in a poor state of repair. The fire department were unhappy with the risk it posed and were urging the Cyrenians to find replacement premises.

In 1974, the Cyrenians began negotiations with the City Council about a house that the Council had leased from Gonville and Caius College at 3 Gonville Place. The lease had 20 years left to run, though the property's future was less certain as it was also part of the proposed road-widening. The Council accepted the Cyrenians' offer to rent the property and planning permission

was granted. Gonville and Caius College, however, was concerned about possible nuisance to neighbours and, as the freeholders, pointed out the terms of the lease that might conflict with the Cyrenians' proposed use. The Council therefore refused to let the Cyrenians rent or lease the building from them unless they could give a "categorical and unqualified assurance" never to cause nuisance to the neighbours. The Cyrenians, whilst promising to do their best, felt unable to make such a commitment, so proceedings were stalled.

Throughout this time, frustration was building up at the Granville in East Road. Heightened concerns over fire safety following a chimney fire had caused them to abandon the use of the upstairs and there was a sense that time was really running out:

"We have been very patient . . . too patient. The decline in worker morale has been shown by the increasing number who have left after only a short time of their intended stay. The residents are increasingly sceptical when Gonville Place is mentioned, hope is dying and our spirits are falling with the plaster of East Road."

(Statement presented to Short Street from the workers at East Road, March 1976)

The workers and residents decided to take some direct action. In March 1976, a group from the Granville moved into the Gonville Place house as squatters. For many this was an uncomfortable experience:

"A memorable thing for my mother was waking up one morning and listening to the local radio and hearing her daughter's voice coming over the waves. I think it was some unearthly hour like 7 o'clock in the morning and she heard me say, 'Well this is not what, you know, we normally would do, this is quite alien to most of us, you know.' It was very middle class people who'd been on the Committee to sanction sort of squatting a building."

(Irene Rolph, liaison worker 1974-77)

The rest of the residents and staff from the Granville quickly followed and the Granville was finally abandoned.

Their methods paid off. In May, Gonville and Caius agreed to allow the Council to sell the Cyrenians the remaining 20 years of the lease for a cost of £9,500, and £9.30 per year rent. The Gonville Place house was established and ran as a direct-access home, taking people directly from the streets. For some this was just for a night or two, while others stayed for many months. Short Street's role remained as a more settled community, taking its residents mainly from Gonville Place when they were ready for a more stable home.

By 1977, Cambridge Cyrenians were therefore running two houses both with full-time live-in volunteers. They also had an office space at Short Street with a clothing store and a full-time paid worker. They had come through some difficult early years, sometimes taking on too much too fast and learning, often the hard way, what the challenges were in running group homes for the homeless. Yet as they moved into the late 1970s, Cambridge Cyrenians had established themselves locally as the people who were in touch with the homeless, who could make the links so badly needed between the people on the streets and the rest of society.

Chapter 3 – Getting established and branching out (1977–1986)

Cambridge Cyrenians saw further growth and expansion during this period. New projects and ways of working were tried, some successfully, others less so. This was also a time of consolidation of existing projects. Finances, staffing and the houses themselves all settled down and formed a much stronger basis for the future.

New legislation for the UK

In 1977 a new Housing Act was passed by central government, clarifying local authorities' duties to homeless households. Local authorities now had to ensure that both temporary accommodation and, eventually, permanent housing (usually council housing) was provided for those in 'priority need' such as people with children. Those without dependent children were not included unless they had particular vulnerabilities such as old age, poor health, pregnancy or disability. The 1977 Act remains substantially in effect today, offering one of the highest levels of protection from homelessness anywhere in the world.

The National Cyrenians had been one of several newly-formed groups campaigning for the new legislation: Shelter had formed in 1966, Crisis in 1967 and St Mungo's in 1969. The Housing Act was broadly welcomed across this newly emerged homelessness sector. The National Cyrenians welcomed the link that the Act made between homelessness and a national shortage of accommodation, rather than seeing homelessness as a sign of individual inadequacy.

The legislation did have the effect of formalising the distinction that had already come to exist between homeless families and the 'single homeless'. Families were now firmly the responsibility of local authorities, so the role of the voluntary sector was identified as helping the single homeless. Some had wanted the legislation extended to all groups, but ensuring that the most vulnerable were now protected was seen as a strong step in the right direction. The Cyrenians by now were aware that homelessness was a much larger problem than they could solve alone.

For Cambridge Cyrenians, the new legislation did not make a huge immediate impact. Some of their clients would undoubtedly have been considered 'vulnerable' were they to approach the local authority, but there was no strong pressure to pass them over. The Cyrenians saw their accommodation as offering something quite different from what the Council would provide for the homeless – they were offering a democratic community, with a focus on

acceptance and communal living. There seemed no reason to push individuals towards the Council if a Cyrenian house suited them.

Cyrenian residents who wanted to move into council housing could generally access it directly from the waiting list, which was not as difficult as it is today.

A new liaison worker for Cambridge

Whilst the role of volunteers was becoming better defined, Cambridge Cyrenians in the late 1970s were still developing the role of the liaison worker. In 1979 the third such worker in only five years had left. Willie Sugg had struggled, as had those before him, in the role. The finances of the organisation were in a mess, and the committee unsure how to go about replacing him.

There was, however, one person they knew of who might just be persuaded to take the job. Jacob Turnbull had come to Cambridge in 1977 as a Franciscan Brother. The Brothers had had links with the early Simon Community, which Jacob renewed. The Cyrenians approached the Society of St Francis and asked whether Brother Jacob might be lent to them for two years. The society agreed and Jacob was released to work for the Cyrenians. He was actually to stay for nearly 20 years.

“Jacob was I think one of the most saintly, selfless people I’ve ever met. He was amazing. I was happy to go and spend days and afternoons with people, who were mostly very interesting, but how Jacob could live 24 hours a day with the people he was helping there, I couldn’t have done that.”

(Part-time Volunteer)



Jacob proved to be exactly what the Cyrenians needed at the time – a few years older than previous liaison workers and comfortable with the informal way of working, he was confident in taking the role and defining what it should be about.

Whilst not overly interested in administration, he spent a great deal of his time, both day and evening, in the houses, or in trips to the pubs with residents and workers together. This personal support was immensely valued by both volunteers and residents alike.

Jacob's style of working was always informal, but his maturity and, over time, his experience meant that the role did gradually evolve into that of manager and administrator, a change that was recognised in his job title in 1982. Terming him the Administrator also reflected a more general change within the Cyrenians as they became less nervous of hierarchy and saw the value for the volunteers in having someone who was in a sense responsible for them.

Living together

By the mid-1980s the separate tiers of accommodation were working well. The Cyrenians had given up running nightshelters but were successfully running Gonville Place as a direct access hostel, and Short Street as a longer-term house. New arrivals generally started at Gonville Place and were considered for a move to Short Street after a period of time.

Most of the residents were men, but there was never a policy not to accept women, and in Short Street one of the longest-staying residents was a woman called Violet.

"My nicest memory quite frankly is that every morning when I went to work I had to go into Short Street and read Violet her stars and she would have spent the whole of the previous day collecting other people's dog ends. And I would be required to buy her an ounce of tobacco and mix it all together and roll her enough – she couldn't roll her own cigarettes – to last her the day, and then she'd collect all the dog ends and the next morning we did the same. But it was much more important than opening the office to read Violet her stars."

(Jacob Turnbull, Administrator)



Violet, Short Street Resident, late 1970s to 1980s.

Most residents in the early 1980s were expected to share a bedroom. Violet, being the only woman, had her own room for several years. However this

was not a fixed right. When another woman arrived in need of a bed, Violet was forced to share her room:

"I did have to share with Violet and she was not pleased. . . She'd had a room to herself you see and they suddenly said, 'Oh well there's another woman coming', and she was not happy for a very long time, well quite a long time, she made life quite difficult. But then she ruled the roost, you know."

(Ros, resident in Short Street in the early 1980s)

Relationships between staff and residents were for the most part friendly and, by today's standards, very informal, often including going out together to pubs in the evenings:

"It seems unimaginable now that what we did in the evenings was took a bunch of alcoholics to the pub!"

(Volunteer in the early 1980s)



Residents and staff relaxing together at a pub near Short Street, early 1980s.

Day trips and outings were also a part of life, with trips to the seaside fondly remembered by residents and volunteers alike.

Romantic relationships between workers and residents were also not unheard of, although they could be problematic. Back in the early 1970s, young women volunteers still in their teens living away from home for the first time had been seen as a bit of a problem within the national Cyrenian movement, largely owing to their tendency to form romantic relationships

with the residents. In 1970 there was a proposal to increase the minimum age for 'girl' workers from 19 to 21, though it appears that this was never implemented nationally.

With women and men both accommodated at Short Street, there was also the potential for relationships between residents. In 1985, Ros and Jack, both of whom had been residents for several years, were married:



"Violet absolutely adored Jack, which made it difficult when we got married. It was at the Shire Hall and when they got to the bit where, you know, does anyone know of any legal reason why they shouldn't be married she stood up and said 'Yes, I do'! . . . And of course the Registrar at that point has to stop, legally... So Jacob had to explain to the Registrar the situation, that Violet was a little bit besotted with the bloke I was marrying and extremely jealous of me and this was the reason. . . . I remember Jack looking at me and thinking 'Oh my goodness me!'"

(Ros)

From left: Ros, Jacob and Jack, at Ros and Jack's wedding, 1985.

Throughout the early 1980s, Cambridge Cyrenians was run entirely by open meetings of the committee members plus any staff, volunteer workers and residents who cared to attend. Meetings could sometimes go on late into the evenings, though often everyone would retire afterwards to the pub for a drink and a chat with residents. Jacob was, however, the only paid staff member in this period:

"The extent of the work which Jacob must have put in is hard to imagine, recruiting and supporting so many live-in volunteers plus all the residents. The Committee members provided some help because in those days they were often directly engaged in visiting the projects and helping out. . . . But even so the burden carried by Jacob must have been tremendous."

(Richard Robertson, Committee member 1983 to date)

The Cyrenians as a national movement

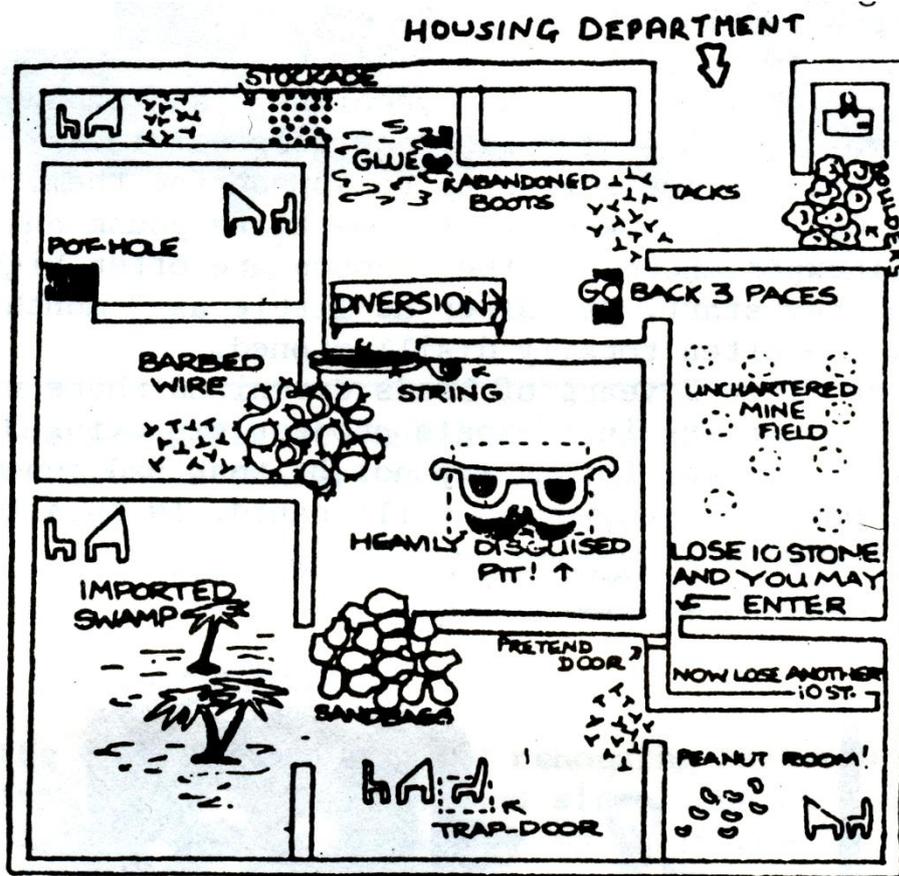
With the number of local growing every year, training had become well-established by the mid 1970s. Many well-attended training events were held, to help equip the volunteers for the task ahead. By the late 70s there was also substantial professional involvement in these training sessions, a departure from the original ethos of the Simon Community which was at times quite critical of 'professionals' in other agencies. The Cyrenians were now starting to work more as one organisation amongst many and to appreciate the resources others could offer.

There was also a strong campaigning focus to the National Cyrenians' work in these years. After the 1977 Housing Act, there was a renewed focus on the needs and rights of the single homeless.¹¹ The regular newsletter *The Cyrenian* was replaced in 1978 by a radical new publication *Rough Justice*. This focused less on reporting news from local groups and more on exposing failures in welfare provision where local authorities failed to fulfil their new duties, or on the very poor quality of accommodation offered to the homeless.

It was critical of the difficulties experienced by homeless people in getting assistance from housing departments (see next page). By now, however, the National Cyrenians were receiving state funding in the form of an annual grant from DHSS which provided over 75 percent of their income. *Rough Justice's* overt criticism of government policy caused embarrassment and threatened future funding.

The publication had acquired a readership, though, both within and outside the Cyrenian movement. *Rough Justice* therefore decided to go independent and survive from the money raised on sales rather than on any funding from the Cyrenians. It retained a strong readership within the Cyrenians but was able to keep its radical edge.

¹¹ *Vulnerable but Not Vulnerable Enough*, 1981, National Cyrenians



Rough Justice, Winter 1981

Raising standards

The voluntary sector had moved on considerably since the 1960s, and hostel provision for homeless people by the mid 1980s provided by a variety of providers including the YMCA, English Churches Housing Group (ECHG) and St Mungo's. The quality of accommodation had also improved and the Cyrenians feared being left behind. They no longer espoused poverty and instead wanted to be associated with higher standards of accommodation.

This led to a national drive in the early 1980s towards improvements in Cyrenian houses. A checklist of 'minimum standards' was produced. Some of these were merely complying with legislation on issues such as fire safety, though others were more aspirational, covering areas such as shared bedrooms and provision of bathrooms and toilets as well as issues relating to resident involvement in decision-making, tenancy agreements and staff employment. It was difficult, though, to provide standards that were appropriate both to temporary nightshelters and to long-stay houses. The National Cyrenians also lacked any 'clout' with which to enforce the standards other than denying membership.

Many aspects of the 'minimum standards' were, however, well received and in tune with what local groups were striving to do anyway. The focus on reducing the use of shared bedrooms reflected a wider change in society – they were becoming less acceptable generally as well as within the homelessness sector. In Cambridge in 1984, Gonville Place was modified and extended in order to offer single rooms to all residents. This change meant that women could now be accommodated more easily, something that was becoming an issue.

Homeless women

Prior to the 1980s, women's homelessness had been more or less unrecognised. The Cyrenians had accommodated some women at the early nightshelters and, as discussed above, in Short Street, but they were the only providers in Cambridge to do so as the Church Army did not take women at the time.

In 1983, members of the Cyrenians were approached by Women's Aid for advice about a house in Corona Road that they had been offered by Cambridge Housing Society. Women's Aid felt it unsuitable to use as a refuge, but were keen to see it set up as a small hostel for other homeless women. The Cambridge Women and Homelessness Group was set up as a separate organisation to manage the new hostel which opened in 1986.

Independent communities at City Road and Maids Causeway

Short Street was working well as a long-term residential community, at times so well that it seemed that live-in volunteers might not even be necessary. In 1979 two new projects, 49 City Road and 70 Maids Causeway, were developed to enable the more independent residents to live in shared houses without live-in volunteers. This was something some of the residents had been pushing for but was not to prove a long-term success.

The Maids Causeway house was open for less than a year, as problems with the lease meant it had to be returned to the owner. The City Road house operated for couple of years, but without the presence of live-in volunteers it was difficult to make it function as a community, and so in June 1981 it was also forced to close. This new venture, although short-lived, had been educational. The role of live-in volunteers was confirmed as central to the kinds of work they were trying to do. Volunteers no longer experienced the tension of trying to live as equal to the homeless whilst also maintaining order.

They were becoming more comfortable in their role in managing the houses.

Changes at the top – a new role for National Cyrenians?

In the mid-1980s, there were further changes in store for National Cyrenians. Despite the Rethink in 1975, the organisation had never entirely resolved what its purpose was to be. The National Cyrenians had always had a dual role of both campaigning and being a support body for the local groups. Since its inception in 1972, CHAR had developed its campaigning focus and had taken over much of what the Cyrenians had previously been doing.

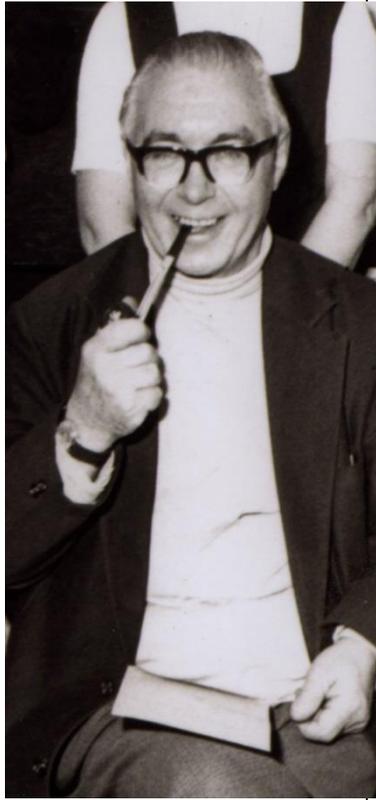
The role in supporting local groups continued, but the initial surge in the number of local groups was not sustained and by the early 1980s the number had started to decline.

One clear role for the National Cyrenians was providing training. By the early 1980s they were pioneering a radical new approach to training volunteers. 'Experiential training' made great use of role-play, and getting volunteers to think about group dynamics. Volunteers were divided about the merits of this approach. Some loved it, whilst others felt it failed to cover the practicalities they needed to run Cyrenian houses.

By this time, it was also being recognised that what the Cyrenians were doing was not unique. They had much in common with other voluntary-sector homeless accommodation providers and could therefore work together with these groups, sharing expertise on issues such as training of staff and recruiting volunteers. The national body was also experiencing difficulties with staffing. Tom Gifford had been the director since the National Cyrenians broke away from the Simon Community in 1970, and his wife Brigid did much of the secretarial work. Tom had struggled with alcoholism throughout his time with the Cyrenians. He had a quick temper and frequently fired his staff after a lunchtime spent in the pub.¹² After Brigid's death he deteriorated (see overleaf) and was eventually removed from his post as director.

By the mid-1980s, the National Cyrenians had seen some of their grants delayed or reduced and were struggling financially. Their relationship with local groups was not helped by being based in Kent. In 1986 the organisation was relaunched and renamed as Homes for Homeless People, moving from its base in Canterbury to London. For Cambridge Cyrenians, the disruption within the national body brought no huge difficulties. They were by now an effective autonomous organisation. The constant need for new recruiting had subsided as volunteers were now better supported, no longer trying to run nightshelters.

¹² The History of National Cyrenians, Gordon Matthews, 1986, unpublished



"In 1980, Brigid committed suicide, and Tom's life fell apart. He sold their cottage and toured from Brighton to Aberdeen visiting all the projects for homeless people with which he had been involved – and not as a visiting dignitary, but as a client. At Oxford's Simon House, night workers told the manager of the stay of an "old boy who had claimed to have founded the Cyrenians". By the time they realised he was telling the truth, Tom was back on the road.

At the end of 1981, tour completed, he returned on Christmas Eve to the Whitstable Road house he had set up in Canterbury. He wanted, he told the startled workers, to be taken in as a resident. ...It ended when he was asked to leave for breaking the 'no drinking' rule. He could hardly complain, he told the Guardian, because it was a national rule on which he had insisted."

(Gordon Matthews ¹³)

By 1986, Cambridge Cyrenians had discovered their strengths. The attempts to create independent houses without live-in staff and limited support staff had floundered, but the established communities in Short Street and Gonville Place were running well.

¹³ The History of National Cyrenians by Gordon Matthews

Chapter 4 – An expanding local scene (1986–1997)

By the mid-1980s, homelessness was a growing problem throughout the UK.¹⁴ Cambridge Cyrenians had been working with the homeless in Cambridge for 20 years. They were running two houses, one for people to access directly from the streets, and the other for longer-term residents. However, it was all too obvious that the needs of the homeless in Cambridge were much more than these two houses could hope to meet. The late 1980s and 1990s saw many new projects established both by the Cyrenians and by the growing number of other organisations working with the homeless. The number of bed spaces provided by the Cyrenians more than doubled from around 20 to 49 in this period, whilst in Cambridge overall the number of spaces for single homeless people grew from around 50 to over 200.

Homelessness in the 1980s and 1990s

House price rises in the 1980s and 1990s, alongside changes to benefit entitlement for young people and rising unemployment had reduced access to private rented housing. Social housing also became harder to access as the Right-to-Buy and fall in new build rates reduced the size of the sector.

Alongside this, the move away from institutional type resettlement units (see Chapter 1) had led to a reduction in the number of beds available nationwide. Camberwell Resettlement Unit, one of the last and by the end of its life the closest to Cambridge, closed in 1985.

Some individuals are always particularly vulnerable to homelessness, such as those who have grown up in care, spent time in prison or in the military or suffered mental health problems. The profile of those who ended up on the streets was changing by the 1980s to include growing numbers of young people and women.¹⁵ Hard drugs, particularly heroin, were also becoming a major problem for those on the street.

In Cambridge in the mid-80s the number of street homeless was widely acknowledged to be growing, but there had been virtually no growth in provision during the previous ten years. The Salvation Army White Ribbon Hotel in East Road had closed ten years earlier, so only the smaller hostel in Willow Walk (run by the Church Army) and the two small Cyrenian houses remained.

¹⁴ Single homelessness: An overview of research in Britain, 2000, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Peter Kemp and Susanne Klinker

¹⁵ Housing policy and street homelessness in Britain, *Housing Studies*, 1993, vol. 8, no 1, pp 17-28; Isobel Anderson

Homelessness was also becoming a more prominent political issue. The sight of young people, and women in particular, sleeping on the streets was shocking to many and led to calls for the government to do more to address it. In 1990, after much pressure, the Rough Sleepers Initiative was launched in London, and rolled out to other areas, including Cambridge, in 1996.

The 'Bus'

In the mid-1980s the Lion Yard shopping Centre in Cambridge had become a popular place for the homeless and street drinkers to congregate. The City Council was concerned about complaints from the public about drunkenness, begging and sometimes intimidation. It called a meeting with the Cyrenians – by now established as the local body with the best links to the street drinkers – the police and social services to discuss what could be done.

The police confirmed the problem, stating that 34 out of the 116 arrests in Cambridge in the first quarter of 1983 for being drunk and disorderly took place in the Lion Yard. There were concerns that trade and tourism could be affected. Eventually a Council employee suggested using an old double-decker bus as a drop-in centre.

The plan was to park the bus next to Lion Yard and to open it up for the street drinkers to sit and get a cup of tea and a sandwich. It was hoped that this might prevent the group of street drinkers from growing in number, possibly help to rehabilitate a few, and of course to reduce the nuisance to the public. The Cyrenians agreed to run the project, with funding from the City Council, County Council and DHSS.

The local press, whilst supportive of anything that would get the street drinkers out of public view, was critical of spending money on the drunks. They were also sceptical that anyone would take the job, running an article headed: "Wanted – an adviser for city dossers".¹⁶

However, a worker was found and in January 1985 the Bus project opened six days a week from 10am until 4pm. Valerie Morrison was employed as the first project worker, assisted by volunteers.

At first the bus was seeing about 20 people a day. For many it was simply somewhere to get drinks, sandwiches or second-hand clothes and to come in from the cold for rest on the upper deck. Others were helped with housing applications, registering with GPs and looking for work.

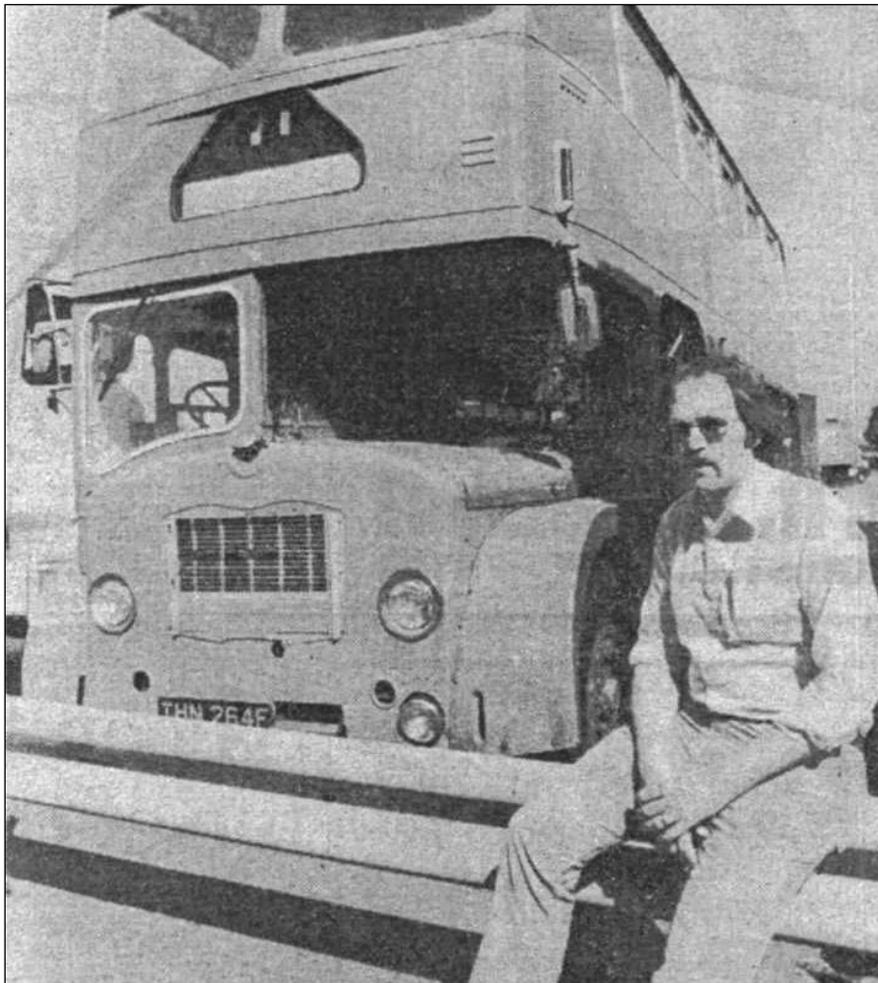
Facilities were extremely basic and challenging for the staff:

¹⁶ Cambridge Evening News, 2nd October 1984

"It firstly had no toilet and then we got a portaloos but, well, homeless people understandably can get very angry about their situation and every time they got angry with the bus workers or something they'd tip the portaloos over. And the washing-up water had to be taken out into the streets and poured down the drain and the only heating were gas heaters which froze in the winter and the water froze in the winter."

(Jacob Turnbull)

The water used for making drinks had to be refilled by bucket from the car park. However, the feeling of working together in the face of adversity gave some sense of solidarity to workers and service users alike.



Vic Blickem, from the County Council, with the Bus, 1985.

By June 1986 around 40 people a day were using the Bus, only around a fifth of whom were homeless or in squats. There were rising numbers of young people visiting, most of whom were out of work and living in unstable homes. The Bus itself was quite unsuitable for dealing with these numbers and with the range of issues they had. There were also growing safety concerns over

the lack of telephone connection, fire risks and the possibility that people could be trapped on upper deck by a violent service user.

A new home for the 'Bus'

By 1986 it was realised that the Bus was no longer big enough or suitable for its purpose and the City Council was persuaded to construct a purpose-built facility in an area of the nearby Lion Yard car park, which opened in July 1987. It retained its name but now ran from a permanent building with running water, toilets, shower facilities, a room for medical consultations and a telephone. A second full-time worker was also taken on.

"It was by no means easy to get the City Council to agree to this move. Council officers were worried about the idea of homeless people being in the Council's car park; the money to build the project had to be found and it also meant a cut in income because 'sacred' car parking would be reduced."

(Richard Robertson, Committee member and City Councillor at that time)

However, steadily increasing numbers meant that it did not really get any easier to run. Staff struggled to cope with over 30 people on the project at a time, and many more over the course of a day. Many users had drug problems and the threat of violence was ever-present.

"There was a great deal of fond reminiscing about being in this double-decker bus that occasionally got driven away by clients apparently. . . I don't know if that actually ever did really happen but it certainly had acquired urban myth status by that time. . . It seems to me that at the time there was a fond memory of that initial stage and a 'Oh god, look where we've ended up now!' kind of feeling. I think it's a very wearing job."

(Kevin Southerland, Bus manager, 1989–1992)

Staff vacancies and sickness caused problems and forced a reduction in opening hours at times. Despite calls by Jacob for greater authority to be given to volunteers, their role on the Bus remained one of supporting the aid staff, rather than running the project (unlike in the Cyrenian houses, where they continued to run houses).

Day centre or advice centre?

By the late 1980s, there was a debate over two alternative futures for the Bus. One option was for it to function as a basic day centre – a place for homeless and lonely people to socialise, not entirely unlike the 'club' that the Cyrenians had run in the early 70s. It would be somewhere to get food, warmth and some rest.

An alternative direction, led to some extent by the City Council, was for it to offer much more in terms of services and rehabilitation. The Bus could function as a one-stop resource centre offering benefits advice, drug and alcohol advice and extended health services. Jacob was opposed to this focus for the Bus, arguing that homeless people should instead be enabled to use mainstream services. However, others saw the potential to use the premises to link the homeless into the services that they needed.

One service that ran from the Bus project for many years was provided by local GP and Cyrenian trustee, Monica Shutter. At that time homeless people had great difficulties in finding a GP who would accept them, but Monica gave a huge commitment to working with this group:

"In general GPs don't like having people just out of the blue as you don't have any history, you don't know if they are telling the truth or that kind of thing, but I saw them as people really in need. . . More than anything else giving people time to talk about themselves and pick up any problems they might have had and whether there was any straightforward treatment that could be set up then and there."

(Monica Shutter, GP and committee member, Late 1960s–2000)

Involved on the committee since the late 1960s, Monica at first offered her services on a voluntary basis, dropping into the Bus once a week. Later this service became formalised and by 1992, the Bus was offering a GP, nurse, needle exchange, housing advice and mental health outreach, as well as still functioning as a drop-in centre for people to get food, a shower and somewhere to sit.

Wintercomfort

Meanwhile, a new charity had sprung up in Cambridge to help the homeless. Wintercomfort was founded in 1989 by Henry Rothschild, a Cambridge man who wanted to see more being done to help the homeless people he saw around him on the streets of Cambridge. With the eventual aim of opening a nightshelter, Wintercomfort approached the Cyrenians about running evening sessions from the Bus project's premises in Lion Yard. In January 1990 they started operating from 9.30–11pm each evening, offering food and warmth to those out in the cold in the evenings.

Wintercomfort quickly grew into a large and ambitious organisation, with a drive similar to that of Cambridge Cyrenians in the early 1970s. They had mobilised the student population and had large numbers of volunteers from both town and gown involved in fundraising, publicity and working with the homeless. They first ran a nightshelter in the winter of 1991–92, and continued

at various locations most other years in the 1990s. At first they relied entirely on volunteers and struggled in the same way that the Cyrenians had 20 years earlier. However, they changed swiftly to recruit paid staff and managed to run the shelters more smoothly than the Cyrenians had done in their day.

There were, however, differences between the newly formed Wintercomfort and the 20-year-old Cyrenians. Wintercomfort were committed to nightshelters whereas the Cyrenians felt that this kind of provision didn't really give the homeless the home they needed, as people were required to leave each morning and not allowed back until evening. The Cyrenians remained committed to group homes with the opportunity for group support but had also moved away from simply wanting to help the homeless to a greater appreciation of the need to help people back into society. This included, for instance, charging a small amount for midday meals at the Bus, whereas free food was provided by Wintercomfort in the evenings. Two decades earlier, it had been the Cyrenians handing out free food, and the Salvation Army who criticised them. Now it was the Cyrenians who saw the value in encouraging people to see the food as worth money, just as it is in normal society, and who were critical of the newly emerged charity who wanted to distribute it for free.

More changes at the Bus

The evening sessions that Wintercomfort ran had extended the number of hours when homeless people could be indoors. However, having two different agencies running from the same premises did cause some difficulties. The service users were not always able to appreciate a difference in policy: if someone was banned from one project, were they to be banned from the other? There were also concerns from Narcotics Anonymous, who used the Bus project to hold meetings in the early evenings, who found that the clients hanging around waiting for Wintercomfort's evening sessions to open could disrupt their meetings.

By the early 1990s, the relationship between the City Council and the Cyrenians was also changing. In the 1970s the Cyrenians had very much led the way and then looked to persuade the Council to fund their ideas. Twenty years on, the Council itself was becoming more accountable for ensuring that services were provided to the homeless.

In 1992, the Council carried out a review of services for the homeless, which suggested that they should press ahead with developing the Bus project into a more comprehensive advice centre, but recognising that this could not really be done from its current premises.

Wintercomfort had managed to acquire a house in Victoria Avenue, a mile or so out from the city centre which looked much more promising as a base for the Bus. As the Council began to take responsibility for ensuring that services were provided, the Cyrenians and Wintercomfort started to be seen (and to see themselves) as two organisations competing for the same funds and clients. In 1992, a paper proposing a 'merger' between Wintercomfort and the Bus project was discussed, arguing that "Both Wintercomfort and the Bus face the prospect of competing to serve the same customers from a limited supply of funds". Fear of competitive tendering meant that "neither project is in a position to face this future with any confidence whilst the other exists".



Overstream House, new home of the 'Bus'.

Wintercomfort had grown rapidly since its inception and now had an army of over 200 volunteers, as well as the house in Victoria Avenue to use. It was therefore agreed that they should take over the running of the Bus entirely. In October 1993 the Cyrenian Bus staff were transferred across to Wintercomfort and in January 1994, the Bus Project was moved away from the Lion Yard to Overstream House, in Victoria Avenue (see above). The

Cyrenians focused instead on what they felt they did best, running their group houses.

Other local developments

Wintercomfort were not the only development in the field in this period. In 1987 the English Churches Housing Group (newly formed from the Church Army and Baptist Housing) opened a second hostel in Victoria Road, much larger than its first one which remained in Willow Walk.

The YMCA, which had been based in Gonville Place since 1974, was by the early 1990s starting to function more as a homeless hostel than simply a provider of low-cost accommodation for young people. Referral mechanisms were being developed and clients allocated key workers. Another new development in 1992 was Emmaus which established a community for around 20 homeless people a few miles outside of Cambridge. Members of the community lived and worked together, operating a furniture recycling business.

A few years later in 1995, Jimmy's Nightshelter was opened in the basement of Zion Baptist Church (where the Cyrenians had 20 years previously held their club for homeless people), providing accommodation for up to 30 homeless men and women. Initially this was a joint venture between Wintercomfort and the Zion Baptist Church, but within a year the two organisations disagreed and Wintercomfort withdrew. Differences in ethos and approach had prevented the joint working arrangement, though the nightshelter continues to this day.

Outreach work

In addition to this growing range of accommodation there was also an interest emerging in the early 1990s in providing outreach work and 'floating support' to people who had moved on into their own accommodation (so named as the support is not tied to the particular accommodation, and can 'float' with the client as needed if they move to new accommodation).

In 1991 Social Services, with a three-year grant from the Health Authority, decided to employ an outreach worker for homeless people with mental health problems. The Cyrenians were appointed to manage the worker, so Cordy Dixon was taken on and based at Short Street. She worked with homeless and ex-homeless clients wherever they were and spent two days a week at the Bus. Cordy soon had over 100 clients with alcohol, drug and mental health problems, and started various projects including an arts and crafts group at the Howard Mallet Centre, a group with the Bridge Project (a

drug advice centre in Mill Road), and, together with a worker from Wintercomfort, outreach work with rough sleepers.

Two years later, Wynn Turley took over from Cordy. The outreach work was extended to include a weekly session at Arbury Community Centre, and summer picnics held on Midsummer Common in order to reach people who did not use the Bus.

Expansion of Cambridge Cyrenians

This was also a period of expansion for the Cyrenians. The two houses that they had now been running for many years were almost always full and many people had to be turned away.

Housing Associations were by now becoming better funded as they increasingly took on the role of providing both mainstream and supported housing provision. At this time the City Council was taking action to deal with houses lying empty, abandoned by their owners, and started compulsory purchase procedures on several in the city. A house at 151 Chesterton Road was acquired in this way and sold to King Street Housing Society which then renovated it and leased it to the Cyrenians to open as an eight-bed residential project with six residents and two live-in volunteers.

Two years later, in 1988, King Street Housing Society acquired and made available the house next door, 153 Chesterton Road. However, rather than open it as another direct-access project, the Cyrenians decided to run it as move-on accommodation for residents who were ready for more independent living and could manage without resident volunteers. In contrast with the similar venture in the late 1970s, this time the Cyrenians were able to afford support from paid staff to oversee the houses.

The bookkeeping had since 1972 been maintained by Committee Member, Graham Burghall but in 1989 Pat Faircloth was employed as a part-time bookkeeper. Expansion also allowed the Cyrenians in 1988 to employ Jean Stanley as a part-time support worker for the residents of the 153 Chesterton Road bedsits and in 1992 Moira Meherishi was appointed to work alongside Jacob as Deputy Manager.

A fifth house, leased from Granta Housing was added in 1991 in Carlyle Road, also as a direct-access project which is in use to this day. And in 1993, an additional house was opened at 153 Hills Road, also leased from King Street Housing.

The independent bedsits in Chesterton Road were a success, so much so that in 1996, with the help of a grant from the Housing Corporation, 151 Chesterton Road, which had been losing money, was adapted by King Street Housing

Society so that it too could run without live-in staff. Jean Stanley's role was expanded to manage both houses. The bedsits were welcomed by residents looking for a more independent style of living than the other Cyrenian houses:

"Here you have your own kitchen. It's better when you can cook your own meals and not have to worry about upsetting other people."

"I got here and was like: 'Wow - I've got my own room and I can do my own cooking and the rent's cheaper. . . I do like it here a lot better cause you feel a bit more independent and able to do things for yourself."

(Current residents)

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Cyrenian houses in Short Street and Gonville Place continued running along similar lines. It became harder to recruit young British volunteers, who increasingly wanted to go abroad for their gap years, so volunteers were increasingly young people coming from abroad for a few months. For some, whether from abroad or not, it could be quite a culture shock:

"I hadn't been away from home before and I got on the train with my suitcase and then turned up at this place. I always remember walking in there; it was tea time so everybody was in, nine blokes stood around the kitchen and two support workers. One guy, who was dead tall, loads of hair, long hair, who later turned out to be the nicest bloke you'd ever meet, he put on this really gruff voice and went 'Welcome to the homeless!'. I was like: 'Oh my god, what have I done!'"

(Volunteer, 1991-92)

However, most adapted quickly to the demands of the role, finding camaraderie amongst both the other volunteers and the residents they lived with. The volunteers were not quite seen as being in authority in the same way as paid staff, and both residents and volunteers recalled conspiring together to save some food money for drinks at Christmas, or to conceal rent arrears from Jacob that they knew would be paid off once someone's first wages were paid.

Relationships with the residents in the houses remained quite informal, with pub trips in the evenings and friendships formed:

"I think we all learnt to drink too much, more than was good for us but... Because a pub was a safety thing because everybody knew that the landlord kept peace in the pub. We weren't in charge and we could be quite free with residents."

(Jacob Turnbull)

By 1997, Cambridge Cyrenians had been running group homes with live-in volunteers for nearly 30 years. The past 11 years had seen them develop from two properties to five, two of which now provided move-on accommodation, suited to long-term living, as well as direct-access houses, taking people for shorter lengths of stay. The number of paid staff had increased from just one to five and they were becoming part of expanding local provision for the homeless in Cambridge.

Chapter 5 – A changing national scene (1997–2010)

New Labour's election victory in 1997 marked the start of a new era in British politics. It was also the start of a new era for Cambridge Cyrenians as Jacob Turnbull, manager for nearly 20 years, retired. The late 1990s and 2000s saw further growth of services in Cambridge, run by the Cyrenians and others, and some joint working arrangements were developed. The relationship between the voluntary sector and government was also to transform over this period as local authorities took increasing responsibility for coordinating and funding homeless services.

The successor to the National Cyrenians body, Homes for Homeless People, had been active during its first few years. However by 1997 it had effectively folded. The Cyrenian local groups around the country were now connected to one another only by name and history.

Instead of looking to the wider Cyrenian movement for support, Cambridge Cyrenians now saw themselves as a part of a national homelessness sector and a growing local network of provision, yet one which was increasingly being led by national policy directions. The relationship of the voluntary sector to local government continued to evolve, and changing funding arrangements altered roles and responsibilities.

New management for Cambridge Cyrenians

Jacob Turnbull had originally been 'lent' to the Cyrenians by the Franciscan Brothers in 1979 for a period of two years. He ended up staying until he retired in 1997, having seen the organisation though nearly two decades of relative stability and growth.

The Committee, or trustees as they had now come to be known, were charged with finding a replacement for a much loved worker, but realised that what they needed to take them forward was someone quite different. They chose Brian Holman changing the job title from 'Administrator' to 'Manager', to reflect the change in role they sought.

Coming from Coventry Cyrenians, Brian initially had concerns were that Cambridge Cyrenians were lagging behind other agencies. A few years previously an Oxford Cyrenian volunteer had been killed by a resident and a subsequent review had been heavily critical of the level of training and support given to volunteers in this kind of work.¹⁷ It had also picked up on a lack of information-sharing between agencies. Cambridge at the time had

¹⁷ <http://handbooks.homeless.org.uk/daycentres/risks/newby>

had little by way of formal staff supervision or policies, something that Brian sought to improve.

"It was a big change when Brian started. Brian is far more of a manager, an organiser and a very good administrator and having things just so. Jacob really didn't like the administrative side.

I think it is a very good thing. I was in the group that interviewed Brian that was I was saying, 'He looks very much a manager....'

But the others said 'That's exactly what we need!'

It runs most effectively under Brian.

(Richard Robertson, Trustee 1983-date)



Brian Holman, Manager of Cambridge Cyrenians 1997-2018

In 1998, the Cyrenians managed to obtain additional funding for an out-of-hours project worker to give greater support to volunteers outside of office hours.

Brian was also concerned about the physical conditions in the houses, something which would require funding to improve. By now, Cambridge Cyrenians had an annual turnover of over £200,000, around 90 percent of which came from statutory sources, mostly in the form of rent paid from Housing Benefit. Pat Faircloth had kept the finances straight but the money was only ever managing to pay for day-to-day expenses. Decorating, replacing furniture or improving the properties was something the Cyrenians had generally done themselves, with the residents or, quite often, not done at all. Brian was keen to improve standards and realised early on that, as most of the houses were owned by housing associations, applications could be made for grants from the Housing Corporation which would pay for improvements to the properties.

Gonville Place was by now in a rather sorry state of repair. However, it did not seem sensible to spend much money on the house as its lease was now

due to expire. Gonville and Caius College, who owned the freehold, wanted to sell the property along with its immediate neighbours, which they also owned. The Cyrenians bid to purchase just the one house, but were unsuccessful, and so in 1998 they had to leave.

Further developments were made to financial systems in this period. The finances were computerised during the 1990s with the help of Richard Robertson who was then Treasurer (and a chartered accountant). In 2000 this was upgraded to specialist software to enable rent accounting to be computerised. Around the same time, an accountant was taken on to attend each quarter to work with the Finance Worker to produce management accounts.

New Labour – funding with strings

After coming to power in 1997, the Labour government continued the Rough Sleepers Initiative funding, but sought to link it in with other work. The Rough Sleepers Unit was established in 1998, also incorporating strands of work on mental health, drugs and alcohol and resettlement of rough sleepers. There was also a target set to reduce rough sleeping by two thirds by 2002, and a 'Homeless Tzar', Louise Casey, was appointed to ensure this was met.

This was quite a different approach from earlier governmental efforts, which focused more on levels of provision rather than targets.

In 1997, Cambridge had been awarded funding from the Rough Sleepers Initiative, in recognition of the scale of the problem it faced. Outreach workers had been employed to go out onto the streets to make contact with the homeless and help them move off the streets. This too represented quite a change from previous decades, where this kind of work was exclusively the preserve of the voluntary sector who, along with the police, occasional car park attendants and other homeless people, had been the only referral routes into hostel provision.

The new approach also represented what could be termed 'tough love'¹⁸ Rough sleeping was never explicitly banned, though a range of new measures to tackle antisocial behaviour and the assistance provided to help people into hostels came close to doing so, as a 1998 government report made clear:

¹⁸ Pursuing Social Justice or Social Cohesion?: Coercion in Street Homelessness Policies in England, *Journal of Social Policy* 34, 3, 389–406, 2005; Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Anwen Jones, Cambridge University Press

“Since the explicit intention of the policy is to deliver clear streets, the Government believes that the public will feel they have a right to expect hostel places to be taken up as more become available.”¹⁹

The government was taking much more of a lead in tackling rough sleeping, though it passed much of this responsibility to local authorities, along with some funding and targets to reach, an approach that was at times controversial.²⁰ The local authorities, in meeting these targets, were reliant on building relationships with the voluntary sector; they were the ones with the premises, the knowledge and the staff to address the problem of rough sleeping.

By the early 2000s, rough sleeping was becoming less of a focus. In 2002, the Rough Sleepers Unit was subsumed into the Homeless Directorate, and later into the Department of Communities and Local Government, which had a much wider remit.

The Rough Sleepers Initiative and Unit had had some degree of success.²¹ However, the overall housing shortage had only worsened with rising house prices and ever-growing waiting lists for social housing. The outreach workers could get all but the most entrenched rough sleepers into hostels, but then they were stuck. A 2003 government report, *More than a Roof*, also recognised that for many people, providing a roof over their heads was insufficient to address their wider needs. A broader approach was needed, with increasing focus on homeless prevention and coordination between services.

Multi-agency work in Cambridge

From 1997, The Rough Sleepers Unit was bringing increased funding into Cambridge to tackle rough sleeping. This meant that the mental health outreach worker that the Cyrenians managed was increased to a team of three. Other organisations, too, were expanding: Newly appointed Street Outreach Workers were taken on by Wintercomfort to make contact with rough sleepers, and tenancy sustainment workers taken on by ECHG to work with those who were rehoused.

With all these developments, it soon became necessary to ensure that the different service providers were coordinating their efforts. The Cambridge Contact, Assessment and Tenancy Sustainment team (CATS) was brought

¹⁹ *Rough Sleeping—Report by Social Exclusion Unit*. 1998 HMSO, London

²⁰ 20 *Pursuing Social Justice or Social Cohesion?: Coercion in Street Homelessness Policies in England*, *Journal of Social Policy* 34, 3, 389–406, 2005; Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Anwen Jones, Cambridge University Press

²¹ 21 *The Rough Sleepers Initiative: An Evaluation, 1993*; Randall, G. and Brown, S. HMSO, London

together with the Wintercomfort street outreach team, ECHG tenancy sustainment staff and City Council workers moving to join the Cyrenians' mental health team in a newly expanded base in Sturton Street. A total of 17 staff were now under one roof with the service managed jointly by ECHG and the Cyrenians.

Cambridge City Council was by this time taking a more strategic role in coordinating services in the city. The Cambridge Multi-Agency Accommodation Forum, led largely by Wintercomfort, had helped communication between agencies since 1991. Later renamed the Cambridge Homeless Partnership and managed by Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, it was wound up in 2003 as its work had now come to be seen as a Council responsibility.

In 2000, the first national Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping Strategy was published, setting out plans to meet the government's target of reducing rough sleeping by two thirds by 2002. To accomplish this, it sought to improve coordination between services and develop more of a sense of collective responsibility for securing good outcomes for individuals.²² The CATS team was charged with delivering the target reduction in rough sleeping, a tough challenge to meet:

"We had three years to reduce rough sleeping to a third of what it was. And it was obvious early on that we were really going to struggle. In order to meet the targets large sums of government money were effectively thrust into our hands to ensure individual rough sleepers weren't on the streets on the night of the count. And we did it and it was a complete disaster for the individuals. We didn't reach the figures but they weren't around on the night of the count."

(Brian Holman 1997-2018)

Both outreach work and tenancy sustainment work proved successful. However, the joint working arrangements of the CATS proved complex and after only two years, the Council decided to re-tender the services. The Cyrenians retained their mental health outreach, and the tenancy sustainment workers went back to being managed directly by ECHG, whilst the street outreach element of the CATS work was contracted to a new agency in the Cambridge, Crime Reduction Initiative (CRI):

"In retrospect the loss of the street outreach contract was a blessing. The pressure to hit the targets at any cost was detrimental to rough sleepers and the team. The levels of stress placed on staff was quite unacceptable."

(Brian Holman 1997-2018)

²² Single Homeless and Rough Sleeping Strategy, 2000, Cambridge City Council p5

Whilst joint management had proved difficult, co-location of services was found to be beneficial. The City Council purchased new premises in Newmarket Road for use as a homeless GP service (which had previously been running from Jimmy's), where CRIs' street outreach team came to be based along with the Cyrenians mental health team and ECHG tenancy sustainment team.

The Wintercomfort drugs arrests

Hitting the targets for rough sleeping may have caused controversy locally, but the Cambridge homelessness sector was soon to find itself at the centre of national headlines.²³

Early in 1998, the police mounted an undercover operation targeting a number of heroin users and street dealers operating from Overstream House, where the Bus project was run by Wintercomfort. In May of that year, shock waves rippled throughout the whole of the homelessness sector in the UK when the police arrested not just the dealers but also the Director of Wintercomfort, Ruth Wyner, and the Bus Project Manager, John Brock. They were charged with permitting the Bus project to be used for the supply of Class A drugs.

Whilst it was not alleged that either of them had in any way profited from the sale of drugs, they were held responsible for failing to do all that was in their power to prevent the transactions. In particular the charity had refused to hand over their records of people banned from the project (often on suspicion of drug use or dealing), citing concern for client confidentiality. The judge at the trial ruled that this failure to cooperate with the police amounted to a failure to do all that was in their power to prevent the drug-dealing and sentenced them to five and four years in prison respectively. A campaign was launched to protest at the sentencing of the 'Cambridge Two'. After a few months the sentences were reduced on appeal and the workers released, though the convictions were upheld.

The case caused repercussions around the homeless sector nationwide as hostels and day centre managers were appalled at fellow social workers finding themselves on the wrong side of the law, and feared they too could be at risk of arrest:

"I think Ruth and John were unwise to not do more to combat drug dealing at the project but they were certainly victimised and treated as scapegoats by the police and Crown Prosecution Service . . . For the Cyrenians, as with the

²³ 23 The Independent, 2nd December 2000 www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/cambridge-two-will-not-go-back-to-prison-626464.html; The Guardian 11th July 2000 www.guardian.co.uk/society/2000/jul/10/homelessness

whole of the voluntary sector, it came as a huge shock to see these two workers treated so badly.”

(Richard Robertson, Committee Member 1983 to date)

Wintercomfort found it hard to retain funding and was forced to abandon plans they had been making for a new nightshelter. Overstream House was closed for a while. When it reopened, it dropped its open door policy, finally resolving the conflict that had been present since the early days of the Bus project between being a drop-in centre and an advice centre. It now only admitted people seeking advice or to use its services.

Other local agencies were anxious to avoid being caught up in the same trouble. The Cyrenians however, were not too badly affected by the arrests. They had long ago realised that accepting all comers without asking questions could be impractical. Nor were they anti-authoritarian, as they had been in their early days, and so they were able to carry on with their work without much fear of being caught up in the same kinds of difficulties.

The end of direct access?

Until the mid-1990s, a large proportion of the accommodation for homeless people was direct access – a homeless person could turn up on their doorstep and, if there was a space, they could move in. In Cambridge, Jimmy’s Nightshelter, the two ECHG hostels, the YMCA, Emmaus and three of the Cyrenian houses were all direct access, even if they also took referrals from elsewhere. The number of direct access beds in the city had increased quite considerably from around 50 to over 100 in the past ten years with many more agencies now involved.

However, there were several perceived problems with this approach. One was the issue of ‘bed-blocking’, whereby direct access accommodation became full of people who were ready to move on but unable to do so because of a lack of alternatives. The Council took the view that it would be better to put resources into move-on or semi-supported accommodation rather than expanding the number of direct access beds. A large choice of direct access provision also increased the opportunities for clients to hop around from one agency to another, running up rent arrears with each and causing project workers to duplicate their efforts, whilst not staying long enough in one place to address their problems.

The ethos of accepting people as they are, without asking questions, could be seen as a naïve and somewhat risky approach, rather at odds with the emphasis on joint working and information-sharing between agencies. Most agencies in Cambridge (as elsewhere) gradually moved towards using

referral systems where possible and developing move-on accommodation, though some accommodation remained targeted at the newly homeless or those moving off the streets.

A more radical change to the direct access ethos was adopted with the 2007 introduction of the City Council's Reconnections Policy. The City Council housing department (in common with most others in the UK) had long distinguished between people with a 'local connection' and those without when accommodating statutory homeless households²⁴. Only those with a local connection were eligible for assistance when homeless; others could be referred back to where they did have such a connection. However, the voluntary sector had not been a part of these restrictions, and most agencies had relatively open access arrangements.

Now that the Council was funding and commissioning services it became increasingly concerned about the large numbers of homeless people who gravitated towards Cambridge from other areas:

*"Cambridge City Council has recognised the need to manage the weight of expectation and demand for services from partner agencies assisting us to deliver the Single Homeless and Rough Sleepers Strategy 2006-09."*²⁵

To implement this policy, and also to reduce the amount of time that people spent before finding an appropriate hostel place, they sought to oversee access into temporary accommodation through the Street Outreach Team (run by CRI).

Rather than simply accommodating the next person who turns up whenever they have a space, the Cyrenians were required to refer them to the City Council who would assess their needs and local connection status before referring them on to accommodation, either with the Cyrenians, elsewhere in the city, or back to where they have come from.

Jimmy's Nightshelter was to remain the only direct access accommodation. Yet it too would soon change, becoming an Assessment Centre, accommodating people only for a matter of weeks whilst they are assessed and moved on elsewhere.

²⁴ To have a local connection someone must have lived in Cambridge for over six months, lived there for at least three years in the past, have a permanent job in the city, or have a close family member living in the city

²⁵ 25 Cambridge City Council Reconnections Policy 2007
(www.cambridge.gov.uk/public/docs/Reconnections%20policy.pdf)

A new funding regime

A few years after coming to power, the Labour government sought to rationalise the various grants that funded supported housing for projects such as the Cyrenians' and to enable local authorities to take a more strategic role in determining how the money was used. There also emerged an urgent need to respond to case law which determined that Housing Benefit payments should only be paid for 'housing costs' rather than 'support work'. The Supported Housing Management Grants, DSS resettlement grants and the element of Housing Benefit paid for support costs were in 2003 all subsumed, along with various other funding streams, into the new Supporting People fund.

The old Housing Benefit payments had been made to all providers of eligible housing provision, including hostels and Cyrenian houses. In contrast, the local authority could determine how to allocate the new Supporting People funds, in line with achieving their aims and objectives and those of component local authorities.²⁶

This change helped to push forward a new relationship between local authorities and the voluntary sector. The local authority now commissioned services and voluntary sector agencies competed against each other to provide them. Agreeing amicably with other agencies who would run which service was no longer an appropriate way of operating in a regime where the Council is seeking to commission services by competitive tender.

The Supporting People funding stream also gave Councils more leverage to ensure that the money was used for the purposes identified in homeless strategies. A particular focus was on obtaining successful move-ons from hostel-type accommodation, something that was seen as crucial to avoid 'bed blocking' and an ever-growing need for more hostels (and a bill to fund them).

Judging success in terms of move-on ran starkly counter to the original ethos of the Cyrenians to see their group homes as an end in themselves and not to push people into leaving unless they wanted to.

Cambridge Cyrenians did, however, manage to achieve a reasonable compromise to meeting this requirement. They had, by this time, substantial numbers of older residents who had made the Cyrenians their home, and were keen to remain for the long-term

"Until I win the lottery, I'll probably be here forever."

²⁶ 26 In two-tier local administrative structures such as Cambridgeshire, the County Council administered the Supporting People funds, whilst the city/borough councils were responsible for developing homelessness strategies.

"It does feel like a home. . . I'm here 'til the day they carry me out in a box, basically".

(2010 residents of Chesterton Road bedsits)

The Short Street house and the Chesterton Road bedsits were designated as long-term housing (similar to old people's residential homes) and therefore not subject to the same move-on requirements as the other hostels. This provision helped to ensure that most people could move on from the direct access accommodation within the maximum two years allowed, whilst those whose needs were longer-term could also be provided for.

New funds, new opportunities

Further development of services was taking place in Cambridge throughout this time. In 1998, the Young Women's Christian Association opened Whitworth House for up to 13 young homeless women, and in 2005, ECHG opened a third residential project in Cambridge, the Cambridge Youth Foyer. This catered for up to 30 young people aged 16–25 who were engaging in education, training or work. Both of these projects are still running, the YWCA property having been taken over by Orwell Housing Association in 2000, and ECHG now part of Riverside.

The Cyrenians, too, made further expansions to their services over these years. Following the closure of Gonville Place in 1998, the City Council had made it clear that it was not looking to facilitate the funding of additional direct access projects, and was instead keen on move-on accommodation. The Cyrenians were able to establish four new projects aimed at helping residents to move to independent living over the next few years:

In 1998, a four-bedroomed house owned by the City Council in St Phillip's Road was set up as an independent living project. The residents took part in a course preparing them to manage their own tenancies, accredited by Parkside Community College.

The next year, three move-on flats were leased from the City Council for use by people receiving support by the mental health team. These were leased on an arrangement whereby when the tenant no longer needed support, they could remain in their flat as a council tenant, and a new flat would be found for the Cyrenians to place a tenant in need of support.

The Cyrenians were aware around this time that little was being done to meet the needs of older homeless people, many of whom were resident at their projects. The Council was persuaded to take an interest and at the end of 2003 the Cyrenians obtained funding from the Housing Association Charitable Trust to employ an Older People's Project Worker specifically to

support residents over 50 in their current accommodation and as they moved on.

In 2004, a new house at 23 Kings Hedges Road opened as move-on accommodation for four residents who had been living in short-stay accommodation for a considerable period of time, but needed a period in semi-supported housing before moving on to independent living. The Cyrenians managed the accommodation on behalf of King Street Housing Association, who in turn leased it from a private landlord. Another house in Kings Hedges Road was added in 2006 under the same arrangements.

There were also new projects established aiming to address residents' needs for work and leisure activities during this period. A bike recycling project was started in 2001 and ran for several years. In 2007, with support from Help the Aged, a tree nursery was established to improve the quality of life for older people and help them find meaningful activity as they resettled into independent living.

"The project's been going from strength to strength, and there's talk about a market stall . . . Things like that just interest me. It's good really; you don't just sit there twiddling your thumbs."

(Cyrenian resident, 2010)

A pottery workshop, was started up in 2009, offering further opportunities for clients to learn new skills and keep busy in the daytime. Residents involved in the nursery and pottery workshops were involved in a garden created at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2010 in conjunction with other homeless projects around the country and the Eden Project.

Cambridge Cyrenians were by this time starting to plan for the future in a more formal fashion, producing their first five-year development plan in 2004.

A home for the heavy drinkers

All these new developments were improving move-on options, support and rehabilitation. However, there was still one important gap in provision. From their very early days the Simon Community had banned drinking on their premises, as has almost all other provision for this client group ever since. But there were always a few people who were unable to comply with this rule. These individuals were evicted frequently from hostels and Cyrenian houses (all of which banned alcohol on the premises), and were unable to sustain a tenancy independently. Many of them had serious health problems and life expectancy was low. There was a pressing need to provide

accommodation and support for those who were unable currently to give up drinking in an environment where drinking on the premises was permitted.

The City Council was eventually convinced of the need to fund such a project and the search for a suitable property began in 1998. There followed many years of concerted efforts on the part of both the Cyrenians who wanted to manage the accommodation and ECHG, who were to act as landlord.²⁷ There was also stiff local opposition to overcome:

“The house is six feet from the wall of our nearest bungalow and they have a fire escape you can jump out of into our grounds. . . We are quite vehemently against this and will do all we can to stop it”

(Victoria Homes Committee, reported in Cambridge Evening News, objecting to a proposal that was later dropped)

In many respects the concerns of the public had changed little. Forty years previously, the Simon Community had eventually been successful in opening the Granville, as it had no immediate neighbours.

Eventually, after investigating 14 properties, this time too a building was eventually found with no immediate neighbours, in this case as it was bounded by a road on one side and a car park on the other.

Owned by the City Council, it had served previously as a pub and a restaurant but had become dilapidated. Using funds provided by the Department of Communities and Local Government, the building was substantially renovated and in 2006, the ‘Controlled Drinkers’ project was opened at 451 Newmarket Road, housing up to six heavy drinkers with 24-hour staffing.

The opening of the Controlled Drinkers project was the culmination of over eight years’ work on the part of Cambridge Cyrenians to cater for a group who had always been at the heart of their activities, yet were one of the most challenging groups to work with. Efforts to work with the heavy drinkers in the 1970s had floundered, staffed with untrained volunteers and struggling with dilapidated premises and a lack of funding. However, 30 years of campaigning efforts had increased public awareness and seen greatly improved funding arrangements. The Council now accepted a responsibility towards this group and the Cyrenians were now a professional and experienced organisation capable of taking on the challenge.

The Controlled Drinkers project, Newmarket Road, opened in 2006.

²⁷ Before the introduction of Supporting People funding, only housing associations could apply for the funding to start projects such as this, meaning the Cyrenians needed a partner organisation.

Chapter 6 – Austerity, growth, and pandemic (2010-2020)

In 2010, a new government came to power, with an agenda of austerity to combat the effects of the 2008 financial crisis – leading to cuts to the direct funding and rising levels of people on the streets, with repercussions lasting the whole decade.

The Cambridge Cyrenians survived this turmoil, saw growing levels of need for their help, but also a saw growth in the size of their provision – from 62 beds in 2010 to 105 a decade later.

Changing local services

The 2010s began with a reconfiguration of local services in Cambridge. Jimmy's Nightshelter became an Assessment Centre. The accommodation was reconfigured from crowded dormitories into single bedrooms with 24-hour access and support and a programme of daytime activities for residents. Its role was to take people directly from the streets, assess their needs and eligibility for other housing options, then move them on swiftly (within 28 days wherever possible) to other accommodation in the city, such as the Cyrenians.

Jimmy's was now the sole route into other accommodation, so the Cyrenians no longer took new residents direct from the streets. This new setup increased the need for close co-ordination between accommodation providers in the city and multi-agency meetings were organised to discuss overarching strategies and individual cases to work out who should go where. Although as pressure on places increased, the availability of accommodation became the overriding factor in determining who went where.

In 2012, the City Council commissioned a review of larger hostels in the city – seeking to improve the quality and management of hostels and reduce the overall number of bedspaces. One of the drivers behind this review was the development of the “Housing First” concept – this recognised that some homeless people remained on the street because they were unable to cope with living in hostels – finding the rules or the engagement with others too difficult, or behaving in ways that others found impossible to live with. Instead, if self-contained permanent housing could be provided first for this group, support could then be built around their needs. The largest hostel – 222 Victoria Road, now run by Riverside – was consequently split into two smaller hostels, one of which was reserved for people in work or training.

This reduction in hostel spaces came first though – funding was not allocated to a Housing First pilot in Cambridge until 2019.

The Cyrenians' first hostel

The Cyrenians' focus on "homes not hostels" was something they had retained from their earliest days. The homeless – they believe – first and foremost need somewhere to call home.

Acquiring a hostel was not so much the result of a deliberate change of strategy, but rather the result of a succession of events, and the Cyrenians' ability to make the most of opportunities that presented themselves. Back in the late 1990s, Wintercomfort had identified the potential for a hostel to be built under the Elizabeth Way bridge, next to the river, in Cambridge. Planning permission was obtained, but the plans then collapsed after the Wintercomfort drug arrests (see Chapter 5). A local entrepreneur, Pete Dawe, was running a social enterprise live/work project outside of Cambridge and keen to set up something similar in the city. Aware that the planning permission for the proposed hostel had not yet expired, he persuaded the county council (who own the bridge) to give his charity a lease without charge and he would fund the building of the hostel in the void under the bridge, The Dawe Trust then had the work done to establish the Jubilee project consisting of a 10-bed hostel with accompanying ceramics workshop. It was hoped that income from the ceramics workshop could make the project self-sustaining, but this proved a challenge and by 2010 the project was losing money, as well as struggling with staff leaving. Peter Dawe was considering closing the project. However, the Cyrenians were aware of his situation as his wife was one of their trustees. They offered to take on the project. A subletting agreement was made and both the staff and the residents were transferred across to the Cyrenians. The Jubilee project staff had to cope with a change to the way of working:

"We weren't really allowed to leave the project before and there was overnight staffIt was almost like being on reception with a screen with a window you opened to speak to people. When I came over to Cyrenians I was encouraged to come over to the Short Street office, do some work there and then go back over to the guys [at the Jubilee]. It took a little bit of getting used to."

(Rikke Jensen, project worker at the Dawe Trust and then Cyrenians)

The ceramics workshop was temporarily closed, until a grant was secured from Communities and Local Government that allowed it to reopen to all Cyrenian residents. Under the guiding hand of Bob Race, a local potter, a

small group of enthusiastic residents began developing their skills. For some it provided an opportunity to relate to staff in a different setting:

"I always wanted to do pottery. I made two big pots. And when I made them Bob turned around and he said 'Now I'll call you a potter!'. It was a compliment after making these things for three months."

(Peter, Cyrenians resident)

"The thing about the Jubilee was that a lot of them were coming directly from prison. They brought a lot of the prison mentality with them like 'I've got to be tough, I'm a really hard guy'...but when they went to do pottery it was a completely different environment and their language changed, they got into it. If you take them out of one environment and put them in a different environment and they were so different."

(Brian Holman, Manager 1997-2019)

However, a commercial outlet for the artefacts that were made was never really found. This could be demoralising for the people making the artefacts, and meant that when the grant ran out in 2016, the ceramics workshop was forced to close.

The accommodation part of the project (the 10-bed hostel) changed from general housing to be an ex-offenders project with related funding, and remains in use. Although small, residents and staff today do acknowledge that the project was very much a hostel in its look and feel rather than a shared house.



The Jubilee Project, under the bridge

Encouraging residents to engage in meaningful activities was core to the Jubilee's role as an ex-offender project, and some were helped to find jobs in

retail, catering, volunteering, getting involved in the allotment or Cyrenians' football team. Many moved on into the Cyrenians' shared houses or independent accommodation.

Growth and diversity

The Cyrenians grew their services over the decade. Some of their older houses were taken back by their owners, including the two longstanding Chesterton Road houses which were taken back by King Street Housing Association to be sold. However, Kings Street agreed to provide new houses to replace these two six bed houses. The first two were brand new houses on the new estates on the southern border of the city (almost in Shelford). This distance from the city centre Cyrenian office provoked discussion:

"The trustees had to consider how far out we felt we could take on new houses. In conjunction with views of the staff it was concluded that we wanted to remain providing homes just within the city boundaries and not in the villages. Staff mostly travelled around by bike and providing regular contact with residents was very important,"

(Richard Robertson, Trustee)

A third house on the southern border of the city was promised but in fact was never made available. Instead, the Council offered a more central house off Mill Road which they had found difficult to let.

Over the next few years other houses were offered in exchange and others were offered up to the Cyrenians to manage by a mixture of the city council, housing associations and private landlords. This growth culminated in 2018 when the Cyrenians took over the leases, management, and occupants of seven houses providing homes for 24 people. These all belonged to Cambridge Housing Society (CHS) but had been leased to Riverside. Five further residents of CHS were also taken on and provided with support by the Cyrenians, though they remained as tenants of CHS. Funding for the support of these 29 residents was passed over to Cyrenians. All this took the total number of bedspaces to 101. Taking on such a large number of properties together with their residents was a huge amount of work for the staff; a new senior housing manager and two support staff were added to the team. The acquisition in 2018 of the batch of seven additional houses with existing residents also presented challenges in terms of the physical quality of the accommodation and of taking on new residents whose needs they knew nothing about. Accommodation manager, Emma Hooton was particularly concerned that accommodation should be of a good standard:

"I want people to feel valued when they come in from the streets ...It might only be a bed but you need to know it's yours and that no one else has slept in it. I'm quite adamant about that. If they move on to a tenancy, I let them take whatever they want out of their room. It does mean we get through a lot of mattresses and a lot of bedding but I'm ok with that."

(Emma Hooton, Accommodation Manager)

The Cyrenians' core model of short-stay and longer-stay houses has proved an enduring one, though the very first 'tier' of accommodation for people straight off the street in Cambridge was now provided by Jimmy's Assessment Centre rather than the Cyrenians. The 2010s, however, saw increasing diversity of types of accommodation to meet different needs. The Controlled Drinkers project opened in 2006 had been an effort to meet a very specific need:

"It was very interesting and really progressive and I really liked that. Allowing the people to drink in a controlled way without pushing them to give up alcohol. And there were occasions when we saw people moving on and getting their own flat. Some of them stopped drinking."

(Diamantis Toutountzidis, Project worker at the Controlled Drinkers project 2010-2012)

A mixture of shared housing and self-contained flats reflects different people's different needs and preferences. And for some, there remains the long-stay housing where they can make a permanent home:



"It's a nice little house.....I think I shall be staying here"

Left: Jonathan, one of the residents at home in one of the long-stay shared houses.

During the 2010s further specialist provision was added. Two additional shared houses were taken on and designated for women only, and other shared houses designated as specifically for those in work.

The increasing diversity of accommodation for homeless people was also seen across other agencies in Cambridge. Jimmy's developed a range of move-on accommodation over the course of the decade – including in 2020 the development of modular homes ("pods") offered to them by a local estate agent and a developer with sponsorship from a range of local businesses. They were placed on land owned by the Council, on leases that allowed for them someday to be moved if required. The Cyrenians had considered also offering pods and a local developer approached them to discuss the possibility of donating some. However, pods are very small, below the minimum level of space normally permitted and Cyrenians were concerned at this. Space standards had been tightened in recent years and Cyrenians had instigated building works to move walls in several houses in order to comply with those standards. They were also concerned around the lack of communal facilities and funding for support for the residents, so did not seek to get involved.

Meaningful activities

There was also a growing focus on 'meaningful activities' throughout the decade – driven in part by funding requirements, and also the Cyrenians' own desires to meet the wider needs of their residents. The allotment project had been running since 2007 and continued to prove popular with residents looking for a constructive way to spend their time.



Residents and volunteers working at the allotment, 2018

In 2010 Cyrenians were invited to participate in the Eden Project's garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. This involved growing a variety of plants, vegetables, fruits and trees, a task which involved a lot of extra input from participants on top of the normal sessions. A group of six helped put the garden together at the show and the garden won a silver medal. For those involved it was a tremendous boost.

The ceramics workshop operated for several years, a football team met regularly, and residents have been supported to find employment and volunteering, with many holding down positions for years.

Administration and office space

Growth earlier in the decade had required the Cyrenians to upgrade their system for administration and accounting. In 2012 the role of bookkeeper was replaced by a finance manager to enable a new software package to be applied. This included specialist rent accounting, essential to handle the complexity of keeping track of the rent payable by housing benefit separately from that due from the residents.

With further growth in the number of people housed, administrative work also increased, to include all the new properties, utility contracts and rent accounting. A second part-time administrative assistant was added.

By 2019, the Cyrenians' offices were still located in the small terraced house next to the Short Street project, Now with over 20 staff crammed in, efforts were made to acquire new premises but the initial attempt to buy offices failed when the seller pulled out at the last minute. Finding suitable offices in a reasonably central location was seen as essential for the future of the Cyrenians but the arrival of Covid-19 put everything on hold so in 2020 this is still unresolved.

Mental health and older people support

The Cyrenians had been employing a psychiatric nurse to work with people with mental health problems since 1991. By 2010 they employed a team of three mental health workers, co-located with other services for homeless people in Cambridge. Despite employing qualified staff, the service always ran alongside statutory services, providing frontline support that was valued by residents and Cyrenian staff, but less closely engaged with the statutory mental health services.

In 2011, the County Council re-commissioned the service for the whole of Cambridgeshire to include both mental health outreach and the street outreach service, the latter being run at this time by a large organisation

called Crime Reduction Initiative (CRI). The Cyrenians joined forces with Wintercomfort to bid jointly, but still lost out to CRI – a much larger organisation. The Cyrenians' experienced staff were made redundant and support for those with mental health problems became part of the wider outreach service.

Funding for the Older Person's Project Worker, who helped older residents to move on and live independently with long-term support, was also withdrawn in 2011.

The Cyrenians felt that the lack of both these services was a problem for many of their residents and looked to other funding sources to re-establish them. In 2015 funding was found from the Tudor Trust and the Henry Smith Charity to re-establish the service. This new Older Homeless Service saw the Cyrenians engage not just with their own residents and those moving on to independent housing (often sheltered housing) but also with other older people who were referred to them by the City Council as being at risk of losing a tenancy. The new service was cited as an example of innovative work in the homelessness sector in a 2018 Homeless Link research report.²⁸

In 2015, Brian Holman also put in a bid for funding from the Big Lottery to re-start the mental health support. This bid was unsuccessful, but feedback suggested that it would be worth retrying – so he did, but with a paired down bid for just one post, which this time was successful. Recruiting for such a specialised post proved tricky, but eventually in 2017 they took on Louisa Hallisey, a qualified psychiatric nurse who'd arrived back in Cambridge to find a job having worked abroad for many years:

"I feel privileged to be able to offer extra help and support to the residents of Cyrenians and less restrictions and more autonomy give me the opportunity to be more creative and individualised in my support to residents...something I believe is a necessity and valued by our residents.

(Louisa Hallisey, Mental Health Practitioner, 2017- present)

"The best thing about the Cyrenians is the mental health side of it. The support there is brilliant. Louisa's good, she's brilliant.... She looked after me and she got me on the right path. She got me on antidepressants, because I never touched them before....She got me to see a doctor....I was so depressed I used to just sit in my room for days with the curtains drawn and the door locked. If you haven't been there, it's hard to know."

(Wayne O'Reilly, resident)

²⁸ www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Moving%20on%20from%20homelessness%202018.pdf

The service involved close working with other agencies including GPs, drug and alcohol services, and statutory mental health services. Having this role in the team made it easier for the Cyrenians to: work with people without diagnosed mental health conditions who needed support with their mental health, to address the underlying problems in their lives that were contributing to their mental ill-health, and to refer their residents into the care of the statutory mental health services if required. Statutory mental health services also found it easier to work with the Cyrenians, knowing they had a qualified practitioner to liaise with:

"I think we've always had a good relationship with other services but in terms of getting mental health assistance that's been difficult. Luckily, we now have our own mental health practitioner. So that's been a massive change to Cyrenians."

(Rikke Jensen, Project Worker 2012-present)

The funding of this post was never fully covered by the Big Lottery grant but Cyrenians used their own reserves to top up the cost, something that was possible by now due to the relatively strong level of reserves.

Links to wider Simon Community

In 2012 there were efforts made to rekindle the links between the various Simon and Cyrene communities throughout the country. The London groups initiated a new Federation of Simon and Cyrenians and Cambridge Cyrenians joined. They were aware that the cuts to local services were going to make it hard for all of them, so set up with the vision that members could each put in some money and they could then employ a couple of staff to promote the network, share good practice and support in bid-writing. A key part of the vision was that members would agree to keep to their local areas and not to bid against each other. This, however, proved to be a sticking point, as the various Simon and Cyrene communities were, by 2012, quite diverse and did not all fit this vision of locally based groups. The Tyneside group in particular were uneasy about committing to not bidding against each other, so left the Federation. Other members, including Cambridge, were keen to reach out to other groups. Brian Holman recalled that the London Cyrenians in particular had helped him with his first tender, for the ex-offender project, and that Cambridge in turn had helped Bradford Cyrenians with tendering for a similar project. The Federation was, however, never able to secure the funding needed to really get its ambitions off the ground or employ staff. It still exists in name, but little more currently. Cambridge Cyrenians today are much more connected to the other local agencies in Cambridge than to the national Cyrenians movement.

The move to competitive tendering

At the start of the decade, one of the things that had been worrying the Cyrenians was the move to competitive tendering for services. This was a threat to services that the Cyrenians had fought for years to establish and considered as “theirs”, though they were in fact reliant on funding from statutory sources, which would be re-tendered at some point.

“In the next few years they could all go out to tender and somebody else could win the contract and so Supporting People would say: ‘Well thank you very much Cyrenians for the last 40 years but we don’t need you anymore’, and Cambridge Cyrenians would just cease to exist.”

(Brian Holman, Manager 1997-2019, speaking in 2010)

This fear did come to be realised in the early years of the decade with several services when both the mental health service and older people’s support were lost via a competitive tendering process.

A few years later, competitive tendering brought an opportunity to secure longer-term funding for the Jubilee project. A nearby project for ex-offenders was run by Stonham Housing Association. The local authority commissioned the service and in 2012 the contract had come up for renewal. Stonham owned the building from which they ran the service and said anyone else tendering would need to have a suitable building of their own. The Cyrenians realised that they now had just such a building – the Jubilee – just over the river from the Stonham ex-offender project, so decided to bid:

“We bid for it for practice. We knew that with Supporting People, at some point all our contracts would go out to tender, and we thought if we’d never bid for something before, the chances were that our bids would be unsuccessful and we’d lose our contracts. We weren’t really expecting to win it. It was a practice bid. But we won it!”

(Brian Holman, Manager 1997-2019)

The Cyrenians were not, however, the only local charitable organisation worrying about losing their own projects to competitive tendering and keen to get some practice in. In 2013 Jimmy’s were in a very similar position so also decided to have a go at a competitive tender, for practice, resulting in them winning the controlled drinkers project from the Cyrenians:

“We didn’t expect to win it. We’d never put in a tender to do anything before! We did it because we knew we were going to have to bid for [the assessment centre], within a year or so. So Henry [the director of Jimmy’s] said ‘Right, test case! Have a go. Let’s see what happens.’”

(Fiona Blake, Chair of Trustees of Jimmy’s)

Winning the ex-offender contract from Stonham had had a limited impact on relationships between agencies, as Stonham had been otherwise uninvolved with the homelessness sector in Cambridge. In contrast Jimmy's and the Cyrenians had worked closely together for many years and shared a strong local ethos. Losing a project in this manner did damage this relationship between them:

"I was very sore because it was a real pet project of mine and it took so long to get the money together. I didn't speak to Henry for four to five months after that!"

(Brian Holman, Manager 1997-2019)

The move to competitive tendering changed the dynamics more broadly between the different local agencies:

"When I was first in the Cyrenians, Richard Howlett [the manager of Jimmy's] was really helpful to me. You'd go to a joint meeting with different agencies and you'd talk about the good things but also say 'Look, I've got these real problems' or 'Can you help me with this?', and you'd share amongst yourselves....As contracts came in and competitive tendering, you stopped sharing and you certainly stopped telling people you'd got problems. In fact, it got a bit ridiculous - you'd go to a meeting and it would just be everybody saying how wonderful and brilliant their service was."

(Brian Holman, Manager 1997-2019)

Changing the management of services also brought difficulties for staff, forced to move from one agency to another. The Stonham staff who had managed their ex-offender project were transferred and found the change to the Cyrenians' more relaxed ways of doing things a challenge at first:

"We took on their staff and they took a bit of time to settle in because the office furniture wasn't bolted down like they were used to. It was a completely different attitude that we had to ex-offenders."

(Richard Robertson, Trustee 1983-date)

Often, the Cyrenians would be subsidising projects from their own resources (to add to the funding received) to run a service. This did give rise to concerns as to whether they were "subsidising the state", and a decision was made at one stage to not do unfunded work. However, the Cyrenians soon realised that using some of their own resources to initiate a service placed them in a strong position to bid for grants and allowed them more control over what services should exit.

The task of applying for funding was an onerous one that took an increasing amount of Brian's time over the last few years of his career, until he

eventually started using an external agency to help with bids. James Martin took a different approach – and it was agreed to appoint a freelance fundraiser to work with them on a regular basis.

Competitive tendering, however, was not all downside. The Cyrenians' first attempt at tendering for the ex-offenders project had proved successful. County-wide services might be hard for them to compete for, but for small-scale local projects they found they were often able to undercut larger organisations:

“We've made it work. We've been successful in tenders, though we've often had to scale down the amount we accept. Our overheads are considerably lower per tenant than most housing organisations.”

(Richard Robertson, Trustee 1983–date)

It is also clear today, however, that competitive tendering against other local agencies is far from being the Cyrenians' only means of finding funding for the work they want to do. Grant funding was eventually found too for both the older people's support (in 2015) and the mental health work (in 2018). Other projects – such as the Jubilee project and several of the move-on houses – were simply offered to them to manage. The Cyrenians by now had a level of reserves that allowed them to instigate some new activities without statutory or grant funding.

Rising homelessness

The Cyrenians may have been expanding during the 2010s – along with other local agencies – but homelessness was growing faster.

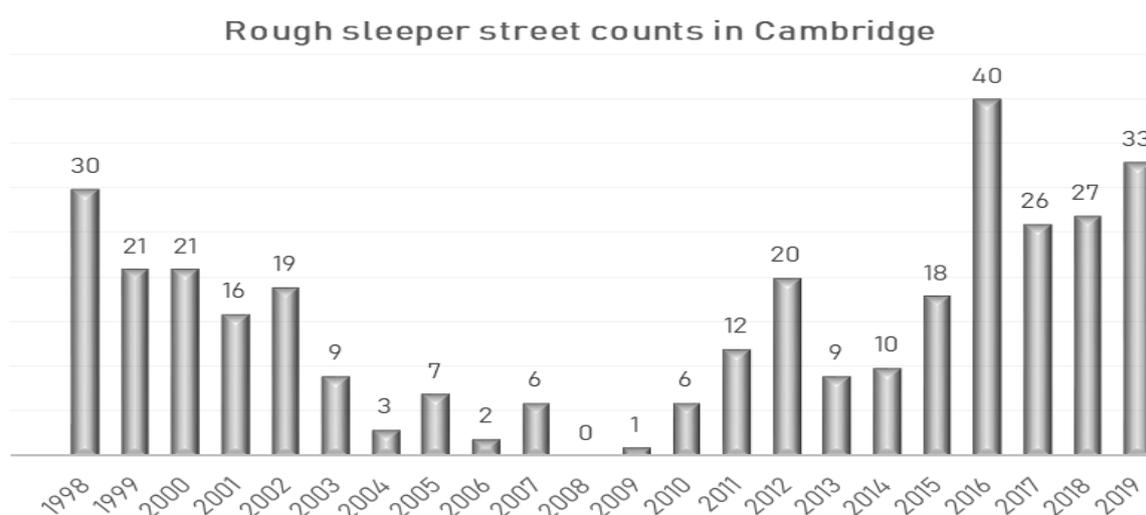
The financial crash of 2008 and change of government in 2010 led to an agenda of austerity involving multiple cuts to local services. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) was introduced in 2008 to set standardised limits on housing benefit help to pay for private rented accommodation. Rates for each size of property were pegged to the 30th percentile of private rents across a 'broad market rental area'. This caused problems for people in Cambridge because the broad market rental area was drawn up to include a large area outside Cambridge where rents were lower, meaning that very few properties could be found within the city that were within, or even close to, the LHA limits. Things got worse a few years later when LHA increases were first capped and then rates were frozen. That meant that throughout the 2010s private rents rose with inflation and Local Housing Allowance did not, causing rents to become increasingly unaffordable to people on benefits or low earnings. By 2019, the LHA for a one bedroom flat in Cambridge was just

£130 a week, with the median market rent for a one bedroom flat in Cambridge £219 a week, leaving a shortfall of £89 a week.²⁹

Pressure grew on social housing as it was the only affordable option for many people, but the number of lettings was insufficient to meet need. This made it hard for the Cyrenians to move people on from their housing – and therefore limited their ability to accommodate new people. The government encouraged local authorities to look to private rented housing as an alternative means of move-on for homeless people in temporary or supported housing – but the insufficient LHA rates meant that they could not afford the rents.

Mental health services and other non-statutory support services were also cut back. The Cyrenians – like many homelessness organisations throughout the country – found that the people who came to them had higher levels of need than before. At the same time as all of this, the Supporting People funding stream, from central government to local authorities, was ended – local authorities now had to fund the support work of organisations such as the Cyrenians from their shrinking budgets. This meant that the resources available to help the growing number of people in difficulties was falling, just as need was rising.

The effects of this perfect storm were clear to see. Every year agencies in Cambridge worked together to count the numbers sleeping on the streets on one chosen night, as part of a national effort to produce a snapshot estimate of rough sleeping across England. In the early 2000s the numbers they counted fell from around 20 down to single digits. From 2010, however, the trend reversed, to higher levels than had been seen for the past 10 years:



Source: Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government housing statistics. 2011, and 2012 figures are based on estimates, and pre 2001 data may be either estimates or street counts.

²⁹ Source: Valuation Office Agency

Homeless fell and then rose across the whole of England in this time period, though the increase seen in Cambridge was more extreme – in England overall the number of rough sleepers rose from 3 to 8 per 100,000 people between 2010 and 2019, whereas in Cambridge it rose from 5 to 26 – a five-fold increase in just 9 years.

A whole-city approach to solving homelessness?

The Cyrenians, Jimmy's and other local agencies did what they could – developing their own move-on accommodation to replace the private rented housing that would previously have been an option. But their efforts failed to stem the rapid rise in people on the streets.

A new movement to tackle the problem grew up from the churches in Cambridge. A group of churches came together in the mid-2010s to form the Cambridge Churches Homeless Project in 2017. The City Council already ran a severe weather emergency provision (SWEP) to help people off the streets at the coldest times of the year. However, there were visibly still people on the streets throughout winter. The Church's Homeless Project therefore set up a winter nightshelter that rotated around different churches over winter, offering beds to up to 15 homeless men and women. Donations, fundraising and free use of church halls meant that this provision was without charge to use, so foreign nationals with no recourse to public funds could be accommodated for the first time in many years.

From this movement, a wider group was formed – It Takes A City was launched at a summit in November 2018, driven by recently-retired local businessman, Chris Jenkin. It brought together businesses, faith groups and individuals who wanted to tackle the problem of homelessness in Cambridge. They had momentum and an energy about them, though existing services felt a little side-lined from this new movement:

"I was quite surprised that he developed that without reference to us. It came as a bit of a shock to me to realise that he was referring to Manchester as a paradigm, rather than what we had already done. It seemed he wanted to float in and say: 'Well Manchester have managed it so Cambridge must manage it'. And I felt we'd been doing this for a very long time."

(Fiona Blake, Chair of Trustees of Jimmy's)

"The trouble was, at the event, I realised we were being quite negative. They were saying 'Let's just open up a house, we'll put out an appeal to all the wealthy people in Cambridge and we'll just buy these houses and we'll put all the homeless people in them'. We were basically sitting in this meeting

saying: 'Well you can't. It just doesn't work like that'. I realised how negative we appeared."

(Brian Holman, Manager 1997-2019)

The City Council had been deliberately side-lined by the Cambridge Churches Homeless Project at first – as it was opposed to additional nightshelter provision, for fear of attracting more rough sleepers to Cambridge. It Takes A City, however, demonstrated a will to change things, self-funded from donations and the churches, and then was in a position to force others to take note of what they were doing, and work with them rather than against them. Cambridge Cyrenians, Jimmy's and others soon came to appreciate the fresh vision that they brought and recognise the value of pushing people to consider areas of need that were poorly served and to connect wealthy donors with this challenge in new ways.

New management, new challenges: Coronavirus

In 2018, Brian Holman decided to retire after more than 20 years as the Manager of Cambridge Cyrenians. The post was filled by James Martin – who had worked in the Cambridge homelessness sector for over a decade first at English Churches Housing Group (now Riverside) and then Wintercomfort.

"I wasn't particularly looking for a new job, but in the back of my mind I was looking for something with a bit more of a challenge. I loved the work, loved working at Wintercomfort daycentre, but this came up and I thought: 'This job only comes up once every 20 years!'."

James Martin, Director 2019-date



James Martin, Director 2019-date

The title of the role was changed from Manager to Director – to reflect the desire for someone to take the organisation forward into the new decade. For James, the appeal of the role was very much the small and autonomous

nature of the organisation, more “quirky” and less corporate, with freedom to initiate things, though he also recognised that the organisation was in good shape and he hadn’t been appointed to make wholesale changes. He needed, however, to be steering the Cyrenians to work as a larger organisation – staff out of hours phone support for residents was replaced with the use of an external agency, which worked better given the larger number of properties now in management, and IT systems were upgraded.

James’s appointment came shortly after changes to the trustees too – Neil Offley, a local businessman had joined as a trustee in 2017. Unlike many of the trustees, his background was not in homelessness or housing, but in health service management and executive coaching. When the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Raith Overhill stood down in 2018, Neil was asked to take this on. He saw his role as to provide challenge, as well as to support. He was acutely aware of the growing problem of homelessness in Cambridge and keen for the Cyrenians to develop a clearer idea of their role in responding to this, and their identity as an organisation. The website was revamped and a logo developed. Neil felt they should become more strategic in their activities and consider what their contribution is in the wider field of organisations seeking to help homeless people.

As James was settling into his new role as Director, and new Chair of the Trustees, Neil was seeking to steer the charity to a more strategic role; everyone was reminded abruptly that the future is not something we can always have a strategy lined up for. The Covid-19 pandemic spread quickly across the globe in the early months of 2020. In March 2020 a national lockdown was imposed, and people were told to “stay home”. But how were the homeless to stay home? Even before the Government announced national measures, Cambridge City Council had started sourcing emergency accommodation for those on the street. Hotels and student accommodation stood empty by the end of March, as tourists and students had deserted the city. This created a unique opportunity to move the street homeless indoors, though enormous co-ordination of effort was required. The City Council led the process, with support from the collective of voluntary organisations – It Takes a City managed to source and supply food to the people in the hotels. Rough sleepers were invited to apply. The Council had been aware of around 30-40 rough sleepers on the streets and expected maybe 50 people might apply – though in fact numbers were more than double that with over 140 being initially provided with accommodation. This was thought to be due to hidden homeless people such as those previously sleeping in cars, and sofa-surfers who were no longer welcome to stay for lockdown or felt that a hotel room was a better offer than sleeping on the streets.

For some, the hotel experience was a relief from being on the streets. The break from having to focus on food and keeping warm gave them a chance to sort their lives out and for agencies to engage with them. Others – particularly those with addictions – proved a challenge to accommodate, leading to damage to one of the student accommodation blocks used and a large bill for the Council.

Meanwhile, the Cyrenians were grappling with how to provide support to accommodation that consists of hostels and houses with shared facilities, and a government directive to stay home and minimise contact between people wherever possible. Their live-in volunteers were all from overseas and returned home at the start of lockdown, leaving the larger houses without their usual support. Many of the Cyrenians' residents were older, in poor health or in the groups who were told to 'shield', avoiding all contact with others. Staff had to change their roles rapidly, learn to support residents by phone wherever possible, have conversations on doorsteps, and take on new duties such as shopping for the more vulnerable residents. For those with mental health problems and anxiety, it was a difficult time. Many residents had previously relied on a range of support from other agencies and places to go for social contact, and struggled when this was abruptly ended:

"The lockdown means that everybody is under pressure. There's a definite pressure and it comes out in overreactions sometimes. I overreact to things and I don't think it's just me."

(Geoff, Short Street resident)

"I didn't have a very good time at first. I hit the booze bad. I didn't want to be here. I had suicidal thoughts. I was completely lost. I couldn't go up to the allotment, I didn't have anything to do. You just sit by yourself. The staff said I should go to see someone, but I didn't."

(Peter, Short Street resident)

Residents were banned from having visitors, and one was subsequently evicted for failing to comply with this, as this was felt to endanger their housemates.

As face to face contact became a little safer, outdoor contact was preferred, so meetings were held outside, on park benches or whilst out for a walk.



Project worker, Kat, supporting residents outdoors during the Coronavirus pandemic

As the City Council's housing management service resumed, Cyrenian residents who'd been lined up ready to move into council housing when lockdown began, were finally able to move. The continued requirement for social distancing meant that the Cyrenians were not able offer the usual practical support with a move – though they found that their residents did in fact manage well:

"It was a bit haphazard, but it seems to have worked on the most part. It's quite a traumatic experience for people to move. They normally get the emotional support and someone to help them but all that had to be done from a distance. But you're quite often surprised at how resilient people are."

(James Martin, Director 2019- date)

The temporary absence of volunteers created an opportunity to see how projects managed without live-in volunteers and re-evaluate their role. The Cyrenians today are one of few homeless projects using volunteers in this way. The experiences of the houses without volunteers turned out to be mixed – some coped well but others did not. The Cyrenians felt that having volunteers in the houses was useful, and that the volunteering position provides a valuable role in giving young people who will be tomorrow's professional social workers, psychiatrists, and nurses real insight into the lives of homeless people.

The Coronavirus pandemic has created a new set of challenges at the end of a decade of funding cuts and competitive tendering. The Cyrenians as an organisation have survived and even expanded, with a growing diversity of

provision now available to meet diverse needs – though the problems with homelessness in Cambridge persist and have worsened over the decade too.

Conclusions: Fifty years on

It is now 2020 and Cambridge Cyrenians have been supporting homeless men and women in Cambridge for 50 years. They started with a group of students and townsfolk seeing a need and responding with compassion, and over the years many more staff, volunteers, trustees, partner organisations and funders have come together to grow and develop the help provided.

Whilst there have been huge changes to the types of care and accommodation they provide, there are also some common threads that can be seen throughout. Cambridge Cyrenians today provide a range of accommodation to over 100 formally homeless men and women. The accommodation has diversified in recent years. As well as the shared houses that the Cyrenians have managed for the last 50 years, there are now self-contained flats and a small hostel. The range of size and type of projects has widened to include short-stay, long-stay, and houses specifically for people in employment, women, ex-offenders, or older people. Involving residents in the running of their houses remained a focus of the Cyrenians' projects throughout most of their half-century. In the early 1970s, this may have been quite a radical idea, in contrast to the very authoritarian doctrines of the hostels run by the government, the Salvation Army and the Church Army. Today, resident involvement is a near-universal doctrine of housing providers. Yet the degree of resident control in the Cyrenian houses has been tempered over the years – efforts to give residents equal status to workers were short-lived and never really practical. Today, residents no longer have a say in who moves into the houses, and key decisions are made by senior staff. The focus on communal living has waned, with few houses organising regular shared meals today.

“There’s a depressing amount of microwave meals when I visit most houses”

(James Martin, Director 2019 to date)

Shared living does, however, continue to provide some people with a higher quality of life and social interaction than they would find by any other means.

The use of live-in volunteers has also remained and is seen by the Cyrenians as an important feature of their work. This is despite an overall trend away from this kind of role in the homelessness sector elsewhere. The informal role of residential workers who are there because they want to help rather than because they are being paid is still one which Cambridge Cyrenians feel to have a value, as is the opportunity it presents for young people to gain a valuable insight into the lives of people who find themselves homeless. The Cyrenians have also expanded the types of roles taken on by volunteers and

have many local people volunteering for a few hours a week in addition to the full-time live-in volunteers.

Keeping accommodation projects on a small scale has also remained a key feature of the Cyrenians' approach in Cambridge, as elsewhere. Despite the acquisition of a small hostel in 2012, the focus is still largely on single shared houses and on a personalised approach to support.

What has changed?

There has been much that has changed over the past 50 years. In sheer size Cambridge Cyrenians have grown substantially. In 1970 they managed one house for 14 homeless people with volunteers but no paid staff. Today there are around 20 paid staff, alongside four or five live-in volunteer workers. The annual turnover is over £1 million. Over 100 people in Cambridge live in accommodation managed by the Cyrenians, and other formerly homeless people are offered support in their own accommodation. The physical standards of the accommodation have improved substantially; all residents today have at least their own rooms.

The style and ethos of the Cyrenians have also seen a degree of change. The Simon Community of the late 1960s was a radical and almost proudly amateur organisation, anti-authoritarian and seeing itself as doing something quite outside of the mainstream. Today, Cambridge Cyrenians are a professional agency, and play a part in a now highly coordinated system of voluntary and statutory sector provision for the homeless. This has entailed some losses – the control of whom to admit, and the freedom to determine how long they may stay have both been removed from the Cyrenians' control. The Cyrenians' role as a national campaigning body ended in the 1980s, although Shelter and Crisis ensure that this strand of work does continue, and the Homeless Link has taken over CHAR's role of coordinating and representing those working with the homeless.

Over the years the role of committee members evolved from being that of heavily involved volunteers, running the projects in their spare time to somewhat more remote, 'trustees'. As the staff grew in number and professionalism, the committee's role became one of policy making and strategy.

There are many ways in which the Cyrenians have improved the help they have been providing over the last 50 years. The development of policies ensures that people are treated more fairly, that knowledge on what works is passed on and that a good quality of service and accommodation is maintained. Today's Cyrenian projects are a long way from the early days

when they had to close down for weeks at a time because their staff could not cope.

There has also been an increasing diversity of provision by the Cyrenians. They learnt early on that different groups of homeless people (such as drinkers and non-drinkers) did not mix well, and that some people benefit from more self-contained accommodation.

It has taken longer to meet this diversity of needs. A lack of funds meant that it took until 1984 before single rooms were offered in all their houses and until 1999 before self-contained self-catering bedsits were offered. The need for separate accommodation for heavy drinkers was recognised back in 1970 when the Granville was forced to close and reopen only for those whose problems did not include alcohol. Yet the difficulties of managing such accommodation were substantial and not something an organisation staffed only with untrained volunteers could take on. It took until 2006 before a house was finally opened where the heavy drinkers could be housed, accepted as they were – as alcoholics unable for now to give up – and offered a home regardless. The need for single sex accommodation for many homeless women was recognised in the 1980s but has been added to the Cyrenians' own portfolio within the last few years.

The drivers of change

Some of the changes have been brought about by increased governmental interest and funding for combating homelessness – in part a result of the campaigning and awareness-raising efforts of the Simon Community, the National Cyrenians, and taken forward by others in more recent decades.

Statutory funding sources have brought great improvements to the quality of services, including staffing levels, safety and the degree of professional support offered. Yet the local authorities do not have to give the Cyrenians this money. Both the City and County Councils have obligations to meet in terms of government targets, their own objectives, and of course to the council taxpayers of Cambridge who expect their taxes to be used efficiently. The Councils can, and indeed must, constantly consider whether the services they fund the Cyrenians to provide could be provided better or at less cost by another organisation.

Tendering of services has seen them lose some services, and gain others. Overall, the impact has been positive, if measured purely in terms of numbers of people accommodated – services initiated by the Cyrenians do not always get taken forward by others in the way the Cyrenians envisaged, but this is not a threat to the existence of their organisation, or their ideas. A more comfortable balance has been struck, with the Cyrenians described by

the City Council as a “critical friend” – supportive and flexible, but not afraid to challenge when needed.

Yet the changes in Cambridge Cyrenians were also in part a result of their own internal dynamic. New charitable organisations form on a wing and a prayer, often with new and radical ideas and a strong sense of a unique purpose. Over time, they learn from their experience. The Simon Community quickly learned the contradictions between their ideals of accepting all comers and maintaining a coherent community. Later they learned to go beyond responding to someone’s immediate situation, and to appreciate the need to help them to move on in life.

This same dynamic is played out across different organisations in different timescales – the latest development in Cambridge being the It Takes a City movement with its drive for change and optimism that this can be achieved.

The future

So, what does the future hold for Cambridge Cyrenians? At the moment they are a successful organisation with substantial experience, a strong reputation in the city, funding, and a spread of properties that they manage – supporting over 100 people in accommodation at any one time, with a further 40 or more supported in their own accommodation by the older homeless service, or involved with the allotment. The wealth of experience gained over the half-century of supporting homeless people have given them the skills to know what works and how to help people turn their lives around. It is also clear that the need for their services has never been greater.

None of this, however, means that the future of the Cyrenians should be taken for granted. The finances they rely on today are heavily dependent on statutory sources. Gone are the days when ‘Cyrene week’ could raise funds equivalent to the annual income of the liaison worker, or when money was hardly needed as all the workers were volunteers and food was begged or scavenged.

Ideas for possible future developments suggested by those interviewed for this book were wide-ranging – many staff are keen to see the longer-term support currently available to the over 50s extended to younger age groups. The director, James Martin, is keen to set up a painting and decorating social enterprise – as the Cyrenians have a ready supply of properties in need of this service, and residents who could develop skills in these areas. Hunting for a new and larger office has been a growing priority as the number of staff have expanded, as have upgrades to IT systems to streamline ways of working.

In other areas, such as the development of modular homes, the Cyrenians are as yet uncertain – recognising that these may not be the quality of homes they would ideally like to be built, but that they nevertheless offer much better housing than living on the streets, and that for some people any form of self-contained housing may be easier than sharing. Similarly, the Housing First model is being watched with interest, but some trepidation over how well it can work. Some are keen to see the Cyrenians take a more active campaigning role for more structural changes to try to address the underlying causes of homelessness. This is something that the Cyrenians did do historically do as part of the wider national movement, but which can be difficult to maintain when dependent on funding from statutory sources. It may be best to channel such efforts through organisations such as It Takes a City, set up with more of a focus to campaign and co-ordinate, rather than provide support directly.

The problem of homelessness seems larger than ever, yet the Cyrenians are cautious about growing too fast. There are two main reasons for this – firstly that they are reliant on statutory funding for much of their work and as they already provide around a third of the bedspaces for homeless people in Cambridge, there may be limited room for growth within the available funding. And secondly, Cyrenians trustees, staff, volunteers and residents alike recognise the value of being a small organisation operating at a personal level where support can be tailored to need, and with a strong local base. There is no strong desire to spread far from Cambridge city, nor to merge into a larger organisation.

The Cyrenians do have ambition to grow though – to work with others and to take advantage of opportunities that arise through new service commissioning or to develop services to address emerging needs. A new business plan has recently been agreed, which sets out some of their ambitions.³⁰ Cambridge Cyrenians want to be pioneering, inclusive, and flexible in the way they work, whilst treating people with empathy and respect in order to empower them to reach their potential. There are plans to grow the supported housing provision to help meet the growing need. There is also a plan to develop housing within the Local Housing Allowance rates – something that may now be possible given that the government's response to Coronavirus included re-pegging Local Housing Allowance to market rents. Plans to invest some of the reserves in a building – either as office space or accommodation – will help set the organisation on a more secure financial footing. Raising the public profile of the Cyrenians is also a key objective –

³⁰ <https://cambridgecyrenians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Cyrenians-Business-Plan-2020-23-Final.pdf>

sharing their expertise and working with others to help find longer term solutions to homelessness.

It is clear that the nature of commissioned services still brings insecurity to the Cyrenians and it is hard to plan strategically without knowing what services you may lose. It is also hard to remain differentiated from other local agencies, when they may win tenders for services you developed, and to survive you must do likewise. Nevertheless, the size and agility of the Cyrenians means that they are able to respond quickly to new opportunities and meet new needs.

A lasting legacy?

The Cyrenians certainly intend to remain part of the Cambridge homeless sector for many years to come. But if they were to lose out, and the Council to look elsewhere for suppliers of services, what would their legacy be?

The Cyrenians are less distinct from other organisations today. In part this is because they have dropped some of their more radical ideas. But it is also because some of their once-radical ideas are now mainstream. Providing accommodation on a small human scale - a home not a hostel, involving residents in decisions, and encouraging them to take part in the day to day running of their accommodation are all ideas that have been widely adopted, having been once pioneered by the likes of the Cyrenians.

There is also a substantial legacy from the campaigning work of the Cyrenians, especially nationally. Although this work is now being taken forward by other organisations, the Simon Community and the Cyrenians were major campaigning bodies in the 1960s and 1970s and were instrumental in the establishing of CHAR. Some of the campaigning work focused directly on policy change. The 1977 Homeless Act was the start of a process that has seen increasing responsibilities placed on local authorities to help homeless people, with the recent 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act extending some of this support to single homeless people.

The early Simon Community were reaching out to the rough sleepers who were largely outside society and getting help from nowhere else. Today, outreach workers are funded by government. Although this means that the focus of their efforts may be somewhat different, their presence can only be considered a mark of success in raising the public profile of homelessness.

The involvement of volunteers in projects has also had, for some of them, an enormous lasting impact on their own lives. Individual volunteers interviewed for this book have gone on to work in mental health, to help found the Cambridge Women and Homelessness Group, to manage the Howard League

for Penal Reform, and to work as a solicitor specialising in homeless people's rights. Others are known to have gone on to train as probation officers, psychiatrists, and social workers. Many of these drew inspiration from their days with the Cambridge Cyrenians. Many from the last decade have taken their experiences back to their home countries, spreading an understanding of homelessness and the lives of homeless people internationally.

And, last of all, it is hoped that this book will make some small contribution to ensuring that the experiences of Cambridge Cyrenians and the history of homelessness in Cambridge are recorded for the future.



Cambridge Centre
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